

INFRINGING PATRIARCHAL SUBJUGATION AND SOCIAL STIGMA IN SUDHA
MURTY'S MAHASHWETA

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Abstract

Feminist writers in Indian Fiction have presented a new facet to Indian English Literature. Their writings mirror the sordid realities of society rather than reveries. Many contemporary women writers throw light on the deplorable conditions of Indian women in a patriarchal society. Identity crisis, alienation, loneliness, social discrimination, women subjugation, frustration, struggle, social stigma, psychological turmoil and injury are the main elements of their writings. Women writers like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahal, Sudha Murty and many more novelists have portrayed the characteristics of modern women who long for liberation, self-identity, equality, and social respect. This paper aims to explore how the protagonist in Sudha Murty's Mahashweta defies the subjugation and social stigma imposed on her by a patriarchal society.

Key words: patriarchy, orthodox, ill-treatment, social stigma

The term 'patriarchy' comes from the Greek word 'pater' which means 'father'. Patriarchy is the indication of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of this dominance over women in society as well. It is a socially-constructed system where males have prime power. It rules almost all walks of life, from political leadership, business management, religious institutions, economic systems and property ownership, right down to the family home where men are considered to be the head of the household. Under the patriarchal society, women have to silently suffer the miserable conditions of women subjugation, discrimination, social stigma, sexual violence, domestic assault and marginalization.

Though the term "feminism" was coined in 1837 by the French philosopher Charles Fourie's, the real feminist movement started well before a century ago. It aims at equality in the personal and family life of women. Feminism in India aims at characterizing, creating and providing equal political and social rights that have been considered the privileges of men. Feminism in Indian Fiction voices against social discrimination and inequality which in several cases results in the institutional withdrawal of women. Women writers like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahal and Sudha Murty started to pick the women's issues as their topics and concentrated on the reasons for the plight of gender-discrimination against Indian women.

Sudha Murty is an eminent writer in English and Kannada. She has written novels, technical books, travelogues, collections of story stories and non-fiction and six books for children. Her works have been translated into all the major Indian languages. She was the receiver of the R.K.Narayan Award for literature and the Padma Shri Award in 2006, and the Attimable Award from the government of Karnataka for excellence in Kannada literature in 2011. Apart from her contributions to literature, she is famous for many philanthropic works. She aims to empower women. She spreads awareness of the importance of rural education, public hygiene, poverty alleviation and much more. She incorporates the need to maintain a clean India, hence building up toilets for public. She has been passionate in helping people in flood-affected areas too.

Sudha Murty's novels seek to spread a sense of hope, happiness, or a life lesson in a simple and lucid language. Through her writings the author gives a ray of hope to those who suppress their emotions and suffer silently as silent victims because of prejudices in a patriarchal system. Her writings create awareness in women to overcome the age-old injustice against them. In her novel Mahashweta Sudha Murty mentions her aim and dedicates this novel "to all those women in our country who suppress their emotions and suffer silently because they have leukoderma. May they be imbued with hope and courage."

Mahashweta empathetically presents the plight of a new-age woman named Anupama. She is an extremely beautiful, intelligent, and kind girl from a plebeian family. Her father is an ordinary clerk in a government school, a timid man, and completely subservient to his second wife's will (Sabakka), and is not in a position to help his eldest daughter and cannot afford to pay for his daughter's education. Sabakka does not like Anupama because she is good-looking and intelligent whereas her daughters, Vasudha and Nanda are plain and do not excel in their studies. Anupama would have been devastated had she not got the scholarship for her higher studies. The scholarship helps her to escape from the clutches of her stepmother and her humiliation. She is doing her final year M. A. degree in English and plans to do doctoral research after her post-graduation. She is not only outstanding in her studies but also staging classical Sanskrit plays and acting in them. For Anupama acting has become second nature. Her beauty and acting skills fascinate Dr. Anand who belongs to an opulent family. Radhakka, Anand's mother, is extremely orthodox and narrow-minded. As Anand insists on marrying Anupama, she hesitantly agrees, and gets them married despite the high family status. Poverty and domination at home on the step-daughter puts spokes on Anupama's doctoral research and her poverty makes her accept the proposal of Dr. Anand without defying. Due to the prevalent marital system, she has only Hobson's choice in the crucial concern of her marriage. Once in wedlock, at first marital life seems a perennial fountain of joy, love, and happiness for Anupama and she wonders how philosophers could describe such pleasures as ephemeral. But within two months Anand is obliged to go to England for higher studies, and his mother asks him to leave Anupama at home for two months so that she may perform the first Lakshmi Pooja there. As two months would fly in no time, Anupama and Anand happily agree to it. However, soon the daughter-in-law feels like being locked up in a gilded cage. She does not feel at home in her in-laws' house and starts thinking that she would always feel like a stranger there. Each day at her in-law's house becomes a trial for her. The much-awaited Lakshmi Pooja day comes, and it is celebrated on a grand scale with hundreds of rich people gathering there. Anupama is busy with the pooja activities. When she goes to the kitchen to bring some hot charcoal pieces to light the incense to the Goddess, a red-hot piece falls on her foot and severely burns it. In due course she finds out that her beauty is blemished by small white patches on her foot and learns that she has leukoderma. She is afraid to inform Anand about her condition and worries about the consequences if she does not get cured. When her mother-in-law finds that her daughter-in-law has leukoderma, she believes that the miserable disease is the result of sin from her previous life. Anupama is not allowed to do any work and is humiliated by Radhakka for concealing her skin condition before marriage. She realizes that her position has become worse than that of a servant in her in-law's house. She cannot feel grateful for getting married in an elite family. Rather she feels they have poisoned her life and made her life worse than before. Ostracized by her mother-in-law and sent to her father's home, the hapless woman cannot even share her mental agony with her husband Anand.

Anupama's marital life is darkened and completely destroyed due to that white spot of leukoderma. It is a superstition that a person who inherits leukoderma continues the sin of his/ her previous birth. Superstition spoils the life of Anupama. Anand trusts his mother and sister's fabricated stories against Anupama. He abandons his wife to lead her life of struggle, humiliation and social stigma. The patriarchal system in which he grew up leads him to give up Anupama to suffer silently. Being subjugated by her husband, she has no other option than bearing the pain of verbal abuse and humiliation. Anupama, due to her poor background, always faces domestic violence and verbal abuse at her home and in-law's home.

Anupama writes several letters to Dr. Anand to arrange for her joining him as soon as possible so that she may be liberated from the social stigma and her mental agony. She receives no reply from him. Harsh gossip in the village, ill-treatment by her step-mother, being a burden to her poor father and the rapid spread of white patches makes her lose her heart, and she is almost driven to think of committing suicide.

Anupama finally discovers the real Anand. He has only loved her beauty and married her for it. He is unwilling to live with a marred beauty. A new epiphany is suddenly realized. Anupama sees life in a

different light. Unlike the traditional Indian women, Anupama would not succumb to the torments of her familial condition. She prevents her father from pleading with her mother-in-law and takes a bold decision to step out of the house at once. She does not like to suppress her self-respect and feels that her dignity is more important than preserving her marriage which only has plunged her into misery. She is now ready to face the world, determined to stand on her own feet and build a new life for herself.

The decision turns the naïve Anupama into a pragmatic new-age woman and leads her from ignorance to wisdom. She goes to Bombay and gets a job as a clerk with the help of her friend's husband. In that vast city where people from various backgrounds and different regions lived, nobody ever talked about her skin patches or her past. She casts out all the taunts that have been inflicted upon her. She becomes a financially independent woman and supports her father too by sending him a part of her salary. Now she is no more a traditional homemaker or a daughter-in-law who agrees and yields to the miserable conditions in a traditionally dominant family set-up. And she becomes a new-age woman with the courage to overcome the stigma and prejudice of society. Anupama shows her courage when she finds out that her friend Smitha's husband Hari has vile intentions towards her. After Hari's attempt to seduce her sexually she decides to leave Smitha's house. The incident creates a scar on her personality and gives her to understand how an independent woman has to face sexual assaults on her from wicked men who only look upon lonely women as objects of sexual gratification. Anupama does not get trapped into Hari's designs on her. She moves out of her friend Sumithra's house and stays at Dolly's house. On Dolly's suggestion, Anupama takes up the teaching profession at a college, which would help her to emerge as a woman of immense potential.

The story of a loving couple Dr. Anand meets at London moves him deeply. The wife has lost her legs in a car accident, yet her husband takes absolute care of her and loved her profoundly. He considers it his duty to support her in difficult times as he has taken the marriage vows to be with her until death. His words touch Anand's heart. He starts thinking of Anupama and returned to India in search of her. He traces her village, but finds that her father has passed away and nobody knows Anupama's whereabouts. At last, he meets Anupama in Bombay at the Tata theatre while she is directing a college drama. But he cannot speak to her and Anupama also does not notice him. By getting her address Anand arrives at her house, repents sincerely, and asks her to come with him to start a new life in England. But Anupama refuses and says, "How can you possibly expect a burnt seed to grow into a tree? Husband, children, affection, love ... they are all irrelevant to me. It is too late for us". Anand understands that it is their last meeting and tries to persuade her again: **"Anupama, think one more time about what I have said. Please come back with me"**. She retorts to him saying, **"you are a well-educated man from a good family. But there is one thing you have not learned ... You should never call a woman whom you do not know by her given name"**. This obviously reveals how she has totally rejected a loveless marital life that is wilfully upheld by a custom-bound society. Here the author Sudha Murty presents a newly liberated woman who is bold enough to live without the help of a man.

Meanwhile, at the Bombay government hospital Anupama meets Doctor Vasant who is a kind and good-natured man. He wants to remarry Anupama despite knowing her past. When Anupama turns down his proposal, Dr. Vasant can only brood over the golden life-partner he has missed: "Oh God! If only I had known her before her husband ruined her life, I would not have lost this priceless jewel". In the end, she turns out to be a true and newly evolved Mahashweta. She refrains herself from the institution of marriage. The novelist powerfully brings home to the readers the truth that a woman requires no support from a man to lead her own life. No wall or moat is required to protect a woman from a patriarchal society, The author expounds the new woman's view that with the help of education, self-confidence, and courage, a woman can face and overcome all barriers in her way and lead a successful and peaceful life without losing her identity.

In India, women have been socially projected as the weaker sex, a sexual tool, and a commodity and oppressed by patriarchal dominance. Social system, the poor and rich dichotomy, superstition, hatred,

ignorance, domestic violence, verbal and sexual abuse – all have turned a naïve Anupama into a pragmatic woman at the end. Sudha Murty portrays the protagonist Anupama as a newly liberated woman who exhibits her strength and courage to overcome her adversities caused by the patriarchal society and familial status. Thus, the novel Mahashweta shows the capacity of women to liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchal society and all the timeworn ideas and practices constructed by a male-dominant society with the sole aim of subjugating and enslaving women and thus preventing their evolution into full-fledged personalities.

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