

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta*: A Clarion Call for Women's Empowerment

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Abstract.

In the literary realm of Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* (2000), a compelling narrative unfolds, serving as a resounding clarion call for women's empowerment. This article delves into the novel's thematic exploration, emphasizing the transformative journey of women who transcend societal norms. *Mahashweta* stands as a poignant testament to the strength and resilience of women, challenging traditional roles and advocating for their rightful place in society. Through the lens of the protagonist, Anupama, who rejects societal expectations and forges her own path, the novel becomes a powerful advocate for women's autonomy and self-discovery. This paper encapsulates the essence of *Mahashweta* as a literary catalyst inspiring women to reclaim their agency and rewrite their narratives in the face of societal constraints.

Keywords: Empowerment; Resilience; Self-discovery; Social Commentary.

1. Introduction

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* stands as a literary beacon, illuminating the transformative journey of women navigating the complex terrain of societal expectations. Within its pages, a compelling narrative unfolds, echoing a clarion call for women's empowerment. This article undertakes a thematic exploration of the novel, delving into the profound societal implications it articulates. The protagonist, Anupama, emerges as a symbol of strength and resilience, challenging established norms and advocating for the rightful place of women in society.

Mahashweta transcends mere storytelling; it becomes a poignant testament to the courage of women who defy traditional roles, urging for a redefinition of their positions in the societal

framework. The novel's power lies in its ability to confront and question prevailing norms, offering a mirror to the struggles and triumphs of women seeking autonomy and self-discovery. This exploration aims to unravel the layers of societal commentary embedded in the novel shedding light on its role as a literary catalyst. Through Anupama's narrative, the article navigates the complexities of empowerment, resilience, and the profound journey of self-discovery.

2. Method

Textual analysis is a pertinent method for dissecting Sudha Murthy's novel *Mahashweta*, providing a comprehensive lens through which we can unravel its nuanced layers and discern the underlying themes and messages. This method involves a meticulous examination of the text, considering the interplay of language, symbolism, and narrative devices to derive deeper meanings.

Close Reading: Conducting a close reading forms the cornerstone of textual analysis. By scrutinizing the text line by line, we can unearth subtle nuances, explore character motivations, and discern the author's stylistic choices. This method allows us to identify recurring motifs and thematic threads that contribute to the novel's overarching message.

Identification of Literary Devices: Textual analysis involves identifying and examining various literary devices employed by the author. Elements such as metaphor, symbolism, allegory, and imagery contribute to the novel's richness. By dissecting these devices, we can unravel layers of meaning embedded in the narrative, offering insights into character development, plot dynamics, and overarching themes.

Thematic Exploration: The method entails a systematic exploration of recurring themes within the text. *Mahashweta* delves into themes of empowerment, resilience, and self-discovery. Textual analysis allows us to trace the development of these themes across the narrative, examining how characters and events contribute to their evolution and manifestation.

Character Studies: Analyzing characters is a crucial aspect of textual analysis. Through this method, we can delve into the motivations, conflicts, and transformations of characters like Anupama. Understanding their roles within the narrative framework enables us to grasp the author's intentions and the broader societal commentary presented in the novel.

Contextual Consideration: Placing the text within its broader cultural, historical, and social context is essential in textual analysis. This method enables us to understand the influences shaping the narrative and the relevance of the novel's themes within the societal milieu in which it was created.

By employing textual analysis as a method, we aim to uncover the intricate layers of *Mahashweta*, appreciating its literary craftsmanship and extracting meaningful interpretations that contribute to a richer understanding of the novel's profound impact on the discourse of women's empowerment.

3. Results and Discussion

Sudha Murthy as a writer: Sudha Murthy is a highly respected Indian author known for her simple yet captivating storytelling. Her writing primarily revolves around themes like social issues, human values, and the importance of education. Sudha Murthy's works often draw from her own experiences, making her stories relatable and authentic. Her writing style is straightforward and poignant, appealing to a wide range of readers. She has penned various books, including novels, short stories, and children's books, which have been translated into several languages. Aside from being an accomplished writer, She is also a philanthropist and the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. Her writing often reflects her philanthropic outlook and her deep concern for societal welfare. Overall, her writing is admired for its simplicity, its ability to touch hearts, and its focus on values that resonate with people from diverse backgrounds.

About the Novel: *Mahashweta* as a powerful example of female resilience and self-discovery. The protagonist, Anupama, faces immense challenges and societal prejudice due to her skin condition, vitiligo. Yet, she refuses to be defined by her illness or the expectations of others. Instead, she embarks on a journey of self-preservation and redefines her own identity. Anupama's husband's abandonment represents the patriarchal norms that often seek to control and objectify women. His rejection of her due to her physical appearance highlights the superficiality of societal beauty standards and the emotional detachment that can exist within relationships. Anupama's resilience lies in her ability to rise above these challenges and assert her own agency. She refuses to be a victim of circumstance and actively seeks opportunities to reclaim her life. Her determination to establish her own identity, both personally and professionally, serves as a testament to the strength of the human spirit.

Mahashweta serves as a beacon of hope for women facing discrimination and adversity. Anupama's journey demonstrates that true beauty lies within, and that self-worth is not determined by external factors. Her story is a powerful reminder of the transformative power of self-belief and the unwavering spirit of the human will.

Anupama an epitome of women empowerment: At the beginning of the novel, Anupama is described as one of the most beautiful girls in the city. She is also a talented singer and theatre actor. Anupama is dedicated to her social work, and she goes door to door selling tickets for shows in order to raise money for a charitable trust. Anupama's life takes a turn when she meets Anand at Dr. Desai's house. Anand is a wealthy doctor, and he comes from a rich family background. Anand immediately falls in love with Anupama, and he proposes to her shortly after they meet. Anupama is thrilled to accept his proposal, as she sees it as a chance to escape her difficult life at home. After the wedding, Anand goes to England for further studies. Anupama is left alone at home with her mother-in-law, Radhakka, and her sister-in-law, Girija. Radhakka is a domineering woman who is not happy with Anupama. Girija is a more liberal woman who is often at odds with her mother. Anupama's life at home becomes increasingly difficult. She is constantly criticized by Radhakka and Girija, and she feels isolated and alone. She begins to lose her confidence and self-esteem. One day, Anupama gets severely burned on her foot while bringing hot coal to light the incense for the Diwali puja. She quietly pours some cold water on her foot and continues with the puja, not wanting to make a fuss. Anupama's injury is a turning point in her life. She begins to realize that she needs to stand up for herself and assert her own independence. She decides to go back to school and complete her education. Anupama's journey to self-discovery is a powerful story of resilience and hope. She overcomes many challenges and ultimately finds the strength to live her life on her own terms.

In a society dominated by men, Anupama felt powerless to disclose her burn injury to her mother-in-law. It's a stark example of how women can control and suppress other women in society. When Anupama visited a dermatologist for her injury, she faced her mother-in-law's wrath, unable to speak freely about her condition that led to leukoderma. This power structure silences victims, denying them the right to speak up, even when they're right. The husband-wife relationship lacked the depth for her to openly share her problem, emphasizing how society shapes women, rather than allowing them to be themselves.

The appearance of a white patch changed Anupama's life; suddenly, she became an outcast in her own family. Barred from entering the temple and facing mistreatment by household workers, she lost respect at home. Her dream of a life abroad with her husband shattered, compelling her to leave his home. Struggling alone, no one, not even her husband Anand, offered help. These circumstances forced her to realize that modern women must fight and carve their future without relying on men. Despite being her husband, Anand failed to support her in this critical situation, avoiding replying to her letters and refusing to stand against his mother.

The wealthy society's rules favor male dominance, making them immune to victimhood. Amid the husband-wife divide, Anand remains passive, showing no inclination to assist Anupama. Anupama's innocence is seen as unfit for the affluent society, prompting her mother-in-law to seek another match for Anand. Feeling desolate, Anupama contemplates ending her life, unable to envision a new future. Recollecting drama days of happy endings contrasts starkly with her almost-ending life. As she contemplates, Anupama, considering her morally sound life, questions why she can't live like her sister-in-law, leading a grand life through relationships and marrying a wealthy person. This transformative thought shifts her from contemplating suicide to bravely choosing to lead a dignified and joyful life on her terms—a new beginning for her as a modern woman.

Sudha Murthy's message to women is clear: don't succumb but rise and fight. Anupama becomes a beacon for the new generation, advocating knowledge acquisition to triumph over life's trials. Leaving her village life behind, Anupama heads to Mumbai—a city symbolic of dreams and progressive values. Starting afresh with her college friend Sumithra, she finds solace in a home where she's treated like family.

Anupama lands a job and begins a new chapter in Mumbai, realizing that other women there aren't concerned about her past or the white patch caused by her condition. Some incidents, like her blood donation to Dolly after an accident, enrich Anupama's life further. However, she eventually leaves Sumithra's home due to changes in Sumithra's husband's behavior. Now, she stays with Sumi, her close friend, working as a Sanskrit lecturer at a local college. Anupama's life takes a turn after an accident when treated by Dr. Vasant, creating a bond as his father was a Sanskrit teacher. She aids Dr. Satya through a rough patch, helping him rebound. Meanwhile, Anand starts realizing his mother's deceit and sister's hypocrisy, valuing his wife's love and embarking on a quest to find Anupama.

Though Anand acknowledges Anupama's importance, she rejects rekindling their relationship as a modern woman. She even moves away from Dr. Vasant, prioritizing her theater work and student guidance, symbolizing her newfound independence and strength.

Anupama challenges the traditional norms, forging her own path without succumbing to outdated customs that subjugate women to serve their husbands. This novel serves as a powerful inspiration for women in real life. Anupama's courage offers a realistic perspective on how women should opt for empowerment instead of enduring suffering. Her words echo hope for women trapped in male-dominated societies. Despite vitiligo not affecting her life before marriage, her family bore the brunt. Anupama's father succumbed to Radhakka's pressure due to the white patch, yet no one acknowledges the family's role in her condition, subjecting her to torment.

Double marginalization is evident in the novel as a woman facing vitiligo compounds her societal struggles. Anupama becomes an outcast, rejected and untouchable within her own family. Sudha Murthy primarily addresses gender disparities in society, echoing Wollstonecraft's call for gender equality in "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792). The author aims to create awareness about women's rights, emphasizing the emergence of a new woman unafraid to leave an unsuitable husband. The evolving society aims for equitable marriages where men acknowledge women's equal status and pass on these values to future generations.

Anupama's life in Mumbai becomes a beacon of hope, showing that despite generational customs restricting women, breaking these norms can lead to success. Mumbai's progressive ethos offers support for women to flourish, unconcerned about their past. Anupama's friends in the city exemplify the desire for her happiness, providing her with a place to live. When Anupama's husband encounters her, she rebuffs him, displaying a stark contrast to her initial response during marriage. Despite respecting her husband before, Anand fails her when she needs him the most, highlighting a helpless woman's plight in a male-dominated society.

Anupama's stand demonstrates the new woman's ability to form her opinions and make choices, starkly different from historical perceptions of women's status pre and post-marriage. Education emerges as Anupama's key to success, enabling her to voice her opinions and challenge male dominance. The Indian societal shift from women being solely dependent on male figures before marriage to gaining independence through education and skills marks a substantial change. Anupama's story symbolizes this transformation, where education

empowers her in a male-dominated society. Her narrative shatters the mindset that perceives women as inferior to men, giving rise to a new millennium woman unafraid of male domination.

Traditionally, many societies have held the view that women are subordinate to men, often limiting their roles, opportunities, and autonomy. This mindset perpetuates male domination in various aspects of life, including social, familial, and professional spheres.

However, Anupama's journey and actions defy these norms. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations and her determination to carve her own path break the chains of conformity and submission. Her story illustrates a woman who is unafraid to challenge the status quo and assert her independence. Healing from the emotional distress caused by separation can be a lengthy and challenging process. This is because separation disrupts a person's sense of stability and security, which they had developed over time by being a part of another person's life. This abrupt change can be difficult to comprehend, leading to a state of confusion and a shift in perspective. Marital separation not only affects the individuals directly involved but also has a ripple effect on their families and loved ones. As a result of this experience, individuals may become more cautious and less trusting of others, establishing healthy boundaries to protect themselves. This experience prompts individuals to reconsider their decision-making processes in the event of similar situations in the future.

By depicting Anupama as a strong, resilient, and self-reliant individual, the narrative portrays a new archetype of womanhood—one who is not confined by the fear or control of male dominance. Instead, she embodies the spirit of empowerment, self-reliance, and courage.

In essence, Anupama's narrative becomes a symbol of empowerment, inspiring a new generation of women who refuse to be constrained by traditional gender roles or submissive attitudes, paving the way for a more egalitarian and liberated society.

4. Conclusions

Sudha Murthy's novel *Mahashweta* stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration for women worldwide. Through the transformative journey of Anupama, the novel challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations, empowering women to reclaim their agency and forge their own destinies. Murthy's work serves as a powerful reminder that women possess the strength and resilience to overcome adversity and achieve their full potential. As Anupama breaks free from the constraints imposed upon her, she becomes a

symbol of female empowerment, inspiring others to embrace their true selves and pursue their dreams with unwavering determination. Mahashweta is not merely a novel; it is a testament to the indomitable spirit of women, a clarion call for their liberation, and a catalyst for societal change.

Acknowledgements

The researchers received support from the Department of English and Research and Development Division, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation.

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