



Forgetting our own history: A call to reconnect Indian youth with their tradition

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Abstract

The relationship between a nation's youth and its historical consciousness plays a decisive role in sustaining cultural identity and patriotic values. In the Indian context, where the contemporary generation is increasingly shaped by rapid globalization, digital entertainment, and consumerist lifestyles, concerns about detachment from the nation's collective memory have become particularly urgent. Sudha Murty's short story "Forgetting Our Own History" offers a compelling literary lens through which this problem can be examined.

This paper examines Sudha Murty's short story "Forgetting Our Own History" as a critique of contemporary Indian youth's growing detachment from the nation's historical legacy and freedom struggle. Through the narrator's encounter with two affluent teenagers who are unfamiliar with iconic figures such as Rani Laxmibai, the story exposes a troubling gap between modern education and national consciousness. Using a qualitative interpretive methodology, the study analyzes key conversations in the narrative to investigate how ignorance of historical heroes reflects broader concerns regarding patriotism, cultural memory, and the role of education in shaping national identity. The research further situates Murty's work within discourses on nationhood, demonstrating how a brief fictional narrative can effectively foreground issues of historical amnesia and civic responsibility. The findings highlight the urgent need to integrate patriotic and historical values into contemporary educational frameworks so that young Indians remain connected to their cultural heritage and appreciate the sacrifices that enabled their present freedoms.

The study also aims to show how Murty's narrative underscores the need for stronger integration of historical awareness and national values within modern education, highlighting the role of literature in shaping responsible and informed citizens.

Keywords: Youth, Laxmibai, patriotism, education, narrator

Introduction

Historical consciousness forms the foundation of a society's cultural identity, collective memory, and patriotic sensibilities. In a rapidly globalizing world, however, the younger generation often finds itself increasingly detached from the nation's past, influenced more by digital entertainment and modern consumer culture than by the stories of sacrifice that shaped their country. This concern becomes especially pressing in India, a nation whose independence was secured through decades of struggle, resistance, and the unwavering courage of countless freedom fighters. As newer generations grow farther removed from the lived realities of colonialism and liberation, the responsibility of transmitting historical knowledge becomes not only an educational imperative but also a moral one.

Sudha Murty's short story "Forgetting Our Own History" serves as a striking literary reflection of this contemporary crisis of memory. Through the narrator's encounter with two privileged teenagers during a flight from Delhi to Bangalore, Murty exposes how even educated young people, despite access to modern resources and opportunities, remain unaware of iconic national heroes such as Rani Laxmibai. The teenagers' inability to recognize the symbolic significance of the narrator's award, and their confusion of historical events with popular cinema, illustrate the alarming gap between modern education and the cultivation of national consciousness. This brief yet powerful narrative raises important questions about the role of teachers, institutions, and the broader society in shaping how youth understand their cultural heritage.

Existing scholarship on Indian nationalism and literature has extensively explored themes of colonial resistance, Gandhian influence, and representations of the freedom struggle in canonical novels. However, limited attention has been paid to contemporary short fiction that critiques present-day indifference toward historical memory. Murty's story, grounded in realism and everyday observation, offers a unique lens through which to examine how the values of patriotism, respect for national heroes, and awareness of cultural tradition are diminishing among younger generations.

This study seeks to analyze "Forgetting Our Own History" within this socio-cultural framework, highlighting how Murty not only narrates an incident but also foregrounds an urgent national concern: the fading relevance of historical understanding among modern Indian youth. By employing a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study examines the narrator's dialogue with the two teenagers as a representation of broader educational and societal shortcomings. Ultimately, it sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how literature can serve as a pedagogical tool to revive national identity, reinforce cultural continuity, and inspire responsible citizenship in twenty-first-century India. Innumerable Indians across Indian regions, irrespective of their religions, participated in freedom movements (and in various social reformations). A large number of them sacrificed their lives for liberating their country from outside rules (Contents, n.d.). Some prominent figures like Nana Saheb, Rani Laxmibai, Tantia Tope, Khan Bahadur Khan, Maulana Liaquat Ali, Majanu Saha, Vijaya Rama Raja, Wazir Ali, Dasaratha, Hiri, Chinnamma Sayyed

Ahmed, Teetu Meer, Vasudeva Balwant Phadke, Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Ananda Mohan Bose, Sir Satyendra Sinha, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Subhas Chandra Bose, Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqulla Khan, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev, Ganesh Ghosh, Anand Singh, Kalpana Dutt, Subash Ram, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, C. Rajagopalachari, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, M.N. Roy, P.C. Joshi (Ranadive, 1986) ^[17], and many others, with their visionary leadership, lead the nation towards freedom on 15th August, 1947. Therefore, it is the responsibility and duty of every Indian, especially its educated youth, to understand the value of this freedom and nationhood and never forget those heroes whose contribution was really high and great in liberating a country where they live freely in the present time and which is ruled by their own people. Sudha Murty's short story "Forgetting Our Own History" is an appreciable attempt in this field.

Sudha Murty as a Writer

Sudha Murty (b. 1950), the present chair of the Infosys Foundation founded by herself and a member of the Upper House in India (Murmu & Murty, n.d.) ^[14], is a versatile, prolific, and multidimensional personality. She is very active in the field of societal well-being of ignored people and philanthropy. Though her family was a typically traditional Brahmin Madhwa Kannadiga, yet she is playing an ardent and active role for the goodness of those who are neglected and oppressed in society, including women (Ayushi & Kamboj, 2024) ^[2]. Its reflection can also be experienced in most of her writings. Her books of novels and short stories, such as *Dollar Bahu*, *Gently Falls: The Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk: Life Stories from Here and There*, *House of Cards: A Novel*, *Three Thousand Stitches and Other Stories*, and *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life*, are some examples of works that mainly focus on and show concerns for the aforementioned types of people or victims (Mukherjee, 2022) ^[13].

Sudha Murty finds inspiration to write from happenings of daily life, reality, and observation. The culture of India is inseparable from her works (Alyahya, 2019) ^[1]. Most of her weekends are spent traveling. She utilizes many of her interesting travel experiences or incidents in her short stories, especially in her collection *Three Thousand Stitches* (Banklagi & Salimath, 2018) ^[3]. Though part of another collection, *Wise & Otherwise: A Salute to Life* (2012), the short story *Forgetting Our Own History* is also based on her travel or flight experience, wherein she meets youths, which results in her concern for patriotism, nationhood, and the rightly directed education of young Indians.

Review of Literature

Pratibha Sharma (2016) ^[18] deals with the well-known "Gandhi Quartet," including the novels *The Crown and the Loincloth*, *The Salt of Life*, *The Triumph of Tricolor*, and *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal. The researcher discusses the themes and people or characters in these novels. Moreover, the independence and division of India in the background of history is also analyzed (Sharma, 2016) ^[18]. Rashmi S. (2020), in her study, is concerned about how the agitation campaign for freedom in India is impactful on R. K. Narayan's fictional works. She examines *The Bachelors of*

Arts and Waiting for the Mahatma for this purpose while focusing on the themes and styles. He is greatly influenced by Gandhiji in his writings (S, 2020). Whereas Narwade (2022) describes the emergence of the concepts of nationhood and patriotism, which can be easily found in the early literary works of the nineteenth century. It ensured the participation of Indians in the struggle movements to liberate the nation by inspiring and encouraging them to sacrifice anything. In this way, literature of colonial times expresses why it is needed to liberate the country (Narwade, 2022). Mainak Gupta (2023) ^[7] examines the differences in the ways Gandhiji, the central figure in India's freedom movement, is portrayed in the novels of colonial time *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938) in comparison to the after-independence time novels *Dhorai Charit Manas* (1950) and *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). He finds clear changes in the depiction of Gandhiji's personality between these two groups of novels (Gupta, 2023) ^[7].

The examination of these works makes it evident that they only show the depiction of the freedom struggle, the impact of literature on people to participate in the freedom movement, the impact of Gandhiji, the leading figure of the freedom campaign, in the novels of a writer, and Gandhiji in the pre- and post-independent novels. They do not deal with the contemporary youth's knowledge of the freedom fighters of India, as in the short story "Forgetting Our Own Youth" by Sudha Murty. There is no such study in the knowledge of the researcher. That is why it is useful to analyze this short story from this perspective. In addition, the discussion and description of Indian freedom agitators and campaigns is usually found in novels and its related research studies; this study is based on a short story.

Substance of the Short Story

The writer or narrator is returning from Delhi to Bangalore by flight after receiving an award in the form of a statue of Rani Laxmibai sitting on a horse. Though there are so many people in the airplane, they neither converse with anyone nor are interested in doing so. But the narrator of the story is a teacher. She cannot remain silent. She makes two teenagers converse with her, whose utterances are all about her award. The writer finds the opportunity to tell them some historical facts they are completely unaware of.

Discussion and Analysis

The writer, or the narrator of the story, introduces herself to the two teenagers, boys and girls, and talks with them. She has no feeling of embarrassment or hesitation because, as a college teacher, she daily talks with her students, who are also youth. The two students from a Bangalore college become frank and familiar with her. They first ask the narrator regarding the award; the girl starts with her utterance:

'I saw that statue of a black horse and a woman riding on it. It's a nice toy, but is it not available in Bangalore? You seem to have had such a tough time carrying it with you. Is there any special reason for carrying it with you?' (Murty, *Wise & Otherwise*, 55)

The narrator tells her that the object is not a thing to play with or a toy. She says

'It's not a toy. It's an award.' (55)

But, before she says anything more, the boy also speaks and asks a question

'Is this award for a horse race? There is a lady on the back of that beautiful horse.' (56)

They are curious and want to know more about the memento in the form of Rani Laxmibai's statue with a horse awarded to her

'Maybe you are fond of the races!'

'Is this award for a horse race? There is a lady on the back of that beautiful horse.' (56)

The utterances of the college youth clearly indicate that they have no knowledge of India's glorious history, in which the freedom fighters with the feelings of nationhood, nationalism, and patriotism sacrificed even their lives as well (Contents, n.d.). As the two are educated and from good families also, even then they see it as a toy, her fondness of horses, or an award given to her for winning any horse race. Though a teacher, able to handle difficult situations, she felt embarrassed, surprised, and frowned upon for their ignorance about the statue, while others, such as guards at the airport and the flight attendants, were respectful towards her when she told them what kind of problem she was.

The narrator easily comes to understand from the two teenagers' utterances that they have no idea of the statue with the lady on the horse with a sword reminding any Indian. Thus, she takes it as an opportunity as a teacher to teach them outside any educational institution because the responsibility of a teacher is not only limited to classrooms; he/she is an inseparable part of his/her own surroundings or society. She/he not only shapes the individuals' lives but also reconstructs and reforms a society (Jan, 2017) [8]. The narrator is also in the mood for playing a similar role. Therefore, she asks them to see the memento again so that she can talk to them and explain everything

'Will you go and have a look at the statue and tell me what you think about it?'

They again tell her

'We did look at the statue and that's why we are asking these questions.' (56)

This time also they do not recall the Indian historical struggle of colonial India (Chatterjee, 2001) [4]; the narrator perhaps wants to hear about it or remind them. Their reply once again shocks the narrator. She asks them about the First War of Indians for Independence (Kumari, 2024) [10]. The boy first replies through his utterance and the girl add some more information to this

'Yes. It was in 1942, wasn't it?'

'Of course, we've seen the movie 1942—A Love Story.

The war between the Indians and the British. Manisha Koirala was just stunning in that.' (56)

The narrator asks them about the First War of Indian Independence; they tell her the story of a Bollywood film, 1942, A Love Story (Periago, 2010) [16], with actress Manisha Koirala. They know about the Quit India Campaign as the First War of Indians for Independence merely because of watching the aforementioned film. The narrator corrects them and tells them as a guide and teacher:

'No, that was the Quit India movement. The First War of Independence was fought a century before that and we lost it.' (56)

She further speaks for the enhancement and expansion of their knowledge of history and emphasizes that they should think about nationhood, patriotism, and nationalism

'In 1857 there was a war against the British. The young queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmibai, led her forces against them. She could have remained passive, accepted a royal pension from the British and led a secure, comfortable life. But she didn't do that. She was a fiery patriot. She fought the war bravely and even her opponents were surprised by her leadership on the battlefield. Since then she has been a symbol of courage and an icon of the Indian people's love of freedom. She died so that we could all live in a free India.' (56)

The two teenagers listen to every word of the narrator's utterance attentively. Its evidence is that they neither speak nor chew when she tells all these things to them.

It is clear from the analysis that Indian youth like these two teenagers are on the verge of forgetting their tradition, glorious history, and their freedom fighters. Though the writer of the short story "Forgetting Our Own History" does not talk about its reasons directly, the 21st-century modern youth's engagement in listening to entertaining things on a device called an MP3 player (MP3 Player, 2005) and interest in movies indicate that instead of studying, they spend their time in such futile activities. Unlike them, even the late 19th-century Bengali youngsters (children) instilled in themselves an attitude of patriotism or national belonging by using the contemporary periodicals. The periodicals outlined traits such as courage, devotion, and working with hardiness for the children so that they could enthusiastically and actively participate in shaping the future of the country (Dasgupta, 2021) [6].

It is a matter of great concern that if the youth do not know about Rani Laxmibai, they definitely would be unaware of inspiring women such as Belavadi Maamma, Obavva, and Kittur Chennamma's courage and valor. Though they were without education, they challenged their rivals without any fear while fighting for India. Rani Laxmibai fought so bravely against the English that even her enemies also praised her. Overall, the writer of the short story "Forgetting Our Own History" emphasizes respect and not forgetting such great people, traditions, and cultures.

This problem can be solved by telling college students of any stream about the Indian Freedom Movement and fighters whenever teachers get the opportunity in the classes to do so. In fact, they can create such opportunities in their classes. Sometimes, they can relate their topic to the history of India. A competent teacher of any stream can do it without any difficulty. For example, Sudha Murty, the narrator of "Forgetting Our Own History," a teacher of engineering (Banklagi, 2018) [3], smartly talks with two college students and makes them understand the Indian history of colonial times and freedom fighter Rani Laxmibai.

Conclusion

The study of Sudha Murty's "Forgetting Our Own History" reveals far more than a simple interaction between a narrator and two college students; it uncovers a deep-rooted cultural and educational crisis within contemporary Indian society. The teenagers' inability to recognize the figure of Rani Laxmibai and their confusion of historical events with

cinematic narratives exemplify a growing disconnection between modern youth and the nation's historical legacy. This narrative moment, though brief, encapsulates the broader issue of historical amnesia that threatens the transmission of patriotic values and national consciousness to future generations.

Through a qualitative reading of the story, it becomes evident that Murty uses realism and everyday experience as tools to highlight the inadequacies of current educational and social frameworks. The narrator's role as a teacher becomes symbolic of the larger responsibility educators bear in bridging the widening gap between academic learning and cultural memory. Murty suggests that the classroom cannot remain the sole space for cultivating patriotism; rather, educators must actively engage in imparting historical knowledge in all aspects of social interaction. This aligns with pedagogical theories that emphasize the transformative role of teachers in shaping civic identity and moral responsibility.

Furthermore, the story exposes how privileged access to modern technology, entertainment, and globalized lifestyles does not necessarily translate into informed citizenship. Instead, such access can contribute to superficial engagement with media and cultural products, overshadowing meaningful learning about the past. The teenagers' example indicates a generational shift in priorities, where entertainment dominates intellectual curiosity, leaving little space for reflection on national history.

Murty's narrative underscores literature's potential to address these gaps by offering powerful, relatable illustrations of societal issues. A short story, despite its brevity, is shown to carry the capacity to evoke reflection, critique cultural tendencies, and inspire corrective action. The incident described in the story ultimately becomes a call to action—urging educators, parents, institutions, and society at large to reintegrate historical consciousness into the lived experiences of young Indians.

“Forgetting Our Own History” serves not only as a commentary on the ignorance of a few individuals but also as a mirror reflecting a national concern. The story encourages a collective re-evaluation of how India teaches its past and fosters patriotic values. By bringing attention to the consequences of cultural detachment, Murty emphasizes that sustaining national identity requires continuous, conscious effort. Only through deliberate engagement with history can the youth cultivate the respect, responsibility, and awareness necessary to contribute meaningfully to their country's future.

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