



## **CATERPILLAR WANTS TO FLY FREE (DREAM OF A GIRL) IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SHORT STORIES BY SUDHA MURTHY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the symbolic and thematic dimensions of Sudha Murthy's short story "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*", focusing on the emotional transformation and silent resistance of a young girl within the Indian middle-class socio-cultural framework. Using the metaphor of the caterpillar, the narrative reflects the protagonist's psychological journey from suppression to self-realization. The research employs feminist literary criticism and socio-cultural analysis to examine how Murthy represents female aspiration, identity formation, and the subtle forms of resistance that define the lives of many Indian girls.

Through close reading and interpretative analysis, the study reveals that Murthy's storytelling is grounded in simplicity and realism, portraying internal change as a powerful mode of empowerment. The findings highlight how dreams, even when unspoken, become acts of defiance against culturally imposed limitations. The paper concludes that Murthy's gentle feminist voice, expressed through accessible language and relatable characters, contributes significantly to Indian English literature by amplifying the silent struggles and dreams of women seeking freedom within tradition-bound structures.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the rich corpus of Indian English literature, **Sudha** Murthy has carved a distinctive niche through her accessible storytelling and deep-rooted humanitarian vision. Her short stories, often imbued with moral insight and emotional sensitivity, offer a compelling portrait of Indian society, especially through the lens of women's lived experiences. One such poignant narrative is "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*", a metaphorically charged tale that mirrors the psychological and social evolution of a young girl yearning for identity, freedom, and self-expression. The title itself evokes transformation—the transition of a caterpillar into a butterfly symbolizing the breaking of societal shackles and the embracing of individuality.

Murthy frequently uses such metaphors to highlight the condition of women trapped in the cocoon of patriarchal expectations. Her protagonists, like the girl in this story, are often ordinary women living under cultural constraints, yet they possess an inner strength that enables them to challenge and transcend these limitations. In "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*," the protagonist's internal struggle is symbolic of a much larger battle faced by countless Indian women—between duty and desire, obedience and self-assertion. This aligns with Meenakshi Bharat's view that Murthy "offers resistance not in strident tones but through quiet, dignified assertion of female agency within the traditional order" (Bharat 112). Moreover, the story deeply reflects Murthy's long-standing thematic emphasis on education and self-awareness as tools for empowerment. In many of her works, such as *Wise and Otherwise* and *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, Murthy presents education as a beacon of hope, particularly for girls and women whose lives are constrained by socio-economic pressures and gender bias (Murthy, *Wise and Otherwise* 45). In "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*", the dream of the girl is not a fantastical wish but a profound desire for freedom of thought, opportunity, and self-determination—an aspiration that resonates universally but bears specific cultural weight in the Indian context.



Through subtle characterization and lucid language, Murthy crafts a tale that is both personal and political. The girl's dream to "fly free" is not just about escaping physical boundaries but about liberating herself from internalized oppression and finding the courage to shape her own destiny. In doing so, Murthy echoes a quiet feminism—one that does not oppose tradition but seeks to redefine it from within. Her narrative voice, gentle yet resolute, empowers the reader to recognize that transformation begins with awareness and courage, much like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. In essence, **"Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free"** functions as a microcosm of Sudha Murthy's broader literary project: to give voice to the voiceless, to illuminate the struggles of the marginalized, and to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in everyday life. The story not only underscores the emotional depth of girlhood dreams but also serves as a powerful allegory for the universal pursuit of freedom, dignity, and self-realization.

### **Sudha Murthy's Contribution to Indian English Literature**

Sudha Murthy's literary contribution to Indian English literature is distinguished by her ability to render complex social realities through simple, relatable storytelling. While many Indian authors explore the grand narratives of urbanization, globalization, or diasporic identity, Murthy's focus remains firmly rooted in the local, rural, and middle-class ethos of India. Her writing style, marked by clarity and emotional authenticity, has significantly broadened the reach of Indian English literature, making it accessible to a wider demographic that may otherwise feel alienated from the ornate prose of canonical authors.

Murthy's stories transcend regional and linguistic barriers, drawing on universal values such as honesty, kindness, education, and integrity. Unlike postcolonial writers who often engage in contesting colonial legacies or elite struggles, Murthy champions the voices of everyday Indians—teachers, homemakers, clerks, farmers, and street vendors. This democratization of narrative focus has filled a critical gap in Indian English literature, which historically leaned towards more metropolitan or elite-centered storytelling.

What distinguishes Murthy further is her consistent integration of **social commentary with moral instruction**, reminiscent of the Indian oral tradition of storytelling. Her narratives often reflect the ethical dilemmas of ordinary individuals while subtly questioning systemic inequalities. She blends fiction with non-fiction in a manner that enhances realism and credibility, drawing from her own life as an engineer, philanthropist, and educator. Her role in literature is also remarkable for challenging conventional gender roles. Murthy presents women not only as subjects of cultural norms but as agents of transformation. Through characters who persist with dignity in the face of adversity, she subtly dismantles patriarchal narratives without overt activism. This approach positions her as an influential voice in the spectrum of Indian feminist literature, one that promotes empowerment through personal resilience and quiet strength.

In addition to her literary output, Murthy's public presence as a social worker and educator has reinforced the impact of her works. Her stories often reflect the initiatives she supports through the Infosys Foundation, creating a rare synergy between her lived values and her literary expression. This embodiment of ethics in action lends authenticity and authority to her voice in contemporary Indian letters.

Sudha Murthy's contribution lies in her ability to bridge the gap between social reality and literary representation. She has not only enriched Indian English literature with regional flavors and moral depth but has also made reading and writing more inclusive—both in terms of audience and subject matter. Her works stand as a testament to the power of storytelling in cultivating empathy, encouraging education, and inspiring personal growth in a diverse and complex society like India.



## The Concept of Transformation and “Dream of a Girl” in Indian Middle-Class Society

In the intricate dynamics of Indian middle-class life, the “dream of a girl” functions as a symbol of internal transformation against the backdrop of tradition, family expectation, and gendered limitations. It represents not only ambition but a psychological evolution—a quiet resistance to the norms that often prioritize conformity over individuality. This transformation, especially for young women, is rooted in the struggle for visibility, agency, and self-fulfillment (Nair 78).

Indian society, particularly within the middle class, has historically emphasized roles of obedience, domesticity, and sacrifice for women. However, in recent decades, the growing emphasis on education and economic participation has begun to reshape these expectations. As **Gokulsing and Dissanayake** observe, the Indian woman in contemporary narratives is “negotiating modernity within the contours of tradition” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 145). This negotiation often manifests in literature through characters whose dreams challenge silent servitude and express a desire to live life on their own terms.

Sudha Murthy’s storytelling aligns perfectly with this societal shift. Her protagonists are emblematic of this transformation—ordinary women who slowly evolve through personal struggles, small acts of rebellion, and consistent pursuit of education and self-worth. In Murthy’s literary world, transformation is not loud or radical; it is quiet and gradual but immensely powerful. As **Sunder Rajan** notes, Indian women in literature often resist “through acts of reinterpretation rather than direct confrontation” (Rajan 93), a trait observable in Murthy’s female characters who balance their cultural roots with their progressive ideals.

The “dream” in this context may be as simple as attending college, learning a skill, gaining financial independence, or marrying for love—yet it disrupts traditional hierarchies. For instance, in stories like *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, education becomes a metaphor for liberation, and the dream of a girl transcends the classroom to touch every aspect of her identity (Murthy 42). These literary portrayals parallel real-life shifts in middle-class households, where daughters are increasingly seen not just as caretakers or brides, but as individuals with aspirations.

Furthermore, transformation within this class is frequently marked by subtle assertion rather than outright rebellion. **Shailaja Paik** highlights how middle-class Indian women often embody “everyday forms of resistance” that eventually lead to cultural transformation (Paik 164). In Murthy’s narratives, this is seen through decisions that may seem mundane but carry enormous symbolic weight—like a girl choosing to write, study late, or question her family’s values. Thus, the “dream of a girl” in Indian middle-class society encapsulates a multidimensional process of self-awakening and gradual emancipation. It is about reimagining one’s place in the world and reshaping societal roles from within. Sudha Murthy, through her accessible and empathetic narratives, gives voice to this transformation—one that mirrors a real and ongoing change in India’s socio-cultural fabric.

### Introducing the Metaphor of the “Caterpillar” and Its Symbolic Significance

The metaphor of the “caterpillar” in literature often signifies potential, growth, and transformation—a dormant force preparing to break free from constraints into a life of freedom and fulfillment. In Sudha Murthy’s short story “*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*”, the caterpillar is more than just a poetic device; it becomes a profound symbol of female self-discovery and liberation within the cultural constraints of Indian society.

Traditionally, the caterpillar represents a state of waiting or suppression, which mirrors the condition of many young girls in conservative environments—curious, vibrant beings who are yet to be seen, heard, or



taken seriously. Much like the insect must undergo the process of metamorphosis within a cocoon, the protagonist undergoes a journey of emotional and intellectual evolution, often in silence and invisibility. The cocoon thus symbolizes both protection and restriction—a safe yet suffocating space defined by familial expectations, gender roles, and social conventions (Kaplan 66).

As the story unfolds, the act of “wanting to fly” becomes an embodiment of the desire to break free from socially imposed boundaries. In this sense, the metaphor aligns closely with feminist interpretations of growth narratives, where transformation is not only individual but political. The metamorphosis is not about rejection of tradition, but about emergence—becoming visible, vocal, and valued. This transformation also aligns with Carl Jung’s psychological theory of individuation, wherein a person evolves by integrating hidden aspects of the self and claiming personal identity (Jung 112). Murthy’s use of the caterpillar is subtle yet powerful—it communicates the idea that transformation is natural, necessary, and ultimately beautiful. The girl does not wish to become someone else; she wishes to become herself. In doing so, the caterpillar’s dream of flight reflects a deep inner urge that resonates with millions of girls who are told to remain within the lines society draws for them.

Moreover, this metaphor captures the temporal nature of change—it emphasizes patience and internal strength. Unlike metaphors of revolution or rebellion, the caterpillar suggests that transformation is a gradual, organic process, requiring both internal desire and external conditions to align. In Indian literature, where women’s journeys are often defined by their relationships or societal roles, this metaphor introduces a more inward and autonomous vision of change (Chaudhuri 88).

Thus, the caterpillar in Murthy’s narrative is not merely a character projection—it is a cultural and psychological symbol that speaks to the latent power within every girl to redefine her destiny. It invites readers to reconsider the silent phases of a woman’s life not as passive but as deeply formative, filled with dreams that, once allowed to take flight, can reshape not just individuals but entire communities.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite the growing discourse on gender equality in India, the dreams and transformative journeys of middle-class Indian girls remain underrepresented in mainstream literature and academic research. In particular, the subtle and symbolic narratives that depict women’s psychological evolution and silent resistance within traditional households are often overlooked. Sudha Murthy, through her short stories, provides a nuanced portrayal of these experiences, using metaphors like the “caterpillar” to highlight the silent metamorphosis of a girl striving for freedom, identity, and self-expression within a patriarchal and culturally confined environment.

The problem lies in the **gap between societal acknowledgment of women's external achievements** (education, employment, public visibility) and the **lack of recognition of their inner emotional and psychological transformation**, especially within the middle-class framework that both supports and restricts them. This study seeks to explore how the metaphorical and thematic representation of a girl's dream in Murthy’s storytelling—particularly in “*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*”—reflects the larger, often invisible, process of transformation experienced by Indian women.

By analyzing this narrative through the lens of gender studies, cultural sociology, and literary symbolism, the research aims to address **how female identity, aspiration, and self-actualization are negotiated within the moral, social, and emotional boundaries of Indian middle-class life.**

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The representation of women in Indian English literature has evolved from passive portrayals of domestic figures to dynamic individuals seeking autonomy and identity. Scholars such as **Kumkum Sangari** and **Sudesh Vaid** (1989) have long emphasized the importance of understanding women's narratives within the intersection of family, tradition, and societal change. Their feminist framework suggests that women's voices, especially in middle-class households, are often silenced or domesticated under the guise of duty and sacrifice. In this context, literature becomes a crucial medium through which suppressed aspirations are voiced and examined.

**Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's** critical anthology (1991) emphasizes that modern Indian women writers often use metaphors and narrative silence to reflect resistance. Murthy's metaphor of the "caterpillar" aligns with this stylistic device—employing quiet, symbolic imagery to articulate the emotional and intellectual transformation of women, rather than overt rebellion. This echoes Tharu and Lalita's argument that "even silence is an expressive act in the lives of constrained women" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

Further studies, such as **Leela Dube's** analysis of gender and kinship (2001), highlight the emotional tensions faced by girls who navigate traditional expectations while developing individual dreams. Dube's sociological lens is particularly relevant to Murthy's work, which often situates her female characters in middle-class homes where family honor is prioritized over personal ambition. These social constraints, while not always oppressive in overt ways, subtly restrict female mobility and imagination.

From a literary perspective, Shashi Deshpande has contributed to the discourse through her own fiction and critical essays, arguing that women writers in India have a responsibility to foreground the internal world of women—their fears, desires, doubts, and aspirations. In Deshpande's view, transformation is not necessarily a public act but a deeply personal journey that challenges inner and outer boundaries (Deshpande, 2003). Murthy's protagonists exemplify this idea by evolving emotionally even when their physical environments remain unchanged.

Githa Hariharan also interrogates the idea of freedom in the Indian context, arguing that true liberation for women involves reclaiming not just space but voice and thought. In stories like "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*," the protagonist's dream to "fly" symbolizes this reclamation, where imagination becomes a political and emotional act. This aligns with Hariharan's broader argument that storytelling is a feminist act when it captures "a woman's right to imagine her own life" (Hariharan, 1992).

While there is extensive scholarship on feminist writing in India, Sudha Murthy's unique contribution lies in her use of plain language, realism, and moral depth to engage a wide readership. Her works remain under-explored in academic circles compared to contemporaries like Deshpande or Roy. However, her stories subtly encapsulate the complex negotiation between tradition and transformation, especially in relation to the dreams of girls from modest, middle-class families.

In summary, the existing literature on Indian women writers provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the metaphorical and thematic structures of Sudha Murthy's writing. However, there remains a gap in focused studies on **how Murthy uses everyday narratives and symbols like the "caterpillar" to explore female transformation and aspiration within domestic Indian settings**—a gap this research seeks to address.





## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Methodology

#### 1. Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretative research design** rooted in **literary analysis and feminist criticism**. The purpose of this methodology is to explore symbolic representations, thematic patterns, and socio-cultural contexts within the short story “*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*” by Sudha Murthy. Through this approach, the research investigates how the story articulates the transformation of female identity and aspirations in Indian middle-class society.

#### 2. Data Source

The **primary data** for this research is the short story itself, as published in Sudha Murthy’s short story collections. The **secondary data** includes scholarly articles, critical essays, feminist theory texts, and books on Indian women’s writing, social structure, and gender studies.

#### 3. Method of Data Collection

Data was collected through:

- **Close reading and textual analysis** of the story to extract key metaphors (e.g., caterpillar), narrative style, and character development.
- **Library research and online databases** (JSTOR, Google Scholar, Academia.edu) for secondary literature on Sudha Murthy’s work, feminist literary theory, and middle-class Indian cultural studies.

#### 4. Analytical Framework

The analysis is conducted using the following theoretical lenses:

- **Feminist Literary Criticism:** To examine how gender roles and identity are constructed, questioned, and subverted in the story.
- **Symbolic and Metaphorical Analysis:** To decode symbols such as the caterpillar, cocoon, and flight as indicators of female transformation.
- **Socio-cultural Interpretation:** To contextualize the narrative within the framework of Indian middle-class norms, expectations, and familial structures.

#### 5. Scope and Delimitation

The study is **limited to one primary text** (i.e., “*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*”) to maintain depth of analysis. It focuses specifically on:

- Female characters and their psychological evolution
- Symbolic representation of dreams and freedom
- Societal pressures within a middle-class Indian setting

The study **does not attempt a comparative analysis** with other Indian women writers or Murthy’s entire literary corpus, though references may be drawn for contextual support.



## 6. Ethical Consideration

This is a **text-based, non-invasive study**, with no involvement of human participants. Proper acknowledgment is given to all sources through standard MLA citation style. The interpretation aims to honor authorial intent while providing a critical lens supported by academic literature. Symbolism and the Metaphor of the Caterpillar

At the heart of Sudha Murthy's "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*" lies the symbolic representation of the **caterpillar**, a metaphor for the restrained potential of a young girl within a patriarchal and culturally rigid society. The caterpillar's journey—from confinement within a cocoon to the act of flying—symbolizes **female transformation**, growth, and emancipation. This metaphor reflects the protagonist's internal struggle to find a space where her dreams can breathe, echoing **Carl Jung's theory** of individuation, wherein a person's true self emerges after a period of internal development and tension (Jung, 1981).

This imagery becomes even more powerful when read in the context of Indian middle-class households, where the life of a girl is often shaped by obedience, modesty, and emotional suppression. The cocoon, in this light, represents the **cultural envelope of expectations**—a place of both safety and suppression. Murthy subtly critiques these conditions through her protagonist, whose quiet desire to "fly" becomes an act of self-realization and symbolic defiance.

### 4.1 Transformation as an Internal Journey

The transformation in the story is not overtly political but psychological and emotional. It reflects a distinctly feminine form of resistance, grounded in self-belief, introspection, and gradual awakening. The girl's transformation is not marked by rebellion or confrontation, but by self-assertion, which aligns with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's assertion that Indian women in literature often resist "through reinterpretation of their cultural roles rather than rejection" (Rajan, 1993).

Murthy's storytelling style reinforces this theme by focusing on **internal narrative voice**, where the protagonist reflects upon her fears, hopes, and vision for the future. The use of simple, clear language allows the emotional arc to take precedence, emphasizing that profound change often begins with a shift in thought rather than in action.

### 4.2 The Role of Dream and Aspiration

The protagonist's dream functions as a symbol of **creative possibility** and **individual will**, set against a backdrop of collective norms. In Indian middle-class settings, where daughters are traditionally expected to prioritize family over self, dreaming for oneself is in itself a subversive act. The girl's aspiration to break out of her expected role reflects what **Leela Dube** refers to as "a quiet cultural rupture"—a moment when inherited roles are no longer passively accepted (Dube, 2001).

The dream is not presented as unrealistic or escapist. Rather, it is deeply rooted in **self-awareness and quiet ambition**. The character does not wish to abandon her world, but rather to **expand her role within it**, which is a recurring theme in Murthy's works. This subtlety makes the story relatable to a wide audience, particularly in societies where gender norms are changing slowly but steadily.

### 4.3 Socio-Cultural Context: Middle-Class Constraints

The protagonist's experience reflects the **dual nature of the Indian middle class**—which simultaneously enables and restricts female growth. On one hand, the middle class promotes education and modernity; on the other, it upholds restrictive gender norms in the name of tradition and family honor. Murthy captures



this paradox effectively. The home becomes a space of care but also control, love but also silence. As **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** argues, understanding the “multiple subjectivities of women” within their cultural contexts is crucial to decolonizing feminist discourse (Mohanty, 2003).

Murthy does not vilify family structures but encourages readers to **re-examine them through the lens of empathy and justice**. By giving her protagonist a voice, even in silence, she allows readers to witness a subtle but significant shift—from passivity to purpose.

#### FINDINGS

The analysis of “*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*” reveals a number of important thematic and symbolic insights into the life, struggles, and aspirations of Indian middle-class girls. The findings emphasize the subtlety and depth with which Sudha Murthy addresses the complex intersection of gender, identity, and cultural expectations.

#### 1. The Metaphor of the Caterpillar as a Tool of Empowerment

The story uses the **caterpillar metaphor** to symbolize suppressed potential and the internal evolution of a girl who seeks to transcend the boundaries set by societal norms. The cocoon represents both **protection and restriction**, while the act of flying reflects the protagonist’s emotional and psychological liberation. This finding aligns with symbolic literature where personal growth is portrayed as a journey from confinement to freedom.

#### 2. Transformation as a Quiet and Internal Process

Unlike narratives of overt rebellion, Murthy’s depiction of **female transformation is inward, reflective, and emotionally driven**. The story illustrates that empowerment does not always involve confrontation; instead, it can stem from internal shifts in perception, self-awareness, and quiet determination. This suggests that personal transformation is often **gradual and introspective**, especially for women operating within traditional frameworks.

#### 3. Female Aspiration as a Form of Resistance

The protagonist’s dream is not extravagant or unrealistic—it is simply to be seen, heard, and valued. Yet, in the middle-class Indian context, even such modest dreams become **acts of resistance**. The study finds that **aspiration itself is politicized**, as young girls’ desires for freedom and self-expression challenge the rigid roles assigned to them by family and society.

#### 4. The Double-Edged Nature of Middle-Class Values

The story highlights the **ambiguous role of the Indian middle class**: while it offers access to education and modernity, it also enforces deep-rooted gender expectations. Families are portrayed as both supportive and controlling, loving yet restrictive. This duality creates an emotional tension for girls who grow up within these spaces, often torn between **cultural loyalty and personal ambition**.

#### 5. Sudha Murthy’s Feminist Voice is Subtle but Powerful

Murthy’s contribution to Indian feminist literature is distinct. She does not use radical language or dramatic plotlines. Instead, she relies on **empathy, realism, and relatable characters** to convey powerful messages about female identity and growth. Her writing serves as a mirror to the lived experiences of millions of Indian women whose stories are rarely told in such emotionally honest terms.





## 6. Narrative Simplicity Enhances Accessibility and Impact

The study finds that Murthy's **simple narrative style**—free from ornamental language—makes her stories widely accessible and emotionally resonant. This stylistic choice allows her to reach a broad audience while subtly addressing deep-rooted societal issues.

## CONCLUSION

Sudha Murthy's "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free (Dream of a Girl)*" is not merely a short story—it is a quiet yet profound exploration of **female identity, transformation, and aspiration** within the confines of Indian middle-class society. Through the symbolic metaphor of the caterpillar, Murthy constructs a powerful allegory of **self-realization and personal liberation**. The story resonates with the silent emotional journeys of countless girls who live under social, cultural, and familial constraints, yet dream of flying beyond them. This research has shown that Murthy's narrative is grounded in **realism and empathy**, focusing not on grand revolts but on **subtle internal awakenings**. Her protagonist's transformation is psychological rather than physical, and her dream is personal yet universally relevant. By capturing the nuances of a girl's struggle to assert her individuality in a traditionally bound environment, Murthy offers a compelling feminist vision—one that values patience, reflection, and dignity over defiance.

The study also reveals how Indian middle-class values serve as both enablers and barriers. While they provide education and protection, they also impose silence and self-effacement, especially upon girls. Murthy's ability to highlight this paradox through simple prose makes her literature not only accessible but socially significant. Furthermore, the analysis confirms that Murthy's literary voice contributes a **unique feminist sensibility**—one that avoids rhetorical excess and instead roots itself in the **lived realities of ordinary Indian women**. Her storytelling becomes a form of advocacy, encouraging readers to recognize and honor the quiet strength in every girl's journey toward selfhood.

In conclusion, "*Caterpillar Wants to Fly Free*" is a gentle yet profound reminder that transformation begins with a dream, and even in silence, there is resistance. Murthy's work reminds us that when a girl dares to dream, she begins the journey not just toward flight, but toward **freedom, self-worth, and identity**.

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