

## Portrayal of Social Realities in Sudha Murty's the Circle of Life

Dr. P. Mohanraj<sup>1</sup> & Dr. T. Johnson<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract:

Sudha Murty, an eminent Indian educator, author, and philanthropist, explores themes of education, religion, family relationships, societal attitudes, and feminist concerns in her literary works. *The Circle of Life* traces the intertwined journeys of five friends, depicting their experiences with friendship, career trajectories, successes, failures, achievements, and disappointments. The novel offers a reflective and compassionate portrayal of the social complexities of contemporary Indian society. This study analyses the text's engagement with pressing social issues, including political corruption, the struggles of marginalized communities, and the increasing dependence on astrology. It further highlights the novel's capacity to prompt readers toward self-reflection and a deeper sense of social responsibility. The paper argues that *The Circle of Life* functions not merely as a narrative but as a social document that captures the lived realities and challenges of ordinary Indians.

**Key Words:** Friendship, Ambition, Corruption, Politics, Educational System, Money and Horoscope

### Introduction

Sudha Murty was born in 1950 in Shimoga, Karnataka. She was a second child of R.H. Kulkarni. She had spent much of her childhood with her grandparents which ultimately made her to grow values of life and also love for humanity. She became first female engineer at Tata Motors. She uplifted lives through Infosys Foundation in education, healthcare, and rural development. She had also written many books, which inspired millions of the people in the world and also translated into many languages. She established numerous school libraries and funded thousands of scholarships for underprivileged students. She was awarded seven honorary Doctorates for her literary and philanthropic works. She was honoured with India's

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of English, SRM College of Agricultural Sciences, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Baburayanpettai, Chengalpattu

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, VLB Janakiammal College of Arts and Science, Kovaipudur, Coimbatore

fourth highest civilian award “Padmashri” in the year 2006 and Padma Bhusan in the year 2023 for her philanthropic work. She is also a recipient of the “R.K. Narayan Award “for her contribution to Literature.

*The Circle of Life* is a novel about five friends — Uttara Rao, Janaki Paranjape, Arvind Shah, K. Subba Rao, and Sumitra Iyer — who meet at IISc, Bangalore, in 1998. They come from different parts of India and belong to diverse cultural, traditional, and social backgrounds. Despite their differences, they quickly form a close friendship during their time at IISc. The story follows their journey through friendship, careers, successes, failures, achievements, and disappointments in life. Before parting ways, they make a vow to reunite on the campus twenty-five years later. The novel explores how their lives have evolved over the years and how, in many ways, life has come full circle for each of them. The story of this book revolves around their struggle for life.

### **Result Analysis**

Murty sheds light on the challenges faced by Ph.D. scholars in the Indian education system. Pursuing a Ph.D. is not a simple task. While enrolment in a Ph.D. program may appear straightforward, students often encounter significant pressure as they progress. One of the major requirements is the publication of research papers in reputed journals, which can be a daunting process. At times, scholars struggle to identify appropriate journals, and some may resort to publishing in less credible or predatory journals. Additionally, scholars face numerous instructions and conditions from their academic guide. As a result, some are unable to submit their thesis on time, while others choose to discontinue their studies altogether. Sudha Murty highlights the plight of Ph.D. scholars through the character of Koushi. Koushi enrolled in a Ph.D. program at IISc six years ago and is now expected to submit her thesis. She is currently under considerable pressure. Koushi tends to isolate herself, refraining from social interaction, and is constantly engrossed in her research work.

At times, she feels uncertain about whether she will be able to complete her thesis on time. “Her guide has put tremendous conditions, and she is under a little pressure. She is always in a hurry and doesn’t care who is to her left or right.” (The Circle of Life 58) Thus, Murty sheds light on the various challenges faced by Ph.D. scholars and how these issues affect their mental well-being.

The Influence of Horoscopes on Arranged Marriages in Middle-Class Orthodox Families. The arranged marriage system in middle-class orthodox families is influenced by various factors, one of the most prominent being horoscopes. Despite living in a modern, technologically advanced world, many people



continue to hold strong beliefs in astrology and horoscopic compatibility. In some cases, even when a young couple likes each other, a mismatch in their horoscopes can lead to the cancellation of the marriage. There are only a few families who do not subscribe to these beliefs. However, when such families propose a marriage alliance, they often face opposition from elders who strongly believe in astrology, resulting in the alliance being called off. This issue is reflected in the story of Sumithra.

Sumithra, is a beautiful and academically talented young woman who remains unmarried solely because of her horoscope. According to astrological predictions, if she marries, she will soon be widowed—an ominous forecast that has deterred potential matches and left her isolated in the marriage market. “In those days in any arranged marriage, horoscopes played an important role. She was considered doomed because of horoscope, which said that she would be widowed very soon after the marriage” (The Circle of Life 32) No one is willing to marry Sumithra. Aware of her situation, she silently observes everything around her, shedding tears in solitude. She has twin sisters who are ten years younger than her, and now even their futures are clouded by the stigma surrounding Sumithra’s horoscope. Elders in the community believe that her presence might negatively affect her sisters’ marriage prospects as well. In her community, the details of her horoscope are widely known, leaving her with little to no opportunity to find a groom on her own terms. With no clear path ahead in her personal life, Sumithra decided to redirect her focus. She has now applied for a PhD in Chemistry at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore, hoping to carve out a future for herself through academic and professional achievement

Sumithra successfully completed her PhD thesis and set her sights on gaining international experience. She received a prestigious scholarship from a renowned German university and, determined to pursue her goals, chose not to concern herself with marriage or the disapproval of the elders back home. She moved to Germany, focusing entirely on her academic and professional journey. After several years abroad, Sumithra returned to India and secured a position as a professor at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc). Despite her accomplishments, she remained unmarried, her so-called ill-fated horoscope continuing to cast a shadow over her personal life.

Years later, Sumithra had an unexpected encounter with Dr. Narayanan Iyer, a celebrated astrophysicist from Berkeley. A globally respected figure, his name had been proposed for the Nobel Prize, and he had published numerous papers in *Natural Journey*. His bestselling book, *Myths in Astronomy*, had gained widespread recognition for challenging superstitions and offering scientific insight into age-old beliefs.



However, Sumithra receives a marriage proposal from Narayanan Iyer. She is overjoyed, as it is the first proposal she has received in many years—and from someone within her own community. She is mentally prepared for married life and willing to make adjustments. She is even ready to leave her current job and relocate to America. Unfortunately, her happiness is short-lived. Narayanan’s uncle and aunt reject the proposal due to concerns about Sumithra’s horoscope. Narayanan’s mother also objects, comparing his horoscope with his father’s and warning him of potential consequences. She even threatens to take her own life if he marries Sumithra. In the end, Narayanan is unable to marry Sumithra because of the horoscope. Sumithra asks questions to Narayana “What is the use of writing a book then? If you have been unable to convince your own people at home, then how will you convince your readers?” (The circle of Life 208) Narayanan has played with Sumithra’s feelings. In response, Sumithra focuses more on her work. Through this, Murthy illustrates to readers how horoscopes can impact the marital lives of young couples in India. She highlights that, due to astrology and blind beliefs, many young women remain unmarried even today.

Status is another significant barrier in arranged marriages. If the bride or groom does not belong to the same community or comes from a financially disadvantaged background, their parents are often unwilling to approve the marriage. Families with wealth, social standing, and respect in the business world tend to prioritize these factors over the personal character of the prospective bride or groom. Parents are primarily concerned with how the marriage will affect their family's reputation in the eyes of relatives and society.

Murthy highlights the issue of status through the character of Uttara Rao. Uttara was born into a well-off family with a strong social standing. Both her father and grandfather were engineering graduates from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, and they owned a successful construction company. Following in their footsteps, Uttara also enrolled at IISc, though she chose to study computer science instead of continuing in civil engineering. While at IISc, Uttara meets Gopal, a PhD student whose father was a professor. Gopal falls in love with Uttara and eventually proposes to her, and she accepts. However, when Uttara informs her family about the relationship, they reject the proposal due to Gopal’s background and perceived lower financial status. Uttara’s father asks many questions about Gopal. “What? At last, you have ditched us! Which community is he from? What religion? What does the boy do? Where is his family? Whose son? What business are they into?” (The Circle of the life 126) Uttara’s brother even insists that she sign legal documents before the marriage, fearing that in the event of a divorce, the family might be forced to pay a large settlement to Gopal’s family. Uttara signs all the documents without hesitation and chooses not to take any ornaments with her except a simple pair of studs. She leaves her family home and marries Gopal.

Following the marriage, Uttara's family cuts all ties with her, and there is no further communication between them. Through this narrative, Murty underscores the harsh reality that, in today's modern, business-oriented world, families often prioritize financial status over the genuine emotions and sincerity of young individuals. The story reveals how societal pressures and concerns about status can override compassion, understanding, and acceptance in matters of love and marriage.

Murty illustrates how the human mind can change when exposed to wealth, property, and high social status, through the character of Subbu. After acquiring sudden wealth, Subbu's once admirable qualities begin to fade. He quickly adjusts and adapts to the lifestyle of high society, easily forgetting his humble past and even hurting the feelings of others along the way. Though Subbu and the woman he marries come from different communities, backgrounds, and languages, their union is made possible primarily because of Subbu's newfound wealth and social position.

Subbu comes from a middle-class family but excels in his studies. He enrolls at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore, saving every rupee to complete his education. Ambitious by nature, he dreams of becoming a wealthy man. After completing his studies, he joins a company in Mumbai, where he faces numerous challenges, particularly from a difficult colleague, Srikantaiah. Despite these setbacks, Subbu proves to be talented and dedicated. His hard work earns him the opportunity to present his ideas to his superior, Diwanji, who is impressed and transfers him to work under his direct supervision. Diwanji owns a textile company in Pune, where a CEO position is vacant. He asks Subbu to move to Pune and take up the role.

At the Pune office, Subbu meets Sarala, a beautiful young woman who works as his personal assistant. Subbu falls in love with her at first sight, and Sarala is equally drawn to him. She trusts Subbu deeply and begins to believe he will marry her. In her heart, she accepts him as her future husband. However, Subbu suddenly receives a call from Diwanji, summoning him back to Mumbai. Diwanji expresses his wish for Subbu to marry his daughter, Veena. Tempted by wealth, position, and elevated social status, Subbu accepts the marriage proposal abandoning Sarala and the emotional connection they once.

"If he married Sarala, what would he get? A beautiful Sarala, dependent on him. And her family who would gain from this marriage, including the responsibilities of her two sisters. If he married Veena, what would he gain? She was not bad looking, she would come with money, position, status and honour – everything that he had longed for, for long time. His dream would be realized with not much effort on his end" (The Circle of Life 173).

Soon, Subbu's engagement card arrives at the office. Sarala is shocked and cannot believe her eyes. All her dreams come crashing down. She doesn't have the courage to confront Subbu or even write him a letter. Due to her family's circumstances, Sarala has kept her relationship with Subbu a secret. If others found out, she feared she would lose her job—and the news could damage her sister's marriage as well. Silently, she swallows her pain and buries all memories of her relationship with Subbu deep within herself. Eventually, Subbu marries Veena and becomes extremely wealthy. Through Subbu's character, Murthy powerfully highlights how the human mind can change when faced with money and social status. Subbu chooses to break off his relationship with Sarala and marry Veena, not for love, but for wealth and position.

The issue of corruption in politics, which destroys the lives of middle-class people, is highlighted by Murthy through the character of Aravind Shah. Aravind, a motherless child, excels in his studies and is fond of books. He always wears khadi clothes and is an introverted person. He joins the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, to study civil engineering. Although Aravind's father is a rich and successful businessman, Aravind lives a simple life and performs well in his studies at IISc. After completing his education, he applies for a job at a company located in Delhi. There, he begins working on building rural houses using modern technology. Aravind often argues with his colleagues about the quality of their work. He particularly dislikes Mr. Parekh, who frequently takes money from the budget for personal use and manipulates financial reports. Soon, Aravind discovers the widespread corruption in the company and confronts Sharma, one of his colleagues, about it. "You buy low-quality cement at a cheap rate and produce false receipts, build bridges and house with that. They could collapse and many people will die because of your injustice" (The Circle of Life 148) Aravind slowly realizes that many companies cheat poor people, and unlike others, he cannot tolerate such injustice. Therefore, he resigns from his job. He then joins hands with a retired professor, Parameshwaran, who is working for the welfare of tribal people in Haripur, Madhya Pradesh. Aravind enjoys his work in Haripur and finds the right mentor in Professor Parameshwaran. During this time, Aravind meets Pamela, a research student at Delhi University. Pamela works alongside Aravind, and later, they get married. Aravind continues to work diligently in Haripur, always avoiding shortcuts and remaining committed to honesty and hard work.

Murthy illustrates the poor conditions of villages and the lack of proper hospital facilities. Professor Parameshwaran dies of a heart attack. Although Aravind rushes him to the hospital, the lack of proper roads, education, and medical facilities makes it difficult to save him. In government hospitals, doctors are often absent, and the equipment is inadequate. Because of the lack of basic amenities in villages, many people migrate to cities in search of a better life. Aravind starts an evening school for women to improve literacy

and empower them. One day, Pamela suggests that Aravind should enter politics—not for power, but to create good policies for the welfare of poor people. Two years later, Aravind contests as an independent candidate in the Madhya Pradesh elections. Everyone believes he will win because of his sincere work for the tribal community. Tragically, Pamela dies in a road accident caused by poor road conditions. Her sudden death deeply affects Aravind. Eventually, he loses the election. Despite working tirelessly for over a decade for the betterment of tribal people, Aravind is defeated because of the greed and influence of others, and even his own people fail to support him. Aravind leaves Haripur with great disappointment. His brother comforts him and advises him to join the ruling party and contest in the Beespur election. Aravind follows his brother’s advice, wins the election, and becomes the Minister of State. For the first year, he works sincerely and with dedication. However, over time, he begins to accept favors and bribes for his work. Although he occasionally feels guilty about taking bribes, his brother Ramesh convinces him to continue. Thus, Aravind’s political life transforms him. Murthy highlights how power can corrupt even a man of gratitude, a true Gandhian, and a devoted social worker, turning him into a corrupt individual.

## **Conclusion**

Sudha Murthy’s *The Circle of Life* serves as a compelling reflection of the social realities of contemporary India. The novel thoughtfully engages with issues such as corruption, inequality, and the increasing reliance on astrology, presenting them through relatable characters and everyday situations. Through her characteristically simple yet impactful narrative style, Murthy foregrounds the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in modern society, underscoring the importance of empathy, responsibility, and self-awareness. By depicting both the struggles and resilience of ordinary people, the novel invites readers to consider their own position and responsibilities within the broader social fabric. Ultimately, Murthy’s work reaffirms literature’s capacity to foster personal introspection and inspire meaningful social transformation. Through the portrayal of social stratification and her commitment to themes of social awareness and human dignity, the author enriches contemporary literary discourse and emphasizes the enduring relevance of socially conscious storytelling.

## **Reference**

Murthy, Sudha. (2025). *The Circle of Life*. Penguin Random House India: Gurugram.

**Publisher’s Note:** *The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher, editors, or the editorial board.*