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Reimagining Identity and Agency: Posthumanist Resistance to Patriarchal Subjugation in Sudha Murty’s *Mahashweta*

T.K. Sivakumar

Assistant Professor of English

Sourashtra College (Autonomous), Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Part-Time Ph.D. Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Dr. Jadeeda Saleem

Assistant Professor and Head of the PG and Research Department of English

MSS Wakf Board College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

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 highlight the unfortunate conditions faced by women in India living within a patriarchal system. Identity crisis, alienation, loneliness, social discrimination, women subjugation, frustration, struggle, social stigma, psychological turmoil and injury are the main elements of their writings. Writers like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahal, Sudha Murty and many other novelists have portrayed the characteristics of modern women who yearn for liberation, self-identity, equality, and social respect. This paper explores how *Mahashweta* reimagines identity and agency through a posthumanist lens, challenging patriarchal norms and asserting female resistance beyond traditional humanist frameworks in Sudha Murty’s narrative.*

*This research paper on “Reimagining Identity and Agency: Posthumanist Resistance to Patriarchal Subjugation in Sudha Murty’s *Mahashweta*” explores the challenges of Indian women in contemporary patriarchal society and analyses how the protagonist fights the social stigma and establishes her identity.*

Research Objectives

1. *The research aims to explore how the patriarchal society controls and affects women’s autonomy.*
2. *It investigates the challenges faced by women in finding their identity and individuality.*
3. *This paper analyzes Sudha Murty’s *Mahashweta* through a feminist perspective.*

Research Methodology

Descriptive and qualitative methods are used to investigate the chosen topic. A profound examination of primary and secondary sources is carried out to ensure a deep understanding of the topic. The chosen novel is meticulously examined to investigate the objectives set forth in this paper.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Feminism, Patriarchy, Social Stigma, Marriage System, Prejudice, Gender Inequality

Introduction

Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates for women's rights on the basis of Social, political and economic equality with men. It confronts the deep-rooted inequalities faced by women and addresses problems like gender bias, patriarchal systems, and social norms that prolong inequality.

Though the term "feminism" was coined in 1837 by the French philosopher Charles Fourier, the real feminist movement started nearly two centuries ago. Feminism has developed through several distinct waves in different stages, each addressing various issues and difficulties faced by women. Feminism is typically divided into four major waves. The Initial Wave of Feminism concentrated primarily on legal issues, such as women's suffrage. The Second Wave encompassed a broader array of issues, including sexuality, family dynamics, workplace equality, reproductive rights, and legal disparities. The Third Wave highlighted individualism and diversity, addressing the varied experiences of women based on race, class, sexuality, and nationality. The Fourth Wave represented the use of social media to fight sexual harassment, body shaming, and other forms of inequality, and an attention on intersectionality. The key concept often discussed in feminism is gender equality, patriarchy and intersectionality. Feminism is a worldwide movement that demonstrates the struggle for freedom in different ways across cultures, addressing exclusive local issues while striving for the common goal of gender equality. For instance, in India, feminists often challenge issues such as child marriage, dowry practices, and violence based on gender, which may be less prominent in other regions. Meanwhile, in western countries, the focus might be more on workplace equality, reproductive rights, and combating subtle forms of sexism.

The term 'patriarchy' comes from the Greek word 'pater' which means 'father'. Patriarchy denotes male authority over women and children in the family and the extension of this control over women in society as well. This is a socially-constructed system where males have prime power. It rules almost all walks of life, from positions of political leadership, business management roles, religious organizations, economic systems to property ownership, extending all the way to the family home where men are traditionally seen as the master of the household. Under a patriarchal society, women have to silently suffer the miserable conditions of women subjugation, discrimination, social stigma, sexual violence, domestic assault and marginalization.

Feminism in Indian fiction voices against social discrimination and inequality which in several cases results in the institutional withdrawal of women. Women authors like Toru Dutt, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahai 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's literary creations are a witness to this.

Sudha Murty's novels mirror the specific struggles and achievements of women in contemporary Indian society, highlighting both the traditional and the modern issues that women face. By doing so, she champions gender equality while respecting the cultural nuances that shape feminist discourse in India. Her 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 repress their emotions and endure quietly as victims because of prejudices in a patriarchal system. Her writings create awareness in women to overcome the age-old injustice against them.

Discussion

Sudha Murty's style of writing is admired for its simplicity, clarity, and deep emotional resonance. This simplicity does not lessen the depth of her characterization but rather enhances their sensibility. Murty excels at creating well-rounded, relatable characters. Her protagonists often face problems of every woman, making it easy for readers to connect with their struggles and

triumphs. Her novels often explore themes of love, family, resilience, and social issues, infusing her narratives with a deep emotional impact. Her portrayal of human emotions is authentic and poignant. She frequently addresses social issues such as gender inequality, education, and poverty. Her stories raise awareness and inspire readers to reflect on these important topics.

Sudha Murty draws attention to societal challenges and emphasizes the importance of compassion and empathy. Her novels often articulate moral lessons and values, emphasizing ethics, integrity, and kindness. Her narratives are not sermonizing but subtly encourage readers to adopt positive virtues.

Sudha Murty communicates the sentiments of Indian women in general through her female protagonists. In *Mahashweta* she portrays the sufferings and mental agony of a middle-class woman in a wealthy in-law's house. The novel highlights how the patriarchal society treats a woman in the name of traditions and superstitions. Anupama's struggle is definitely an epic struggle against the age-old male-dominant system in India. She establishes her identity and leads an independent life of her own by infringing the patriarchy and social stigma.

Murty names her novel "Mahashweta" after the female protagonist of Bana Bhatta's earliest Sanskrit novel, "Kadambari." In "Kadambari," Mahashweta finds success in love, but her lover tragically dies an untimely death. She does severe penance in the forest to bring her lover back to life and they are united. The female protagonist of Bana Bhatta struggles deeply to bring back her true love. But in Sudha Murty's novel *Mahashweta*, Dr. Anand's love is only skin-deep. He ignores and left her when she gets Leukoderma.

Mahashweta empathetically depicts the struggles of a contemporary woman named Anupama. She is an exceptionally beautiful, intelligent, and kind young woman from a plebeian family. Her father, a meek clerk in a government school, is entirely submissive to his second wife, Sabakka. Unable to assist his eldest daughter, he also lacks the means to fund her 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 heart-broken if she had not received the scholarship for her higher studies. The scholarship allows her to break free 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. Dr. Anand, who comes from a wealthy family, is captivated by Anupama's beauty and her acting talent. 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 Dr. Anand's marriage proposal without defying. Owing 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. However, within two months, Anand is set to depart for England to continue his studies. Dr. Anand's 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, it doesn't take long for the daughter-in-law to feel trapped in a luxurious prison. She feels out of place in her in-laws' house, constantly thinking she will always be a stranger there. Each day becomes an ordeal for her. The much-awaited Lakshmi Pooja day is celebrated in a lavish manner with hundreds of rich people gathering there. Anupama is engrossed in the preparations for the pooja. As she heads to the kitchen to fetch some hot charcoal for the incense, a glowing piece falls on her foot, causing a severe burn. As time progresses, she notices

small white patches appearing on her foot, which leads to the discovery that she has leukoderma. Anupama is scared to disclose Anand about her illness and worries about the consequences if she remains uncured. 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 forbidden to do any work and is humiliated by Radhakka for concealing her skin condition before marriage. She comes to understand that her position is now worse than that of a domestic maid in her in-law's house. She cannot feel grateful for getting married in an elite family. Instead, she believes they have poisoned her life, making it even worse than before. Rejected by her mother-in-law and sent back to live with her father, the unfortunate woman is unable to share her mental anguish with her husband Anand.

The expectations placed on men and women in contemporary society are different. Patriarchal society creates a mindset that least bothers about the expectations of women. A man may give importance to status, money, beauty and recognition but a woman expects love, support, trust and caring. When these expectations fail, a feeling of disappointment creeps in their marital life.

Anupama's marital life is darkened and completely destroyed due to that white spot of leukoderma. The belief that vitiligo is a punishment for sins committed in a previous life is a superstition that ruins Anupama's life. Despite understanding the nature of her illness, Dr. Anand is unwilling to accept Anupama, leaving her to suffer in her time of need. Sudha Murty vividly portrays the materialistic transformation of society, even within the medical field, through the character of Dr. Anand, who shows a lack of empathy towards his own wife.

Anand believes the false stories his mother and sister tell about Anupama. He abandons his wife to lead her life of struggle, humiliation and social stigma. The patriarchal system in which he has grown 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 economic background, always faces domestic violence and verbal abuse at her home and her 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 true nature of Anand. He has married her because of her beauty. He is unwilling to accept and 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 courageously decides to leave the house without delay. Unwilling to suppress her self-respect, she believes her dignity is more important than preserving a marriage that has brought her nothing but misery. Now, she is prepared to see the world, resolved to be self-reliant and forge a new path for herself.

The decision turns the naïve Anupama into a pragmatic new-age woman and leads her from ignorance to wisdom. She moves to Bombay and, with the assistance of her friend's husband, secures a job as a clerk. In this diverse city, where people from various backgrounds and regions coexist, no one mentions her skin patches or her past. She leaves behind all the taunts she endured. 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 demonstrates

her bravery upon discovering that her friend Sumitha's husband, Hari, harbors malicious 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 evades Hari's schemes. She relocates from her friend Sumithra's house and takes refuge at Dolly's place. Following Dolly's advice, Anupama pursues a teaching career at a college, which helps her emerge as a woman of immense potential.

The story of a loving couple Dr. Anand meets at London moves him deeply. Despite losing her legs in a car accident, the wife is lovingly cared for by her husband, who shows her deep, unwavering affection. 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 begins thinking of Anupama and returns to India to find her. He tracks down her village, only to find that her father has passed away and no one knows where Anupama is. 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 restart 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”

(Murty, Mahashweta, p.148).

Anand realizes that it is their final chance to convince her once more:

“Anupama, think one more time about what I have said. Please come back with me”

(Murty, Mahashweta, p.149).

She retorts,

“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”

(Murty, Mahashweta, p.149).

This obviously reveals how she has totally rejected a loveless marital life that is wilfully upheld by a custom-bound society. In this instance, the author Sudha Murty depicts a newly emancipated woman who is courageous enough to live independently without relying on a man.

Meanwhile, at the Bombay government hospital Anupama meets Doctor Vasant who is a good-natured man. He wishes 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”

(Murty, Mahashweta, p.151).

In the end, she emerges as a truly transformed 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. Through her characters, Sudha Murty brings out the hard realities of middle-class modern educated women and delineates how they come out of the hardships. She expects that women should be treated as human beings and not as inferior, subordinate, inanimate or as objects of sexual gratification.

Without the significant contribution of women, no family or society or nation can grow. Understanding the concept, Sudha Murty stands up for gender equality and rights. Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman and feminist elected to Congress in American history, has rightly expressed that she didn't want to be remembered simply as the first Black woman to run for the

U.S. presidency, but rather as a Black woman of the 20th century who had the courage to be herself. She wanted to be seen as someone who sparked change in America. She was the force for change and a champion of legislation that would improve the lives of women, children, people of color, and the downtrodden. Likewise, the protagonist Anupama also fights and comes back successfully from the male-dominated societal framework to establish fairness between genders and her own identity.

Kamala Harris, American politician, has correctly emphasized that supporting women leads to the upliftment of families, communities, economies, and ultimately the entire nation. Since half of the world population consists of women, whenever a woman gets equal opportunity in a society, she helps not only her family to come up but also the country.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft expresses that her desire is not for women to dominate men, but to have authority and control over their own lives. She stresses that women need not to be concerned about men exerting power over them. Instead, they should concentrate on their own lives and make decisions independently, without relying on men. At the novel's conclusion, Sudha Murty's Anupama resolves to live independently and make her own decisions. As a feminist writer, Sudha Murty underscores the truth that a woman's life does not end when she is ignored, humiliated, or suppressed by her husband, but rather, it begins to flourish from that point.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explains the necessity for women to have financial and intellectual independence if they want to contribute to the literary canon. The reader can understand through Sudha Murty's *Mahaswetha* that if a woman wants to live independently in a patriarchal society, she needs courage, confidence, education, space and financial independence. Anupama breaks the deep-rooted patriarchy in the Indian society by fighting strongly against societal oppression, discrimination and traditional expectations, as well as blind and superstitious belief.

Conclusion

Sudha Murty has depicted the condition of the current Indian society very clearly in her novel. Superstitious beliefs remain widespread in India even today. Lukoderma is seen as a sin derived from a previous birth. In *Mahaswetha* the novelist has depicted all these social realities prevailing in our society. Indian women have been socially projected as the weaker sex, a sexual tool and commodity exploited by patriarchal dominance. Social system, the poor and the 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 economically defined familial status. Thus, Sudha Murty's *Mahaswetha* powerfully subverts patriarchal constructs by reimagining identity and agency through a posthumanist lens. The protagonist's transformation symbolizes resistance, autonomy, and self-redefinition, transcending societal norms. Ultimately, the novel reclaims female subjectivity, challenging oppressive narratives and asserting a future where women define themselves beyond imposed limitations and categories.

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