
Emergence of new Woman in Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta*: A Study

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Abstract: When woman is mistreated and subjugated for centuries, primarily due to her gender, multitude of them do not succeed in overcoming their hellish existence. History witnessed the mute suffering of woman through literature. But in recent times, a very few have been portrayed as new women who are no more ready to die in hellish conditions but raise their voice against circumstances and injustice. Sudha Murty, who is one of the major voices in Indian English literature today, continues her journey of showcasing the realistic treatment of woman under various pretenses. The paper aims to study the novel *Mahashweta* (2007) and tries to clearly show how our society insensitively behaves towards a woman who suffers from a very sensitive cosmetic disease called Vitiligo. By categorically showing what made Anupama a modern women with paradigm shift in her thinking, the paper also explores how the determined girl, although suffers silently in the beginning, finally strives to rebuild her life against all odds, and goes to Bombay where she finds success, respect and the promise of an enduring friendship. *Mahashweta* can be an inspiring story for many women who

need courage and resilience in a world marred by illusions and betrayals.

Keywords: stigma, internalization, assertion, self-realization, empowerment, positive thinking, paradigm shift, determination, progress.

Sudha Murthy, a renowned novelist, a short story writer both in Kannada and in English who was awarded Padma Shri for social work and education, R.K Narayan's award for literature(2006). Being a chair person in Infosys Foundation, as a philanthropist she has dedicated herself to the society to implement techno oriented facilities in teaching and libraries for most of the Government schools in Karnataka. She got best teacher award from Karnataka

State Government. She also explores the needs of development and humanistic approaches to the people through her writings. Sudha Murthy works predominantly broods over the various problems emerge in society and how the individuals react against them. By using mythical story as backdrop to differentiate between classical love and

modern love, Murty adopts it from Banabhatta's Sanskrit romantic novel Kadambari. It is story of love between the heroine Mahashweta and the hero Pundarika. The untimely death of her beloved, turns prince (Maha- shweta - perfectly white) wearing a white sari and garland, imposes a serious penance on her in the deep forest. In spite of her friend Kadambari's best dissuading, she resolves to continue her struggle which finally brings her beloved back to life and the lovers are reunited. Contrasting this real beauty of love blooms out of inner beauty of soul with that of modern love which doesn't have neither commitment nor sanctity, the novel didactically shows the importance of understanding between wife and husband in bond of marriage.

The story is about a young girl Anupama, the daughter of a poor schoolmaster, Shamanna. She has a step mother Sabakka and two stepsisters, Nanda and Vasudha. She is very beautiful, intelligent and talented. Her parents' want her to get married but she wants to complete her studies. She is an accomplished beautiful and courageous girl. Dr. Anand, an assistant surgeon with Dr. Desai, falls in love with Anupama when he sees her acting in a stage play, Mahashweta. He lives with his mother Radhakka and spoiled sister, Girija. Though he belongs to a very rich family, he convinces his mother, who reluctantly agrees, and gets married to Anupama. Anupama and Anand get married after falling in love in spite of

the differences in their social statuses. He then leaves for higher studies abroad leaving Anupama behind with his mother and sister. Unfortunately, Anupama's fairytale of marriage to Anand starts falling apart when he comes to know the news of vitiligo to his wife.

While exposing the mechanism exercised by both society and male chauvinism, the novel categorically portrays how a new woman starts emerging out of great humiliation. The novel is basically gender centric and critically suggests practical ways to overcome the inferiority complex caused by cosmetic deformities by women. The novel is one of the best examples for projection of woman in a radical manner who moves heaven and earth to succeed in life. The very beginning of the novel start with:

"Even though the female child is stronger than male child at birth as adults it is the man who become oppressor, and woman who suffers." [Mahashweta,1]

First of all, Anupama does not 'internalize' beliefs associated with the so called negative conclusions and conditions of her disease. Instead she fights against it. 'Internalization' is a psychological process where an individual believes and follows what others attitudes, values, standards, opinions imposed upon him/her are true. [Joseph, Valerie

and Tanya O. Williams, 2009.] Unfortunately, the mechanism of internalization happened in women issues and effectively used for exploiting them. It is true that patriarchy has established some values to woman attractiveness and successfully made women believe them. Anupama doesn't believe in the prescription done by either society or males in her life. She slowly started opposing a belief that 'one cannot be autonomous' and starts developing her autonomy.

Anupama also does not accept the stigmatization of her disease. Stigma as a process based on the social construction of identity, whereby individuals who are associated with a stigmatized condition are discredited by society and condemned to an undesirable social status.[Goffman, 7] For example, self-stigma is a process in which a person with a mental illness internalizes stigmatizing attitudes and beliefs held by the public. People who see themselves as a burden may believe themselves to be shunned (either by others or themselves), and those who are socially isolated may assume that their condition either results from or contributes to an undesirable social status. By amplifying social differences, stigma exacerbates existing restrictions on individual freedoms typically experienced by individuals assigned a lower social status in society. Anupama's mistreatment in the novel

clearly establishes how a diseased woman in Indian society undergoes incomparable turmoil of stigmatization and discrimination. In fact it is well portrayed by the writer. Although both men and women are affected by the socially stigmatic diseases, comparatively women have been mistreated and turn to be socially disadvantageous, and forced to live under deprived condition, especially when it is related to sexual based diseases like HIV in Third World countries [Emmanuel N Kontomanolis,12].

As a self-assertive woman, Anupama successfully overcomes some crucial mechanisms to explain how stigma contributes to suicide by discovering her own world of enjoyment. According to the stress-coping model of stigma, stigma is seen as a social stressor that promotes "negative emotional reactions, social withdrawal, and hopelessness among people with mental illness, especially if the perceived threat of stigma and social rejection exceeds the coping resources of the individual. Anupama is totally dejected by her own family and beloved. But she wants to be true to herself and builds counterparts with people. For example she thinks she is better than Girija in morals. "[Mahashweta,77] She is a kind of counterpart to Anand in morals and marital relationships. Anupama also fights against social isolation which is another stigma factor that contributes a person experiencing a mental health

problem that contributes to the risk of suicide. Anupama also creates her own world of enjoyment in reading, translating and teaching Sanskrit literature. She is fond of acting and directing Sanskrit classical plays. She enjoys nature and looks after the garden around Dolly's house in Mumbai. It has become a pastime to go to beach in Mumbai every time when she feels like isolated. "I don't have any complaints about my life here. This is my world and I am very happy with it." [Mahasweta, 150]

Anupama's self realization is one of the grand episodes in the novel. Modern women in recent times exhibit a kind of 'reversal' in their character and thinking. Modern writers adventurously introduced this kind of anticlimax in their works. Anupama becomes a kind of Buddha now. She started experiencing enlightenment in life; she contemplates things one after one and removes obstacles in her life mentally. Before conquering enemy externally, she starts conquering them internally first. End of the fifth part is anti-climax in the novel where Anupama resurges herself to get back from hill and decides to return home. She starts seeing the nature differently,

"Whatever the circumstances she finds herself in, she would meet the challenge head-on, and win. She is now ready to face the world, determined to stand on her own feet and build a new life for her. She looked back and prayed to the goddess, Give me the courage to

live no matter what happens! and started walking home." [Mahashweta, 79]

As a forward thinker, Anupama starts thinking positively and rightly. She deeply delves into the facts of her life and accepts them as they are. She knows that she cannot change them but she can change herself. She tries to construct a kind of defensive mechanism for herself. She develops her own philosophy of life. She starts recapturing her saga of tirade life. She has never known her mother's love. Her father is a timid puppet in the hands of his second wife. His step mother Sabakka is a cruel and selfish who expects daughters' lives flourishing at the cost of other's life. Her taunts would only add to her misery. She also discovers the real nature of Anand whom she thinks that he his Manmatha in the beginning. "Anand has loved her beauty and married for her for it. Then why should she die for a husband who doesn't even care about her? [Mahashweta, 78] Radhakka is a superstitious woman who always believes in Narayan's horoscope at the cost of her daughter in-law's life. Girija, sister-in-law is a kind of loose moral who marries man only for the sake of money. She even enjoys vicious satisfaction for the explosion of white patch. Therefore, she comes to a conclusion, then why should she has to die? Even if she dies no one would care. Society at large would take Anand's side and sympathize with him. The only question that haunts is why she should

die for people who don't care her.
[Mahashweta,78]

As a social worker, Murty suggests that certain social attention, social work support and psychological counseling is required from community side. As a keen observer of people and society, Sudha Murty has vividly depicts the psychological trauma of a patient and sends a message to the society. Anupama not only overcomes the stigma of leukoderma but also progresses in her life with doubled determination, is a kind of alter call for the world of women by Sudha Murty. Generally, suicide attempt survivors often face extreme stigmatization and are not taken seriously because they are viewed as simply 'crying wolf' and only a small proportion of suicide attempters seek formal help [Robert, 5]. Further, they are treated by many that they are not really sincere and serious in their intent to live. [Cvinar, 2005]. They always live under cynicism and seeking attention [Witte, p.612, 2010]. They take time to normalize. The trauma she had (undergone and motivated Anupama) finally lead her to think of suicide has been a heart rendering episode in the novel. The taint of the stigma associated with suicide has been wonderfully brought out by the writer. Sudha Murty conceptualizes her new woman in Anupama by her intensity in persuading marital vows with Anand even after discovering her diseases. In the beginning, she is not discouraged but believes in the integrity of Anand

and his love for her. She says herself that, "Anand is not like these people. He is a doctor. Surely he will persuade his mother to see reason." [Mahashweta, 56] She writes numerous letters to him clearly mentioning her return address. Every day she waits for postman Papanna's arrival and disappoints. But when she learns that Anand starts listening to his Radhakka and breaches the marriage trust purposefully, she resurges herself not to plead for his mercy and doesn't do any attempt to get financial support from him. She realizes that 'Radhakka and Anand are very similar. [Mahashweta,78] In spite of Sabakka's persuasion, "Your in-laws are rich. Why can't they send some money every month for your maintenance?" [Mahashweta,69], she is reluctant to approach them for their help. She believes that "The bond of marriage never threads through the sympathy but understanding. She doesn't want to be 'caught in relationships of conveniences. [Mahashweta,114].' She further states,

"The real success of a marriage depended not on superficial factors such as those. but upon love and mental understanding between husband and wife." [Mahashweta, 87]

Another quality that makes Anupama as woman of goodness is her but positive attitude towards other characters in the novel in spite of her adversity. Anupama not only conquers her deep sense of meaninglessness in her life but

also encourages her friend to have a meaningful marital life. She is not carried away by jealous of the marital bliss her friend is going to enjoy but bestows her best wishes. She says in her letter,

“Let your husband be a man who will only shower happiness and love on you. It is better to have an understanding husband than one who is merely handsome and wealthy, marriage is gamble. The result cannot be predicted beforehand. Finding the right match is matter of chance. I was unlucky in this. May you be more fortune.”
[Mahashweta, 65]

Anupama advances herself in encouraging and promoting others in life. She becomes a clerk in Mumbai and helps her colleague Dolly in her sickness and becomes supporter to her family. She donates her blood to Dolly. She also servers doctor Satya in his illness and consoles for not getting married to his classmate Vidhya. She even sends money to her father despite his helplessness and rejection. She also wants to take the responsibility of her step sisters. She finds meaning in all these, that's why she answer to the question if she is considers herself unfortunate,

“Of the thousands of flowers that blossom on a tree only a few will bear fruit. And out of those few fruits, insects and squirrels will eat some. The tree does not keep anything for itself. Does

that mean that the life of the tree is wasted? [Mahashweta,117]

Anupama's wisdom is clearly seen in following the fact about the disease but not on others faith and feelings about it. After certain time she successfully manages to overcome her feelings on certain things like marital bliss and love. As an educated woman, Anupama tries to make people know the truth about her disease. She struggles to maintain between science and faith. Leukoderma is neither contagious nor inherited from parents. She is properly informed by Dr. Rao that nothing is proved so far about the disease. She is even ready to agree that her condition is inherited by her mother in order to make her sister's path clear for marriage. She strongly opposes the malicious stories spread throughout village. She doesn't care the inauspiciousness involved in her participation in puja or attending marriage. She tries to send her father to reconsider proposal for her sister Nanda by debunking the so called 'Lord Brahma's approval [Mahashweta,68] Anupama's schools ayah suggests in believing in goddess and doing puja once. Anupama replies,

“Savantri, I have prayed to many gods and goddesses in various temples. I have gone to dargahs and churches, but nothing has helped me.”
[Mahashweta,71]

In India, the diseases like childlessness and leprosy are attributed to Karma. So

victims suffer discrimination, stigma and ostracism. Woman is banned from attending various occasions and is isolated from social gatherings. According to some cultures, the stigmatization can be extreme where issues like vitiligo and infertility are viewed as a burden on the socioeconomic well-being of a community. The stigma extends to the wider family, including parents, siblings, and in-laws, who are deeply disappointed for the loss of continuity of their family and contribution to their community. Imposition of this amplified guilt on woman by the patriarchal society is questionable.

Anupama tries to her determination to overcome all her misfortunes without ever giving in. At times she wants to be like Sita so that 'feet beneath her would open and to be swallowed by earth. [Mahashweta,72] But she doesn't entertain her mind to continue the thinking because she doesn't want to be like Sita to accept her defeat. Anupama slowly gathers her courage to face the fact of life and wants to become 'lonely traveller on long and arduous road. [Mahashweta,73] There is nobody really who loves her enough to bother about her, but she wants to move on. She removes her mangalasutra and becomes completely out of wedlock by the time she arrives Mumbai.

Sudha Murty clearly tries to establish how education and financial independence is essential for women to empower. Seeking financial

independence for self-reliance and liberation is one of other major aspirations among modern women. She observes, "With financial independence, Anupama's confidence began to blossom. She had become friends with many the girls who worked with her [Mahashweta,84]. When Sumitra, her friends expects money from Anand for Anupama's support, she sternly asserts,

"Sumi, I don't want money from someone who doesn't love me. God will provide for me. I have my education, and it will serve to feed me. [Mahashweta,81]

Anupama's economic status has certain impact on her image in the society. Her fears can easily be attributed to her weak economic power. Her present status shows how among educated women, concern for individuality has positive relationship with age and employment. It is true that the educated working women have higher concern for status than the non-working women or house wives. Concern for status among educated women has deeper roots in personality and is closely related to certain personality dispositions. It is found to be positively related to ego-strength and emotional stability. All the relationships of these values are influenced by interactional effects of age, employment and other social and personal background factors. However, the way things are, there is no choice for Anupama but to be a participant in the patriarchal system.

One can't help feeling a twinge of compassion for this poor woman who will let down her own kind to establish herself on the right side of man-made social codes.

Anupama doesn't allow the myth of security and luxury provided by her husband to confine her life within her four walls where she is totally alienated from the male world that dominate her in all areas and deprive her of the knowledge and treat her husband 'lord' or 'god'. She doesn't want to be hegemonically suppressed under the title of 'educated and rich wife'. For her, the present position is a sense of 'reality' because she can't possibly think beyond that 'reality' in most areas of her life unless a disease like vitiligo confronts her. Trapped within the complexities of a transitional society, the position of Anupama remains powerless. Sudha Murty has dealt with women and women's issues in the stories *Stove Bursts* or *Dowry Deaths*, *Price of Jealousy*, *Crisis of Confidence*, and *A Life with Dignity*. She feels that women are competent individuals. They must be encouraged to be self-reliant and confident. She feels that though women are becoming economically independent, many of them are bonded with the shackles of emotional and social dependence. She asserts, "Education and financial independence are tools that can help any woman face difficulties but confidence in the self is the one which helps the most." [Wise and Otherwise, 140]

The blend of elegance, expertise and innocence, which should be the characteristics of self evolved woman, is wonderfully woven with Anupama and turns her to be a protagonist and

sympathetic victim in the novel. Building an image of a woman with pure human touch with high level of self and people consciousness, still neglected, will certainly arouse sympathy in the readers. She is not only sensitive towards the dignity of individual and respects freedom of expression but also is abundantly blessed with a sense of aesthetics and intellectuality. She recites the dialogues and put them instantaneously into action on the dais. Murty's adaptation of Bana Bhatt's Sanskrit novel *Kadambari* where Mahashweta plays a significant role as a heroine and the poetic lines through Anupama's mouth not only reveals the plight of her but also relates her real story.

Like Rohini to Chandra, like Lakshmi to Narayana, am I to him. Just as the creeper depends on a tree, emotionally I depend on him. I cannot live without him, and for his sake, I am ready to renounce everything. Let society say anything it wishes, I do not care. [Mahashweta,6]

These lines justify the patriarchy principle 'woman shall depend on man' which perpetuates the dominance of strong over weak from ages past. The theme of the poem brings some parallelism between the protagonist and her creator as she deserves the epithet of

‘voice of woman’ for her a spirit against the established values of fundamentally orthodox society.

Sudha Murty feels everyone should know his or her strengths and capacities. She says “Keep your feet to the ground and work around you as there is so much misery and gloom that it is better to light a candle than to remain in darkness[Wise and Otherwise, 140].”

Sudha Murty ideologically attributes the focal point that believing in real beauty only brings meaning to life and empowers the modern women through Anupama story. By conceptualizing the term real ‘beauty’, Sudha Murty persuasively gives an alter call to her readers. With her simple look with minimal attire, Murty deserves the appreciation by reader in expounding the same concept through the novel. Beauty conscious has become the way the modern world. People are stricken with the beauty tips and cosmetic experiments. The matrimonial columns in Dailies are underlined and coloured with beauty demands. There are characters who are mad with beauty and driven away by it in their crucial decisions in the novel. Anand being a doctor has also become prey to this transient attraction called beauty. Radhakka being superstitious women and averse to poor background though should have to oppose, she accepted due Anupama’s charm and elegancy. But Anupama never allows her external beauty to dominate her, instead she

allows her internal beauty to rule her life. She never pays attention. For her, youth is neither for enjoyment nor for getting mere appreciation.[Mahashweta,87] She never uses the make-up except for a few light torches while acting in plays. [Mahashweta,83] But the Anand is counterpart to her. His brought up and his affluence throws him in the world of imaginations and becomes such a stubborn that he selects only the best in life. Unfortunately, in his life false prestige has become deciding factor in his selection of life partner. He wants to be perfectionist even in his selection of the partner. Finally, the beauty he broods over makes him a beast and kills his familial life. The author puts it in the mouth of Vasant,

“ One’s beauty is seen in one’s nature. A good human being who is compassionate to others, who tries to understand the other person’s difficulties and reach out them in their hour of need has real beauty. Such people should always be cherished and honoured.” [Mahashweta,132]

Another striking quality that Anupama exhibits throughout the novel is her commitment to herself and conscience. She is true to herself. She never crosses her limits in personal life with any man or woman. Apart from possessing good qualities like helping nature and heart of gratitude, she maintains her marital ethics. Starting her forced interest in Anand, Anupama is chased by males in every walk of her life. Sumitra’s

husband Hari who portends to be her brother suddenly proposes her to be his secret wife. It literally turns her to be disgusted towards males. She not only slaps him and leaves the house at once but also decides herself not to be "anybody's 'sister or anybody's aunt anymore." [Mahashweta,114]. She ruthlessly rejects the gifts offered by both Satya and Vasant. She clearly mentions that Vasant can be friend forever and not to complicate our relationship by getting married.[Mahashweta,150] She is a woman of generosity and she attends all invitations and presents the invitees with gold or silverwares. From the beginning, she is actively involved in fund raising activities for charity. She even sells the tickets to people like a sales girls with commitment. She doesn't expect Dolly's house to be her own. Even the thought of keeping their property for herself is worse than begging. [Mahashweta,107].

Conclusion:

Mahashweta can be considered one of the master pieces among Murty's literary works for her systematic instillation of courage in women like Anupama. Anupama's gradual evolution as complete and courageous woman is artistically and convincingly developed. In adversity, Anupama learns how to understand and serve people more. She allows affliction teaches her more than reading books and following people. She allows to empower her mentally and builds her

own world of philosophy to treat herself and rises up amongst everyone else like she never has before. Her final decision with Anand and Vasant proves that Anupama has decided what to do with her remaining life in the beginning itself. Now she is not reactive but she is proactive. She is clear what she wants in her life.

As an artist and keen observer of life and people, Murty releases sharp barbs against evil practices towards woman. She questions what is wrong with people simultaneously confesses inability to grasp the enigma and incompressibility of life. She doesn't hesitate to inform to people whatever she experiences or perceives in life. She indirectly puts it through the mouth of Anupama,

"My experience have taught me this. I have come to realize that courage and confidence are the real wealth in life. Education can improve your chances of success, but ultimately you have to face life all alone. I don't depend on any guru nor I do read any philosophy. My conscience is my guru and it guides me well." [Mahashweta,116]

Only the genuine writer can effectively accomplish the task of influencing society. The writer is first aware of the internal currents in society. He first understands and evaluates events in the life of society because he is 'antenna' of society. It is true that just as society affects the writer so does he affect society. When a writer writes with the

intention of social consciousness and responsibility, certainly it will have impact on people. As the famous writer, Jean-Paul Sartre says about the social responsibility of the writer.

“Writing is not simply writing, it is an act, and in man’s continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon. It is necessary that he understand this.” [Sartre, 1948: 12]

The final chapter or Prologue is evidence what a literary piece can do with the people. The best part of this book where the writer shares a true incident that occurred with her after the novel was published. It demands a verdict that the Prologue can be a proof and living witness for the change which is anticipated by the author among young minds in India. Hope the legacy of impacting people will continue in days to come.

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