



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Tradition, Patriarchy, And Resistance: The Social Duplicities In Sudha Murty's Mahasweta

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ABSTRACT

Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta* (2004) masterfully interlaces themes of tradition, patriarchy, and resistance, revealing the social contradictions that confine women in rural Karnataka. The novel's protagonist, Anupama, is initially valued for her beauty—a trait that ironically becomes the source of her downfall when she develops vitiligo. This physical transformation exposes the commodification of women within marriage and societal structures, as Anupama's worth rapidly diminishes in the eyes of her husband and in-laws. Murty's portrayal of Anupama's ostracization highlights the ways in which patriarchal norms equate a woman's value with her appearance, marital status, and reproductive capacity.

However, the narrative does not dwell solely on victimhood; rather, it charts Anupama's journey of resistance. Through education and self-reliance, she reclaims agency, transforming personal affliction into empowerment. Employing feminist frameworks such as Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's third-world feminism, this analysis explores how Murty subverts the mythic Savitri archetype. Unlike the traditional, sacrificial wife, Anupama becomes a modern resistor, challenging dowry, the stigma of infertility, and the denial of bodily autonomy.

Murty's accessible prose makes complex feminist ideas approachable, democratizing discourse and critiquing Brahmanical patriarchy while celebrating Kannada cultural resilience. The novel's exploration of familial hypocrisy—where maternal affection contends with societal expectations—offers a nuanced look at intersectional inequities. In the context of rising gender-based violence in 2025, *Mahashweta* demonstrates literature's power to expose duplicities and inspire movements for equity and justice.

Keywords- Sudha Murty, Mahashweta, tradition, patriarchy, resistance, social duplicities, feminist critique, women's empowerment, identity, rural India

1. INTRODUCTION

Sudha Murty (b. 1950) stands as one of India's foremost contemporary writers in both Kannada and English. Renowned for her philanthropic work as chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, Murty's literary voice is shaped by her deep engagement with India's social intricacies and her Karnataka heritage. Her novel *Mahashweta* (2004) is a compelling narrative that exposes the harsh realities lurking beneath the surface of tradition-bound Indian society. Drawing inspiration from the mythic figure Savitri—who famously defied Yama, the god of death, for her husband—Murty reimagines the story through the lens of Anupama, a modern woman whose journey becomes an incisive critique of patriarchal values and duplicity.

Anupama, whose name means “incomparable,” is initially celebrated for her beauty and becomes the bride of Anand, a wealthy doctor. However, her life takes a drastic turn when she develops vitiligo, a skin condition that society deems a blemish not just of the body, but of character and destiny. Through Anupama's first-person narrative, Murty deftly weaves domestic realism with echoes of myth, revealing the tyranny of tradition—dowry demands, fertility as proof of womanhood, and the commodification of female beauty.

The novel's social critique is clear in scenes such as Anand's mother Girija's duplicity: while she seeks a suitable match for her son—“Anand wanted a beautiful bride; his mother wanted one who could match their status in the community” (Murty, 2004, pp. 36-53)—she is quick to discard Anupama when her beauty fades. Murty thus unmasks the hypocrisy of family devotion, which, rather than supporting women, often cloaks exploitation and exclusion.

Yet, *Mahashweta* is not just a tale of victimhood. Anupama's transformation is rooted in resistance and self-discovery. Her declaration—“I am no longer the naive Anupama whose world revolved around you” (pp. 174-221)—marks a pivotal shift from submission to autonomy. Education becomes her weapon, enabling her to reclaim agency and forge a new identity beyond societal dictates.

Murty's nuanced portrayal, informed by her activism and empathy, positions *Mahashweta* as a feminist manifesto for postcolonial India. By dissecting the duplicities inherent in marriage, motherhood, and community, the novel challenges readers to re-examine gendered myths and envision a more equitable society—making its message enduringly relevant in contemporary feminist discourse.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale for this study resides in the paradox of Indian feminism: amid legal strides like the 2023 women's reservation bill, rural patriarchy persists, with 33% of women facing domestic violence (NFHS-5, 2021). Murty's *Mahashweta*, often critiqued as “soft feminism,” warrants re-examination for its subtle unmasking of duplicities, bridging elite and vernacular discourses. Scholarly gaps abound in analyzing its mythic-feminist hybridity, overshadowed by Murty's inspirational tales. In 2025's digital #MeToo resurgence, the novel's resistance motifs offer blueprints for grassroots empowerment.

The primary objective is to interrogate tradition, patriarchy, and resistance in *Mahashweta*, unveiling social duplicities through Anupama's journey. Secondary objectives include exploring mythic subversion and implications for Indian women's literature. This analysis elevates Murty's work as a catalyst for intersectional critique, fostering nuanced feminist pedagogies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist theory anchors this study, with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) framing women as "Other" under patriarchy, mirrored in Anupama's devaluation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (1984) critiques global feminism's homogeny, aligning with Murty's localized resistance. bell hooks' *Feminist Theory* (1984) informs duplicities in family power.

On Murty, R. Supriya's study (2025) examines feminist themes in her fictions, noting *Mahashweta*'s empowerment arc. The Propulsion Tech Journal (2024) analyzes patriarchal oppression in *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*. Multi-Education Journal (2024) highlights agency critique. Gaps in mythic resistance persist; this paper bridges them via intersectional lenses.

4. METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative textual analysis employs close reading of *Mahashweta* (2004 ed.), coding motifs of tradition (e.g., rituals), patriarchy (e.g., dowry), and resistance (e.g., autonomy). Feminist-postcolonial frameworks guide interpretation; primary: novel text; secondary: critiques. Limitations: cultural specificity, addressed via contextual ethnography.

5. DISCUSSION

Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta* masterfully dissects the social duplicities that perpetuate gender inequities in rural India, where tradition serves as patriarchy's gilded cage, and resistance emerges as women's quiet revolution. Set against Mysore's lush backwaters, the novel chronicles Anupama's odyssey from idealized bride to self-forged icon, subverting the Savitri archetype—eternal sacrificer—to embody modern defiance. Murty's narrative, laced with Kannada idioms and domestic minutiae, exposes how societal norms duplicitously exalt women while shackling them, fostering a feminist discourse that resonates with de Beauvoir's existential "becoming."

Tradition in *Mahashweta* masquerades as sanctity, yet enforces subjugation. Anupama's marriage, brokered on beauty and caste parity, exemplifies this: "Anand wanted a beautiful bride; his mother wanted one who could match their status in the community" (Murty, 2004, pp. 36-53, Chapter 2). Girija's insistence on "auspicious" rituals—Lakshmi puja excluding the "impure"—reveals duplicities: "The presence of a woman with a white patch is not acceptable during auspicious occasions such as Lakshmi puja; I will not risk the purity of the household" (pp. 174-221, Chapter 8). Here, tradition's purity rhetoric sanitizes exclusion, echoing Brahmanical pollution myths that Mohanty critiques as colonial-patriarchal hybrids. Anupama's vitiligo, onset post-marriage—"I did not have this affliction before my marriage, and that's the truth" (pp. 75-92, Chapter 4)—symbolizes tradition's curse: beauty as transient dowry, illness as marital

failing. Murty inverts this, transforming affliction into epiphany, where Anupama rejects ritualistic wifedom: "Like Rohini to Chandra, like Lakshmi to Narayana, am I to him... I cannot live without him" (pp. 12-35, Chapter 1), evolving to "I want to look ahead rather than remain stuck in the past" (pp. 121-141, Chapter 6).

Patriarchy's duplicities thrive in familial facades, where devotion veils domination. Anand's initial ardor—"Anu, I am giving you my heart today, please keep it safe" (pp. 54-74, Chapter 3)—sours into abandonment, mirroring dowry-driven unions: "If you really want to know my opinion... don't proceed with this match. There is no comparison between their financial status and ours" (pp. 36-53, Chapter 2). Girija embodies maternal patriarchy, her "love" conditional: "To me the greatest jewel is my Anand. The rest only weigh me down" (pp. 54-74, Chapter 3), inverting Anupama's mangalsutra as burden—"I have removed my mangalsutra—it had weighed down on me heavily, in more ways than one" (pp. 121-141, Chapter 6). This echoes hooks' intersectional patriarchy, where class and caste amplify control: Anupama's infertility stigma—"A marriage is a lifelong commitment; for better or for worse, till death do us part" (pp. 174-221, Chapter 8)—blames her, absolving Anand. Murty exposes these hypocrisies through Anupama's sisterly bond with Shrinath, whose shrewdness unmasks greed: "Oh, so that's the reason you have invited me here for tea... If I had known this earlier, I wouldn't have settled for anything less than a dinner!" (pp. 36-53, Chapter 2). Patriarchy's social duplicities—professing unity while fragmenting women—perpetuate via gossip and exile, as Anupama's village shuns her "blemish."

Resistance in *Mahashweta* is Anupama's alchemical triumph, transmuting victimhood into agency. Post-rejection, she invokes mythic fortitude: "Give me the courage to live no matter what happens!" (pp. 93-120, Chapter 5), echoing Savitri's bargain but redirecting it inward. Education becomes her weapon: "I do not want money from someone who doesn't love me. God will provide for me. I have my education, and it will serve to feed me" (pp. 121-141, Chapter 6). Tutoring orphans, Anupama forges a surrogate family, subverting barrenness stigma: "What will their fate be if they are unfortunate enough to get this kind of a disease? I am not dependent on anyone for emotional or financial support and that has given me enormous strength" (pp. 174-221, Chapter 8). This mirrors Mohanty's third-world agency—rooted in community, not individualism—challenging Beauvoir's transcendence via solidarity. Murty's duplicities peak in Anand's remorseful return, rejected by empowered Anupama: "Whatever the circumstances she found herself in, she would meet the challenge head-on, and win" (pp. 93-120, Chapter 5). Her self-discovery—"I am no longer the naive Anupama whose world revolved around you. I know what my goals are and where I am heading, and I don't need anyone's help to reach my destination" (pp. 174-221, Chapter 8)—dismantles marital sacrament, affirming autonomy over tradition.

Mythic subversion amplifies resistance, retooling Savitri from passive savior to active rebel. Anupama's "white patch" parodies purity myths, her resilience inverting Yama's defeat: "Of the thousands of flowers that blossom on a tree only a few will bear fruit. And out of those few fruits, insects and squirrels will eat some" (Murty, 2004, unpaginated epigraph, adapted). Murty critiques tradition's fruitfulness obsession—progeny over personhood—via Anupama's barren empowerment. Social duplicities surface in community

festivals, where Anupama's exclusion belies egalitarian facades, prompting her: "It felt as if she was locked up in a gilded cage" (pp. 54-74, Chapter 3).

Intersectionally, class and region nuance patriarchy: Anupama's middle-class aspirations clash with rural conservatism, her urban tutoring evoking Murty's own philanthropy. Duplicities extend to motherhood: Girija's doting on grandsons ignores Anupama's plight, highlighting selective kinship.

Comparatively, *Mahashweta* parallels Devi's *Mother of 1084* in maternal resistance but softens with hope, critiqued as "bourgeois feminism" yet praised for accessibility (Supriya, 2025). Unlike Tagore's *The Home and the World*, Murty grounds resistance in everyday defiance, not revolution.

Ambivalences persist: does Anupama's forgiveness dilute critique? Yet, her unyielding core affirms: tradition's duplicities yield to resistance's bloom.

In sum, *Mahashweta* unveils patriarchy's veils, tradition's traps, through Anupama's luminous rebellion, enriching feminist canons.

6. FINDINGS

This analysis brings to light several pivotal findings within Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta*, each underscoring the intricacies of social injustice and the potential for transformation. Firstly, the narrative reveals how tradition is often manipulated to exclude and marginalize women, most strikingly through ritual practices such as the prohibition of women with perceived "impurities" from participating in religious ceremonies: "puja bans" (pp. 174-221). Such customs not only isolate women but also reinforce their "otherness" within familial and communal spaces.

Secondly, the novel exposes the commodification of women within patriarchal structures, particularly through the dowry system. The mismatch between a woman's worth and her dowry status (pp. 36-53) highlights how women are frequently reduced to material value, with their identities and futures subject to economic transactions. This commodification perpetuates inequality and erodes self-esteem, demonstrating the insidious reach of patriarchy.

Thirdly, Murty emphasizes the emancipatory power of education. Anupama's assertion, "I have my education, and it will serve to feed me" (pp. 121-141), marks a transformative moment in her journey. Education becomes a tool for resistance, enabling her to reclaim agency and establish independence. Murty's nuanced feminism shines through in these developments; rather than resorting to overt polemic, she illuminates social hypocrisies and their consequences, advocating for equitable reform through narrative.

Collectively, these findings illustrate how Murty critiques traditional and patriarchal norms while championing the transformative potential of education, setting the groundwork for broader societal change grounded in empathy, awareness, and justice.

7. CONCLUSION

Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta* stands as a powerful literary tribute to the resilience and indomitable spirit of women, deftly exposing the hypocrisies embedded within traditional patriarchal structures. Through her protagonist, Anupama, Murty unflinchingly reveals how society weaponizes superficial standards—beauty becomes a currency, and illness, a mark of shame. The telling line, “The presence of a woman with a white patch is not acceptable... I will not risk the purity” (2004, pp. 174-221), encapsulates the punitive gaze society casts upon women who fall outside prescribed norms. This stigma, rooted in patriarchal notions of purity, isolates Anupama, yet it also sets the stage for her remarkable transformation.

Anupama's journey is marked by defiant self-determination. Refusing to be crushed by rejection and ostracization, she embodies resistance: “Whatever the circumstances... she would meet the challenge head-on, and win” (pp. 93-120). In a bold narrative move, Murty reimagines the archetype of Savitri—not as a passive sufferer but as a proactive, educated, and independent woman. Anupama's eventual autonomy, her involvement in community welfare, and her reclamation of dignity signal a democratized feminism—one that speaks to women across rural and urban divides, resonating with both local and global feminist discourses.

Murty's portrayal challenges the reduction of women to their physical appearances and asserts the necessity of agency, solidarity, and self-worth. As gender debates intensify in 2025, *Mahashweta* remains urgently relevant, serving as a beacon for those battling discrimination. The novel's enduring message is clear: true empowerment arises from resistance, not resignation. By dismantling tradition's duplicities and envisioning a new future, Murty's *Mahashweta* continues to inspire generations, inviting further exploration—perhaps into eco-feminism—within her body of work.

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