

## The Social Stigma

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### Abstract

*Dr. Sudha Murthy, the author of the novel Mahashweta, is a celebrity writer. Her works have been translated into many Indian languages. She is a Padma Shri Awardee and the recipient of R. K. Narayan's Award, for her contribution to Literature. This article is about the psychological realism, specifically in the leading character, Anupama, which forms the undercurrent in the novel Mahashweta by Dr. Sudha Murthy. Psychological realism defines the realistic human behavioral thinking process which modulates every human being's life. Necessity and struggle for survival create more than imaginable strengths in the minds of even average human beings. In this novel, the author visualizes such latent strengths and creates an optimistic reassurance in the minds of the readers.*

**Keywords:-** Psychology, Realism, Introspection, Trauma, Family Relationships, Stigma.

### Introduction

Dr. Sudha Murthy hails from Shiggaon in North Karnataka and has done her M.Tech in Computer Science from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. She was the first woman engineer in Telco and presently, is the chairperson of Infosys Foundation. She has penned twenty-four novels, three non-fiction books and four books for children. She is a writer, social worker and a generous donor who contributes to various charities in the capacity as the chairperson of Infosys Foundation. She is the recipient of various awards for her contribution to the society. She has been honored with the 'Padma Shri' Award by the Government of India in the year 2006 and the recipient of the R. K. Narayan Award in the year 2006 for her contribution in the field of literature.

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She is one of the leading women writers whose works are a realistic portrayal of the socio-psychological issues faced by the contemporary Indian women. In a simple style, she has touched upon the important modern-day issues in her novels. She explores the workings of the inner mind of the women characters in her novels who are educated and who have the inner strength to face any adverse situation and finally emerge independent and carve a place for themselves in the society. The novel *Mahashweta* written by Dr. Sudha Murthy was published in Kannada language in the year 1983. It was translated into English in the year 2005 and later on was translated into various Indian languages. The author in the novel *Mahashweta*, has realistically portrayed the role of Indian woman and the societal psychological influence on the leading character Anupama. Dr. Sudha Murthy has touched upon the sensitive social stigma- leukoderma in this novel.

The concept of psychological realism by Henry James, the *Father of Psychological Realism*, is based on exploring the different emotions, the hidden desires of the characters and different facets of the working of human mind namely their outlook, frame of mind, account of life and requirements. This realism also explores the inner working of the individual and their reaction which depend on the different situations. Like the concept of psychological realism, she has brought out the different emotions of the leading protagonist Anupama, which vary according to the circumstances, thereby exploring the inner consciousness of the leading character and her reactions while facing situations which was beyond her control. This made Anupama to make a firm resolve in her mind and face the setbacks and emerge stronger.

The title of the novel is aptly named as *Mahashweta* which means 'pure' by the author, Dr. Sudha Murthy. *Mahashweta* was the name of the leading character in the ancient work *Kadambari* written by Bana Bhatta in Sanskrit. *Mahashweta* in *Kadambari* saved her lover from death due to her pure love. Likewise, Anupama, around whom the novel evolves, converted the negative aspects of her life into positive and remained pure and untouched with a clear vision and dedicated herself to the profession, she loved the most- 'teaching' and 'directing plays'.



Marriage is a union of two minds, a life-long commitment based on love, faith, trust and mutual understanding which culminates into an emotional bonding. It also helps the couple to weather many a storm thereby helping them to hold their hands together in their life-long journey. Anupama, a very bright, intelligent college student who liked to help people by involving herself in charity work, though hailing from a poor background, believed in the traditional concept of marriage. Anupama who enacted the character of *Mahashweta* during her college days on stage was waiting for her Pundarika who would sweep off her feet and would love her till death. She met Dr. Anand, her future husband who later turns to be a life changer for her, by chance for the first time at Dr. Desai's clinic where she had come to sell tickets for her play and it was love at first sight for her and Anand smitten by her physical beauty, felt the same emotion for her.

This mutual attraction culminated in marriage with little opposition either from Shamanna, Anupama's father and a poor school teacher and Radhakka, Anand's mother and a cold calculative and a cunning woman. Women, after entering their new relationship merge with their husband's family and psychologically adjust themselves to the new relationships and environment. This happened to Anupama, the chief protagonist of the novel also. In spite of her talents, Anupama became a loyal wife and a subservient daughter-in-law. She loved Anand and was happy with him which she thought and prayed that such happiness would continue for the rest of her life. Destiny had willed it otherwise. After Anand departed to London for higher studies, the sudden appearance of a white patch on her foot, destroyed her dreams and set the alarm bell ringing which she knew would shatter her life forever.

Her visit to the doctor proved that she had leukoderma and fear entered into her sub-conscious mind that something was going to happen to her which would end her longing for a secured life filled with warmth and love which she fortunately had found after her marriage with Anand. She assumed:

“Anupama now felt that as though there was a sharp sword hanging over her head. She was haunted by the fear that

someone would find out her secret; and the harder she tried to conceal her problem, the larger the web of deceit grew. And so did the patch.” (Mahashweta, p. 51)

For a woman, it is their parents who provide the feeling of security before marriage and her husband who provides stability and security after marriage. She felt unsecured since her husband was far away and the gloom which descended on her mind could not be dispelled. Her premonition proved right with the discovery of her physical ailment by her mother- in- law when she rolled down the stairs and exposed her foot with the patch.

She was treated as an outsider in her own house. She also had a feeling that her husband who was a doctor would understand her predicament but unsure as to whether as a son, he would take his mother’s side or support Anupama by antagonizing his mother. She knew now that her future rested on her husband’s decision. She always thought that:

“A home, after all, is not made up of just the four walls- there must be affection and love, as well. So where was the place she could call home? Where would she find kindness and trust? With Anand? But how would she reach England? She did not know the answers to any of the questions that plagued her.” (Mahashweta, p. 56)

The dominating mother- in- law did not heed to any of the pleadings of either Shamanna whom she had summoned or Anupama. Left with no choice:

“Anupama went to her room, collected the few things that belonged to her, picked up one of Anand’s photographs and returned where Shamanna waited for her. She took his hand in hers, and silently clutching her bag, walked out of the house. She knew in her heart that this was the last time she would be seeing the house or its people... but she did not look back even once.” (Mahashweta, p. 58, 59)

Unable to bear the onslaught which she had to face from her step-mother, step-sisters and the villagers and seeing her father’s plight, Anupama was forced to take the drastic decision to commit suicide. The fact that her letters to Anand did not fetch any reply and also the news



that her husband had decided to remarry had left her in a disturbed state of mind. It was only then that she realized that though her love was pure, Anand's love for her was only for her physical beauty. Despite Anand's education, he did not have the capacity to differentiate between the inner beauty and external beauty. In the last minute however, common sense prevailed with the self-realization that she was also capable of facing the world and could definitely restart her new life. Her thoughts went back to their wedding day, when he had held her hands and took his vows in the presence of Agni. She always wanted during her college days, happy endings for all her plays and this was definitely one of the reasons which led her to the path of positive thinking that: "Life is not always a fountain of happiness, but rather a mix of pain and sorrow. The drama of her life had just begun, and she had no choice but to see it through the end. (Mahashweta, p. 70)

The positive attitude along with self-confidence helped her to take decisions and come out of psychological gloom which had engulfed her which would have otherwise resulted in self-destruction. This goes to prove the fact that in spite of gender discrimination where women are always considered as a weaker sex, strong women emerge unscathed and mentally stronger to face adverse situations. It proves that they are no less than men when it comes to handling emotions, pains and ultimately their life. Anupama started her second lease of life when she shifted to Bombay to start her new career and was ready to face the challenge that life offered her with a lesson that her economic independence was going to be the secret or rather the stepping stone for her success.

With the help of her friend Sumithra and her husband Hari, Anupama managed to find a job and made new friends who did not care about her physical ailment which was now fast spreading in her body. She adapted herself to the new environment, new life and new friends. When after a year, she saw the true face of her friend's husband Hari, she decided to move out and again it was her friend Dolly who came to her rescue. Anupama stayed at Dolly's place as a paying guest and after Dolly's departure to Australia after her marriage, Anupama was entrusted the job as a caretaker of the house. Anupama removed her mangalsutra which signified that she had left the past and its bitter memories which

symbolized her end of her marriage life. When God closes one door, he opens the other. It happened in the case of Anupama's life when she met Dr. Vasant who worked in the hospital where she was treated her when she met with an accident. Both Vasant and his friend Dr. Satya visited her often and for the first time after all her sufferings which she had to face, Anupama felt close to them and she was able to even relate her past to them.

When Satya fell sick, Anupama volunteered to look after him. One evening in the midst of a conversation, she advised Satya to recover from his past love affair, change his mind and accept life as it is:

“It is better to understand the vicissitudes of life and solve our own problems in the manner we find appropriate. I have learnt that repeated success makes a person arrogant, while an occasional failure makes a person more mature.” (Mahashweta, p. 116)

She continued saying:

“Courage and confidence are the real wealth in life. Education can enhance it. But ultimately you have to face life all alone. I don't depend on any guru nor do I read any philosophy. My conscience is my guru and it guides me well.” (Mahashweta, p. 116)

This sums up the changes in Anupama's life and shows how she had learnt to take things, accept it and face the reality. She also has learnt that no one in this world is permanent or indispensable.

Fortunately, Anupama had resurrected her life at the appropriate time and with the determination to not let herself think about the past, she propelled herself to look for a bright future. She immersed herself and concentrated on what she liked to do the best that is teach history and direct Sanskrit plays and happy to be with the next generation. Though Anand was fully aware that his wife Anupama did not have the disease before the marriage, he was a coward who hid himself behind his mother and became insensitive towards his wife who had pleaded with him repeatedly through her letters to help her prove her innocence and allow



her to join him in England. He visited India for his sister's wedding but did not make an attempt to contact her. He felt:

“Anupama will overcome any hurdles she faces. Did she not sell a thousand- rupee ticket to a stranger like me? And did she not have the courage to stand in front of thousands of people and enact scenes of sorrow, of passion feeling awkward? It's best if she handles the present situation on her own. I shall write to her after sometime, once everyone has calmed down. She will also feel better about it.” (Mahashweta, p. 122)

Anand never wrote to her and thought that it was better to stay away from her. The same man, on learning of his sister's infidelity before marriage, somehow started analyzing things in the right perspective but it was too late. His search for his wife proved futile but as luck favored him, he met her when he came to watch a play at Bombay during one of his visits to attend the medical conference. As he watched the play, he was sure it was indeed Anupama who was giving the commentary and with great difficulty he got her address and the very next day, went to her place. When the same innocent and docile Anupama had undergone a change and decided to lead her own life without him, Anand could not accept or digest it.

When he asked her for forgiveness, she asked him:

“Which mistake are you seeking forgiveness for? Please remember that saying the right thing at the right time is what makes a conversation meaningful. Language is a tool we use to express ourselves. It is what differentiates us from animals. Did you speak when you first got to know about my condition? Was it my fault that I got this white patch? Is it my fault that I am a poor man's daughter? Now that you are here, answer me.” (Mahashweta, p. 146)

Anand's hope of a reunion with Anupama, crashed, when she put forth a question for which he had no answer, the question which had haunted her during the earlier painful days, the questions which had no answer then and also today. She questioned him:

“Suppose you had got leukoderma, do you think I would have left you for some other man? A marriage is a lifelong commitment; for better or for worse, till death do us part. Wasn't that what you'd said to me before you left for England? Even though you are a doctor, you only know how to treat a disease, not tend to a patient's emotional needs.” (Mahashweta, p. 147)

Her parting words to Anand summarize the psychological trauma which had definitely left a scar for the rest of her life, a scar which could not be easily erased or healed. Vasant fell in love with Anupama because of her impressive character. When he proposed to her, she politely refused to accept Vasant's offer since she was fully aware that she did not want to get entangled with any man again in her life. Women are bold and once they take a decision and make up their mind, they do not look back and Anupama did not want to commit the mistake twice in her life. In fact, in the college day function where she was working, they had decided to stage the play *Mahashweta*, directed by Anupama, it was Vinuta, Anupama's student who would play the lead role while Anupama would be giving only the commentary.

The lines:

“Like Rohini to Chandra, like Lakshmi to Narayana, am I to him. Just as the creeper depends on a tree, 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, p. 151).

The same Anupama who was swept off her feet by Anand who actually worshipped her

for her physical beauty was no more. In her place was a more matured woman who had grown from strength to strength and was ready to face the challenges in life leaving behind her memories of the past. She definitely was a woman with integrity and her strong will power brought her home to the safety of the shore after facing a major storm in the sea.

Life is a long journey and in this journey, each individual would have their own experiences. It is also a psychological journey which may unfold many things and teach us various things and helps to realize



and assess one's individual capacity. The journey is definitely not a path of roses but is filled with highs and lows, sorrows and happiness, success and failures. Only the proper viewing in a clear perspective without letting emotions ruling us, one can analyze things and clearly view our goal and the means to reach our goals. It happened in the life of Anupama.

Anupama was an obedient, loving daughter-in-law but unfortunately her sacrifices went unnoticed. With no support from her own family or her husband or her in-laws, she was a frustrated woman groping in the dark without a light or ray of hope. There are two types of violence namely: the physical and the mental violence. Anupama did not undergo any physical violence. It was due to the white patches in her skin that she had to face the mental violence caused due to the societal factors. The events which happened in her life were beyond her control which made her to lose her happiness and mental happiness with the appearance of the white patch or leukoderma which was no fault of hers but had ruined her family life.

When women are pushed to the corner, they react in different ways. Either they succumb to the pressure or turn around or fight back to achieve and take them back what is theirs rightfully. Though Anupama had negative feelings and considered that life was not worth living, she must be given credit for taking her life into her hands and turning the past into a bright future and for viewing her life in a proper positive perspective and with rational thinking.

There are many Anupamas in this world who emerge stronger and victorious when the situation warrants. It is ironic that Anupama lost the man whom she loved, Anand, who rejected her and when love tried to enter again for the second time in her life in the form of Dr. Vasant, who later became her friend and a close confidant, loved her for her internal beauty but she was not willing to open her heart for another man. Though she did not have any children of her own, Anupama did not feel the emptiness because she had many children who looked up to her for her guidance. Anupama's future life was not known but she preferred to live in the present with happiness, tried to erase the past and not dream anymore about the future. Life is the best teacher and Anupama, the chief protagonist, as a student had learnt many things in her journey.

It is not humanly possible to remain unaffected by not reacting to the surroundings. It depends on the individual to react according to the situation which is more important. Anupama has risen from the bottom of the debris, managed to build her life brick by brick with a solid base. She has laid the foundation for a strong building, similarly the building which can withstand the strong undercurrents namely emotions and would not be blown away or collapse like a pack of cards. A modest attempt has been made in this journal and the author has not digressed from Indian tradition and culture but has made the lead character as well.

In conclusion, to give courage and encourage women keeping in mind their family background and in spite of all the adversities to have faith in human relationships are the best examples to describe the social stigma of the novel. In this novel, Henry James's concept of psychological realism can be applied directly since the leading character, Anupama, initially gets disheartened due to the sudden stigma which exposes her to the psychological realistic world of inhibitions and reservations. Due to her mental maturity coupled with the course of survival, she is able to look at things from the pragmatic perspectives and could open up new vistas of thinking by paving her roadmap for a better tomorrow. This once again proves the aspect of psychological realism not only with the leading character of Dr. Sudha Murthy and also permeates in the other characters of the novel.

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