

REFLECTION OF SOCIAL AND MORAL ISSUES IN SUDHA MURTHY'S MAHASHWETA

Dr. Prakash S. Tale

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Vidya Vikas Arts, Commerce and
Science College, Samudrapur Dist-
Wardha

Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur
University, Nagpur (Maharashtra)

Email – taleprakash27@gmail.com

Cell No. – 9637263190

Abstract :

This paper shows the reflection of social and moral issues in the thought provoking novel Mahashweta by Sudha Murthy. Through the social and moral values Sudha Murthy tries to transform the life of oppressed. In Mahashweta, the protagonist Anupama primarily admired by her in laws, her husband Anand and her stepmother but when they know about the disease of Anupama, they all abandoned her in various ways. She suffers a lot but not away from her way that she had chosen for. She was not only abandoned by society but also by her near and dear. Through following the path of social and moral values she overcome all the odds and adverse situation in her life and rebuild a new world where she was able to take a fresh breath.

Keywords : Social, moral, transformation, women, disease, humiliation

Introduction :

Sudha Murthy is the chairperson of Infosys foundation. She is philanthropist, social worker and author. She is one of the notable Indian writer writing in English. She represents the contemporary Indian women who suffers from the traditional patriarchal society. Sudha Murthy has written novels, short stories, and children books. In her novels she deals the contemporary issues – discrimination, gender equality, dominance of patriarchy, and humiliation.

Mahashweta is the story of a very sensitive and brilliant girl Anupama whose life changes drastically when she diagnosed the white patches on her leg after marriage. She follows the path of discipline and dedication for the betterment of her family. Being a daughter of teacher she follows the path of morality in her life. After detecting the leukoderma (vitiligo) instead of giving support to her, her in-laws humiliates at every point in her life. She faces numerous problems and ill treatment by her uncaring in-laws and insensitive husband, Anand. It is an inspiring story of courage in the face of betrayal and disappointment. This poignant story offers hope to those who suffer prejudice in society even today.



Social Issues :

1. Stigmatization of Skin Ailments or Untouchability :

In Mahashweta, the protagonist Anupama suffers from leukoderma then her in laws treats her as inferior. They abandoned her in social gatherings and religious rituals. Her husband, being a doctor, could not understand the intensity of the disease. This disease is not medical disease but a curse or boon to the person who oppressed. The society and even nearer humiliates her everyday but she is unable to defend. Radhakka, Anand's mother also angry with Narayana and Narayana also pour fuel in the life of Anupama. He says –

“This is a bad disease. She cannot perform any puja now. It must be the result of a sin from her previous life.” (Murthy 54)

It means that the novel exposes how society unfairly treats people with such conditions, often equating physical appearance with personal worth.

Though the leukoderma is not a contagious disease, the people blindly believe that this disease is a bad omen. Anupama is a victim of this disbelief. It affects the life of her sister Nanda. The Nanda's prospective in-laws knew about the disease, they send a letter to Shamanna, Anupama's father mentioning about the leukoderma of Anupama. So they are not ready to extend their marriage proposal because of the disease. The letter mentioned –

“We do not want a daughter in-law whose sister has white patches. As you are aware, ours is a very orthodox family and nobody will accept this alliance.... Perhaps this alliance has not met with Lord Brahm's approval.” (Murthy 68)

2. Patriarchal Attitude :

Mahashweta explores the theme of Patriarchy embedded in society. Sudha Murthy raised the question how women are judged and treated based on physical appearance and marital status. Anupama, the protagonist of the novel, is known for her beauty. After she develops the leukoderma her beauty suddenly collapses in the eyes of her husband and his family. It means that the patriarchal attitude treated a woman to her outer appearance rather than her inner beauty or character. It has not given any importance to women's inner aspects. Anupama was interested in staging the drama. She was perfect in her art but Radhakka, a traditional woman, doesn't allow her for staging the performance of drama. She was living her life like a bird in a cage. She says –

“Her only purpose was to be adorned and exhibited as an acquisition, a reflection of their status in society. She had never expected to live this kind of a life.” (Murthy 42)

Anupama is a plain hearted and bright girl. She has not any concern with bad things. Her in-laws and her husband behave like an envy but she cannot change her behaviour. She knows the affair of her sister-in-law Girija but she kept it secret.

“She was still pure at heart. She had been shunned and abandoned only because of one white patch. On the other hand, Girija, who had had a sordid affair before her marriage was held in high esteem in society and at home.” (Murthy 127)

3. Gender Discrimination :

Gender Discrimination plays an important role in the novel. Anupama is abandoned by her husband and rejected by her in-laws. Anand fails to support Anupama as she needs due to the family pressure. In her parental house she also treated as burden instead of supporting her. Her stepmother's cold behavior reflects how even other women can perpetuate patriarchal values, reinforcing the idea that a woman's place and value are tied to her marital success. Anupama's suffering contrasts with the suffering of women in society. Murthy here depicts the journey of Anupama towards independence. She accepts the challenged role of woman in this patriarchal society. She finally proves that women's dignity and self respect is not depends on men's approval. The transformation of women is depend on self reliance and inner strength. It is the core message of the novel. The novel criticizes the conditional value placed on women based on beauty and marital status, the lack of support women receive in times of illness or crisis, the internalization of patriarchal norms by both men and women.

Through Anupama's story, Sudha Murthy not only exposes gender discrimination but also offers a hopeful vision of resilience and independence.

4. Economic Vulnerability of the Middle Class :

Sudha Murthy explores the economic vulnerability of the Indian middle class through the life of Anupama, the protagonist of the novel. Anupama belongs to the middle class family but she preserve the self respect and sincerity throughout her life. As far as the economic vulnerability is concerned her stepmother always think about dowry and marriage of her daughters. She thinks that daughters are seen as financial responsibilities rather than independent individuals. Being an educated and talented woman, society measured Anupama from her physical appearance. Her father Shamanna always think about the marriage of his daughters. When the bride seeing program of Anupama performed, her mother-in-law accessed the financial position of Shamanna by observing his dhoti and threadbare coat. Shamanna feels very guilty when he saw the Radhakka's ornaments and Anand's Mercedes-

Looking at Radhakka's ornaments and Anand's Mercedes – symbol of a world totally alien to him – Shamanna had grown so painfully aware of his limitations that he had not spoken at all. (Murthy 34)

Radhakka valued people on the basis of their economic status in society. She considers Anupama and her family as a poor as compared to hers. She also warned Anand that he must be practical in life. You can bring a daughter-in-law from poor family into your house but never send your daughter to a poor family. How could I have married of a princess like Girija to a begger like Vijay? Or told people that my daughter's father in law is a cook? What would they have said? Think of our status in society! (Murthy 127)

Moral Issues :

1. Hypocrisy and False Liberation :

Mahashweta highlights the deep rooted hypocrisy and false female liberation in society. In this novel Anupama fight against the societal norms and prejudices after she detects



leukoderma. It leads abandoned by her husband and her in-laws. Anand, being a doctor, could not understand the reality of the disease. He abandoned his own wife because of his false understanding. He knows the leukoderma is not the contagious disease but it is harmless to others. He pretends to be good natured man before Anupama. His real nature expose when Anupama was in need of help to any person. She was eager to see the helping hand in her life. It means that she was waiting for Anand's reply to her letter because she is really abandoned from society. She was the victim of false belief. The villagers knew the truth about Anupama. They know that her husband had not written to her in such terrific days. Anand gives priorities to his family's social standing over his marital vows. "By now, everyone in the village knew that Anupama had a white patch because of which her in laws had sent her back and that her husband had not written to her." (Murthy 63)

2. Betrayal of Trust :

Betrayal of trust is the major moral issue in Mahashweta. It shapes the life of Anupama and also highlights social prejudices. Anupama loved her father before her marriage and after marriage she also loved by her husband, Anand. Only the disease – leukoderma shattered the trust between Anand and Anupama. Anand's silence and his inaction shows one of the deepest betrayal in the novel. When she was living with her in-laws, she feels uncomfortable with them. She has not any option at this time. The only comfort she derived was from Anand's calls and letters. "They were as welcome as rain during the hot summer, as refreshing as an oasis in the desert."

In Mahashweta, Radhakka loved Anupama more but her trust accidentally turns against her when the disease appears. It means that trust depends on superficial values. It is conditional in a society. At this juncture Anupama was very disturbed. Her mother-in-law's house would remain shut forever. She needs the supporting hands but will she expect from whom? She says –

Tears blurred her vision as sorrow welled up in her heart. What was the point in going to the temple now? She started sobbing, but there was not a soul to console her. She was like a lonely traveller on a long and arduous road. (Murthy 73)

3. Internalized Misogyny :

Internalized Misogyny is a phenomenon where women accept the negative and discriminatory beliefs about women that exist in society, and then apply those beliefs to themselves or other women. It comes from internal behaviour of person not from their external attitude. It shows the negative attitude of women like judging women from their outer appearance, guessing women's value depends on their marital status etc.

In Sudha Murthy's Mahashweta we find many threads of internalized Misogyny where women themselves enforce the patriarchal attitude. Anupama's life is upended after she develops leukoderma. She also receives reactions from the same gender about the gender bias. Her stepmother Sabakka is the best example of internalized Misogyny. She always hates not only Anupama's behaviour but her thoughts also. Anupama's stepmother Sabakka had never felt any affection for Anupama. The girl who was her husband's first wife's daughter who

shared the love of her father before Sabakka comes in the life of Shamanna. Sabakka was not the lack of sympathy and compassion about the orphan children except Anupama because she was very beautiful and talented girl while Sabakka's own daughters were not. Being a woman she hates a woman who had courage and rebuild her life against all odds. At the time of Anupama's bride seeing, she says – "She fervently prayed that such a boy would not choose Anupama." (Murthy 27)

4. Loss of Human Dignity :

Loss of human dignity is one of the major moral issues explored through the life of Anupama in Sudha Murthy's Mahashweta. Dignity is an essential part of human identity. The novel shows how Her husband Anand, who once claimed to love her, abandons her when she needs him most. His silence and withdrawal reveal moral weakness. Instead of supporting her, he distances himself, suggesting that social approval matters more to him than his wife's dignity. Anupama realizes this betrayal when she reflects that "*the disease had not disfigured her as much as people's attitude had.*" This line captures the central idea that dignity is destroyed not by illness, but by inhuman behavior. Dignity is disgraced not by fate alone but by social attitudes, prejudices and lack of moral values. At the beginning of the novel Anupama is admired for her beauty and intelligent but the white patches are found in her leg , the situation changed abruptly. She becomes an object of shame and disrespect. Her mother-in-law Radhakka's harsh reaction reflects the failure of moral: "*A woman with white patches is inauspicious. How can she remain in our house?*" This statement shows how superstition overrides humanity, denying Anupama basic respect and dignity. Her husband Anand also takes safe distance from his wife after she detects skin disease. Anand once claimed to love her in front of hundreds of people and in the presence of Agni. At once he says :

"And this is my promise to you. We shall always be together. Anu, how can I ever think of anybody other than you?" (Murthy 38)

Conclusion :

Sudha Murthy's Mahashweta is poignant and recurring story of a woman who always ready to strive for the betterment of her husband. It is an exploration of social and moral issues that continue to affect individuals in contemporary society. Through Anupama's journey, Sudha Murthy criticizes the superficial values and discriminatory practices that are inherent in social structures. The theme of Mahashweta is perfectly fit for the representation of today's scenario. It also serves as a true worth of woman lies not in her physical appearance but in her inner strength and courage. Through Anupama's struggle Sudha Murthy tries to awake the suppressed women for stamping their identity in this world. She builds a new world where she take a fresh breath to live in.

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