

A Study of Psychological Resistance to Familial Authority and Social Violence in

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta*

S. Nandhini (2421221022001)

Ph. D. Research Scholar (Full-time), P G & Research Department of English,

St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Dr. F. Mary Priya

Supervisor, Assistant Professor of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

ABSTRACT

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* is a feminist novel that represents the lived experiences of a woman, whose identity is shaped by social stigma and patriarchal control in the family, through subtle forms of violence. Violence in the novel is represented through psychological illness, rather than physical harm. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence demonstrates how such violence is internalised, leading the oppressed to think that their suffering is natural in a patriarchal society. Anupama's initial acceptance of exclusion reflects this internalised violence. At the same time, John Galtung's theory of structural violence illustrates how social violence controls women in the name of cultural and moral codes, through marriage,

family, and societal restrictions. This paper studies how structural violence functions subtly, humiliating Anupama's dignity in the name of cultural legitimacy, and the psychological awakening of Anupama, her education and economic independence, that act as a resistance to the structural violence, thus showing that empowerment is an inner transformation that demolishes inherited systems of authority.

Keywords: Stigma, Social violence, Resistance, Inequality, Empowerment.

Sudha Murthy is a well-known Indian author, philanthropist and social worker. She was born in Shiggaon, Karnataka. She grew up in a middle-class family where education and discipline are more needed. She is an Electrical Engineering student and became a woman to be placed by the Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company (TELCO). Sudha Murthy is simple and elegant, and she is best known for her storytelling that reflects the societal expectations, especially with women, their Indian values and ethical concerns. Her writings mainly focus on family, oppression, morality, womanhood and social justice. Her contribution to Kannada literature is much more appreciable. Most of her works in Kannada literature were adapted into a televised dramatic series. More than a writer, she is remembered for her humanitarian work as the chairperson of Infosys.

Mahashweta is a Kannada novel centered on a female protagonist, Anupama, a talented, elegant and sensitive woman whose life is completely shattered because of leukoderma (vitiligo), a rare skin disease. In the Indian society, family is idealized as a space for comfort and moral guidance. But later, many feminists investigated that family also functions as a site of control and repression, especially for the passive women. Women are the bearers of hidden wounds. Society stresses them to carry those wounds, and they were given the name "Sacred", which they say would preserve their culture and tradition. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama is portrayed as a victim of society as well as her own family. She belongs to a

middle-class family and has many responsibilities to attain. Even though she is well versed in theatrical arts and has the capability of directing a play on her own, her aim is considered secondary to her familial duties. Suddenly a dreamlike life mesmerizes her, and she accepts blindly.

Sudha Murthy is a woman who always motivates women to feel proud of being themselves and of their active role in society as well as in their own families. Their sacrifice is not openly appreciated by anyone, but it will be deeply recognizable one day. She also portrays women as competitors or feeling like rivals to other women. Here, her mother-in-law creates violence against Anupama not on physical terms but thoroughverbal cruelty and loss of dignity. This paper shows how the female protagonist psychologically resists not only the oppression of her family but also social judgement.

Some of the feminist scholars, like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, emphasise that patriarchy is the main problem for a woman to be marginalised, oppressed, and devalued, which operates through institutions like marriage, family, and workplace, where women are expected to be silent, obedient, and humble. "The family is patriarchy's chief institution. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society." (Millett 33). In *Mahashweta*, matriarchy plays a vital role in the family. Radhakka is a wealthy and authoritarian woman who treats Anupama in an ill-mannered way, not physically but emotionally; she is devastated by the actions of Radhakka. Here, family acts as a space where social norms are internalised, and deviations are disciplined through moral and emotional way.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is represented here as subtle, and the dominations within a family are normalised. Everyone believes that familial relationships involve emotional fluctuations; having many ups and downs, everybody is different in nature, much like unequal fingers of a hand. Likewise, there are no things that are the same within a family. These are the normative words that one hears often. "Symbolic violence is a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted

for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, recognition or even feeling.” (Bourdieu 1)

In *Mahashweta*, Anupama is subjected to symbolic violence because her pain is silenced in the name of moral discipline, and she faces social violence that includes public shaming and alienation that damages a woman's sense of self. Thus, familial authority and social violence function as interlinked systems in the novel that regulates women's lives. Sudha Murthy argues that these so-called cultural forces operate together to marginalise women in a family as well as in the society which we live.

In *Mahashweta*, the family is represented as a site of authority, especially for a married woman. For a woman, her in-laws' house is not going to be the same as hers. They experience a lot with the new environment and its people. Sometimes they feel satisfied with what they have; sometimes they may not. It depends on the way they accept or resist through their actions. “People who have always lived in the sunlight will never understand darkness.” (Murthy 81) In *Mahashweta*, Anupama simply accepts whatever has happened to her because of her sensitive nature. She entered her husband's house with lots of expectations, but after she got leukoderma, their behaviour drastically changed. “Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality.” (Bourdieu 166).

Anand loves her initially but later avoids her gradually. He simply believes what his mother says. Anupama's familial life and her expectations are broken into pieces. Anupama is a victim of her family; her voice is silenced. Initially her mother-in-law accepts her to show herself as a generous person. If she agrees to the alliance, Anand will be happy, and it would earn her Anupama's undying gratitude, and people would praise her, ‘Look at Radhakka... how large-hearted she is! She has accepted a poor girl when she could have got a daughter-in-law from a better background’ (Murthy 25). After Anupama gets vitiligo, Radhakka treats her as a burden and a shame. She does not want to portray her daughter-in-law to

any of her relations and society; if she did so, everyone would feel ashamed of themselves for having such a low-centred daughter-in-law. According to Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a subtle, invisible form of power that is exercised through cultural norms, beliefs, and social expectations rather than physical force.

Beyond the familial tensions, Anupama faces so many struggles in the society that results in her exclusion and alienation. Leukoderma is a rare skin condition that comes into the life of Anupama and acts as a social marker that determines her beauty. Society views her not even as a human being. Sudha Murthy clearly demonstrates how stigma operates as a social force that shatters an individuals' dignity and belonging.

In *Mahashweta*, social violence is not openly stated but is deeply inherited and normalised. It appears in the form of alienation, restriction, and moral judgement. Anupama is treated by the society as an object for sympathy rather than empathy. This kind of social violence completely damages the inner confidence of the victim, isolates her and makes her feel like she is the only person responsible for her own suffering. One of the theorists called Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and the founder of peace and conflict studies, in his essay titled "Violence, Peace and Peace Research", introduced the concept of "structural violence"; later it was widely used in sociology, gender studies, and postcolonial studies. He defines violence as a harm that is not only physical but also as "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations." (Galtung 168). He identifies three forms of violence, namely direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence means physical violence like assault, beating, and harassing. Structural violence is caused by social systems like caste, class, and patriarchy. In terms of cultural violence, it is all about beliefs and norms that can justify structural violence.

Considering the theory of violence by Galtung, Anupama has faced structural violence because she has not gone through any physical violence, but she is abandoned by the family as well as the society. She is isolated in society, and her dignity is humiliated. Structural violence is not something that happens accidentally to anyone. It is a suffering which is produced by the society. Society has viewed Anupama's leukoderma as impure, which leads to her rejection and humiliation by the society. Initially, Anupama worries a lot about her inability to prove herself in the society. She needs to preserve the traditional values of the family, which are deeply rooted in social hierarchies and her mother-in-law's enforcement of tradition.

After the white patches appear on Anupama, Radhakka treats her as a sign of misfortune. She doesn't worry about Anupama's condition but seeks medical attention and prioritizes social reputation. Anand, her husband, is initially affectionate towards her but later become silent. He distances himself from Anupama, avoids communication, and literally abandons her at a crucial time. Here, Anupama experiences psychological alienation, which is more devastating than physical harm. Anupama has been sent away by her mother-in-law to her father's house. Her stepmother fails to give protection to her, instead thinks of her as a burden, and she has a notion that a married woman, who returns home without her husband is socially undesirable. After facing rejection from her own family and in-laws' house, Anupama finds temporary residence at her friend's house. It becomes a counter-space for structural violence where Anupama rebuilds her self-confidence. She seeks a job as a clerk, which fulfils her needs for survival. Even though she feels solace in it, it cannot entirely dismantle society's systemic oppression.

From the perspective of Galtung's theory of structural violence, Anupama's initial marginalisation limits her potential. She has completely changed the notion of the people who could think that a woman who has abandoned her familial life is struggling with low-wage jobs. This shows how structural violence shapes women's identities and allows them to acquire good positions in professional spaces.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps to explain the psychological dimension of Anupama's transformation. Economic independence earns her self-respect. The workplace is a space where she is evaluated by her competence rather than her appearance. This shift dismisses the symbolic structure. This economic transformation is stated by Pierre Bourdieu as, "academic qualification is a certificate of cultural competence" (248). Anupama's eventual transformation as a professor earns her self-confidence. She starts moving from being silenced within marriage to becoming an economically independent woman. When Anand reappears, he sees a confident woman rather than an abandoned wife. Once, Anupama experiences lots of struggles in a patriarchal society where she had no other way to go except to her in-laws. But after she becomes a professor, she is able to carry out her own life. Anupama's professional life gives her better status in society. Her refusal to reconcile with her own husband shows her final stage of resistance. Only economic independence eliminates her dependence on anyone.

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* describes how intersecting forces of familial authority and social violence regulate women's lives. From Anupama's marginalisation in a patriarchal society to an economically independent woman, the novel clearly exposes how authority is dominated by the family not only in an emotional way but also in economic control. According to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of structural violence, Anupama's struggle is internalised, which results in abandonment and social shame in a patriarchal discipline. However, her education and professional status mark the transformation of resilience. This novel clearly defines that identity is not a socially constructed category but a reconstruction of selfhood. Murthy exposes cultural codes which are less important than a woman's worth. By highlighting resistance through education and self-respect, *Mahashweta* propounds that empowerment lies in reclaiming one's own identity from structures that always want us to be silenced and stigmatised. Johan Galtung conceptualises that structural violence is an institutional denial, while her disgrace is attached to

her body, reflecting Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence; their domination is internalised and naturalised.

Thus, *Mahashweta* is a powerful feminist intervention that emphasises psychological resistance as the most powerful response to questions of the invisible violence of the patriarchal society as well as the family, where women are bound by cultural code. The novel exposes how a women's identity is structured and their choices are regulated by familial authority and social violence. Here, we come to know that women's worth is measured by their physical appearance and their marital status. The initial stage of Anupama's journey is crucial. At this stage, Anupama is psychologically wounded by the actions of society as well as her own family. She believes that the cause of her suffering is herself. This suffering makes her feel ashamed, and her psychological damage happens within her own thoughts. She starts seeing herself from the perspective of society. Murthy asserts: "One's beauty is seen in one's nature. A good human being who is compassionate to others, who tries to understand the other person's difficulties and reaches out to them in their hour of need has real beauty. Such people should always be cherished and honoured." (134).

However, slowly Anupama changes her way of thinking from believing herself to be a burden to rebuilding her own confidence. This is where psychological resistance is essential. Anupama wants to continue her education because education is the only way to gain her inner strength and make her feel independent. Here, in the novel, psychological resistance is not about loud protest against violence but about the way she enhances her courage. Anupama does not want to fight with her husband or family; rather, she changes her life and values her dignity. Her refusal to reunite with her husband shows her strong psychological resistance.

Through Anupama's transformation, the novel illustrates that true empowerment begins from the thoughts of a woman. Our social system tries to control women in the name of culture and tradition, but

when a woman changes her way of thinking and approaches society with courage, those systems completely lose their control. Psychological resistance moves her from self-doubt to self-confidence. This paper teaches that liberation is not about changing society, but about changing the self-perception. Through Anupama's journey, we come to know that when a woman refuses to accept the imposed limits from society and rebuilds her identity through her education, she achieves real freedom.

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