Exploring Sudha Murty’s Mahashweta through a Feminist Lens

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ABSTRACT

Feminism plays an essential role in women rights. Many of the Indian women novelists portraying women in various manifestations. Sudha Murthy, a brilliant yet down – to – earth writer in English and Kannada, who writes about an ordinary middle class Indian woman’s life with crystal clear narrative and insightful perception. Many of her writings voice the protest against the subjugation and oppression of women under different patriarchal institutions. And also concerned with the question of women’s space and identity. This paper is an attempt to analysis Sudha Murthy’s novel Mahashweta, a powerful text that tells the story of the female protagonist Anupama, who suffered from leucoderma after her marriage.

In this paper, an attempt is made to focus on the domestic violence, mental agony, inequality and superstitious beliefs that a middle class Indian woman has to face in a society where only wealth not her chastity and purity of mind matters.

In all traditions women have always been considered inferior and incapable of serious thinking. Aristotle declared that “the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities”. Aquinas, a Roman catholic of the 13th century, believed that a woman is an imperfect man. Nietzsche, the German philosopher, said that “women is the source of all folly and unreason” and what “woman is God’s first mistake”. Freud makes women envy the private parts of a man. In this way women were not only marginalized but denigrated in all traditions.

Feminism as a movement gained potential in the 20th century, marking the culmination of two centuries’ struggle for cultural roles and socio - political rights. This movement gained increasing prominence across three phases/waves – the first wave (political), the second wave (cultural) and the third wave (academic). Incidentally Toril Moi also classifies the feminist movement into three phases – the female (biological), the feminist (political) and the feminine (cultural).

An important text of the first wave is Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, which asserted the importance of woman’s independence, and through the character Judith, explicated how the patriarchal society prevented women from realizing their creative potential.

Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex famously stated, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” – a statement that highlights the fact that women have always been defined as the “Other”, as lacking, and negative, on whom Freud attributed “Penis-envy”. A prominent motto of this second Phase, “The personal is political” was the result of the awareness of the false distinction between women’s domestic and men’s public spheres.

In the third wave, feminism was actively involved in the academia, with its interdisciplinary associations with Marxism, psychoanalytic and poststructuralism, dealing with issues such as language, writing, sexuality, postcolonialism, ecological studies, representation, etc.

Many of us have heard about Sudha Murty as one of the prolific women writers in Indian English literature who continuously argued for women’s right and represented the hurdles faced by women in society. Rather than known as a social worker and author she is also known for her philanthropic work through the Infosys Foundation. The yet another golden feather in Sudha Murty’s life is she was also the first woman engineer to be selected in Tata
Motors, Pune. She had written a postcard to JRD Tata complaining of the gender bias in Tata Motors and she was invited for a special interview by Tata Motors. This spirit of her’s against patriarchy, inequality are well reflected in the female protagonists of her novels, who is awakening herself from the subjugation to individual freedom.

She writes about an ordinary middle class Indian woman’s life with crystal clear narrative and insightful perception. Many of her writings voice the protest against the subjugation and oppression of women under different patriarchal institutions. And also awereen with the women’s space and identity in society. Mahashweta is a brilliant work of Sudha Murty which fulfills different aspect of feminism and empowerment of women in society.

Sudha Murthy’s Mahashweta the book started with dedication “To all those women in our country who suppress their emotions and suffer silently because they have leuokderma. May they be imbued with hope and courage.” The book is not only for those who with leuokderma, but also to all the women to build a confidence within and also a constructive environment against all odds. Leuokderma is a cosmetic disease with white patches on the skin and at one point of time it spreads throughout the body. Though it’s not heredity, contagious, bad omen or the pay for the sin committed in the last birth, still a number of affected people face humiliation in the society and get isolated. Instead of intelligence, talent or any other extra power of a woman, still women were judged out of their charming beauty, and discard her if something happens to her gorgeous look. This is what happened in the life of Anupama, the protagonist of Mahashweta.

The novel begins with an emergency scene in a hospital at night which shed light upon the theme of novel. Dr. Anand, a gynecologist was trying his hard to protect both the mother and infant at the time of delivery. After a lot of effort the mother had come through the ordeal alive and the doctor resuscitate the baby through artificial respiration. In Bible Adam said about Eve thus: “This is now the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called women” Biologically its proven, its man’s (father’s) chromosome that decides the sex of an infant. But what we seen in and around us is how the women were ill treated by men, those who played a significant role for the birth of a baby girl. Here also Dr. Anand, a male representative make alive the baby via his artificial respiration. Nurse Prabhavati’s thought: “Even though the female child is stronger than the male child at birth, as adults it is the man who becomes the oppressor, and the woman who suffers. Why did this happen? She didn’t know the answer (2), drags the reader’s attention into this deep thought. Here marks the hint of oppression and aspect of Feminism for the first time in the novel.

Both parents play equally significant roles in the birth of a child. But at the moment of birth-the moment of truth-the only reality is the mother. She is the one who sheltered and nurtured the child more than a father. So children are more attached to mothers and it says that, especially boys are more attached to their mothers than girls. Though many men are dishonested the women in many ways. Radhakka, Dr. Anands mother became a widow in her youth itself, but due to firmness she brought up her two children – Anand and Girija. Anand is adhered to his mother and he was running to home after very day’s duty. Once his professor asked to stay back his home for a while and offer a cup of tea, Anand replied: “No, Akka, avva will be waiting for me at home” (3).

Anupama, daughter of Shamanna, a village school teacher was a talented artist who performs a number of Sanskrit plays. Her ardent dedication, determination, ambition, self control, hard work, kindness etc double her beauty. She never takes a break from her studies. She says to Sumitra, her dearest friend: “Sumi, If I don’t work hard I will lose my Scholarship and that will be the end of my career (20)”. Like other girls she wasn’t happy that she is going to complete her post-graduation within four months. Though she was never far from Anand’s thought, instead of indulged in marriage dreams, her mind focus on how to build up a good future and be a helping hand to her family.

Getting education is the fundamental human right of every individual irrespective of gender. Certain people believed girls and women were educated only for traditional household works and men will be the bread winner of a family. Anupama was aware of these social taboos, significance of education, above all her father’s financial trouble; she was sure that Scholarship was the only way to fulfill her dreams and capable of bringing socio economic changes. Realizing the importance of women education: Economic development and prosperity, Economic empowerment, Improved life, Dignity and honor, Justice, Alleviate poverty, Choice to choose a profession of her choice etc., Anupama work hard. Women must be educated for a healthy and a happy life. An educated woman can be a better human being, successful mother and a responsible citizen. Educating women will definitely increase the living standard both in and outside home. An educated woman will force her kids to study further, wish them to live a better life than hers and respect the people who are educated. Radhakka was extremely orthodox and narrow minded. She allowed Anand for further studies because a man is regarded as the bread winner of a family and considers Anupama’s duty is to be an ideal house wife, and discourage her dreams. The novel portrays this kind of many situations to highlight the gender bias in society. Though Women domination is visible in many fields in society, they were push back with the prejudiced concept ‘after all she is a woman’.

As a father, Shamanna think about only the secured life of Anupama and delighted when he received Anand’s letter. Before completing her studies and fulfill her dreams, Anupama have to agree with marriage, stepped into a new life with Anand in Lakshmi Nivas. Goddess Lakshmi is regarded as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Radhakka showered Anupama with many expensive Sari’s and ornaments. But Anupama said to herself, “To me the greatest jewel is my Anand. The rest only weigh me down (36).” Anupama was not attracted by the expensive materials, like a typical Indian wife she consider her husband equal to God and want to continue life as a wife not as an independent woman. Her mind throbs for her husband’s love and care. Anupama, a girl longs for a good career now longs for a marital bliss. Though she was tasted the bitterness of poor economic status, she did not blind folded seeing Anand’s wealth, for her his love was her greatest treasure.
When Anand went to England for his further studies on scholarship, Anupama had to remain home to perform Lakshmi pooja on Deepavali day as per Radhakka’s wish. None consider her dreams or aspirations, while she was adjusting to her new environment and that was making her diffident and left behind her dreams. Anupama had lost contacts with the world outside Lakshmi Nivas since her marriage except a few ceremonies she attended on Radhakka’s behalf. Later she began to realize that her only purpose was to be adorned and exhibited as an acquisition, reflection of their status in society.

For Anupama Deepavali is a day in which darkness spread in her life, with the discovery that she was affected by leukoderma. Rather than being pity on her situation, she wasn’t welcomed anywhere in the home and abandoned by her uncaring in-laws and insensitive husband. People in society looked her as a bad omen, she forced to return to her father’s home in the village. None of her letters get any response from Anand, though he was doctor who has medical knowledge of leukoderma. She had undergone psychological agony both from family and society due to the superstitious beliefs on leukoderma.

If we deeply examine the feministic aspects, that not only men but also women also was oppose as well oppress another woman. Anupama had to face such kind of oppression in her pre and post marital life. Her step mother and step sisters were harsh on her, envied on her gorgeous look and curse her when each marriage alliance of her step sister was cancelled because of Anupama’s charm. After marriage she had to face humiliations from her in laws. Her sister in law, Girija, “a willing participant in a clandestine relationship just for her fun,” married to a rich family with the support of mother’s money. While Anupama was disesteem due to lack of money and white patches. None noticed Anupama’s inner purity, instead showered bitter words upon her. Through Anupama’s bitter experience the author highlights issue of domestic violence and need of women empowerment.

Determined to rebuild her life against all odds, Anupama goes to Bombay, where her friend Sumitra settled with her Husband. One of the central issue that faced women in society is an attempt of molestation. Most men reckon women as an object for sexual pleasure, not as an individual. Men try to exploit the helplessness of women. Mignon McLaughlin quote: “A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.” Anand imagined how people of England will react while seeing Anupama’s patches and afraid of his unborn children though it had not been proved that the disease was hereditary. Mangalsutra regarded as the sacred symbol of marriage. ‘Mangal’ means auspicious, ‘Sutra’ can be deciphered as a thread. Marriage symbolizes not just coming together of two individuals, but also the bonding of understanding, commitment, mutual love, oneness and spiritual growth. But Anupama’s marital was life contrary to this concept. She removed her Mangalsutra that begot only dolefulness in her life and she look ahead for a better start as lecturer instead of remain stuck in the past.

Anupama began her dramatic career as a performer, but her life experience makes her a good director. Once he says: “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 occasional failures make an individual more mature (116).”

Sudha Murthy’s novel Mahashweta, a powerful text that tells the story of the female protagonist Anupama, who suffered from leukoderma after her marriage. This book portrays the inner strength of a woman who discovered herself in the best way she could, when no one was there to give her a helping hand, not even her so called husband who was desperate to make her his own for the rest of his life, her in-laws and even her own family. Anupama bring out the courage and fortitude of those women can exercise when the need arises, to be able to assert their rights and not always end their life when they faced discrimination in the society. Many women faced various kind of humiliation in our society. This novel not only provides the spirit of resurrection to the women but also an eye opener to those who humiliate the women in many ways. Sudha Murthy was succeeded in her effort.

References