

Resilient Journeys: Feminist Insights into Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*

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Abstract- Indian English novels offer a profound and panoramic portrayal of human existence, meticulously capturing the intricacies of life. Certain novels shed light on the struggles of women in India to establish their individual identities, navigate emotional turmoil, and reclaim their status within society. Many Indian novelists portray the actual picture of Indian Society and the real state of women and how a woman is the subject of domestic oppression, suffering and how she struggles to create her own existence. This paper aims to examine and analyze Sudha Murty's novel *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* from a feminist lens. The institutions of marriage and family, essential for any community, currently face unique challenges. The article examines the struggles of Indian women facing the oppressive structure of a traditional society. Women across India strive to live with dignity, facing difficulties in employment, healthcare, and property rights. The paper will concentrate on major aspects of the women identity issues and patriarchal dominance in the society.

Keywords: Resistance, Crisis, Consciousness, Patriarchal, Struggle, Indian, Females, work, Subjugation.

1. Introduction

The social construct of marriage and family, which are essential to any community, are currently facing unique challenges because of many necessarily changes. Marital stress, which can lead to the breakdown of marriages, is a significant issue, particularly when one partner prioritizes work over their marital life [1-3]. This is especially common among men in India. The rapid revolutionary changes over the last fifty years have challenged conventional, moral, and religious norms in Indian society. Dominant ideologies, increased responsibilities, and changing lifestyles have further destabilized marital values [4,5]. The concept of stability in marriage is now questioned, as lifelong stability is often not achieved even after idealistic weddings [6]. Both major and minor stressors impact couples, particularly women in their roles as wives, affecting their social, financial, mental, and family lives. The present generation is more focused on individual growth, freedom, and privacy, rather than community-centric values.

Expectations from a spouse are now extremely high, encompassing economic, psychological, and emotional well-being. When self-actualization becomes unattainable, wives often experience profound despair. Although modern, educated women enjoy personal freedom, professional growth, and career development, their role within the family remains a topic of debate. Economic independence does not necessarily translate to influence within the family, as their earnings or career growth often do not empower them to play an active role [7]. Physical hardships without decision-making power create a void in the marital relationship, causing couples to drift apart and struggle to safeguard their marriage from negative effects. When adjustment is seen not as a mutual strategy but as a duty imposed on the wife, the relationship lacks comfort. The feminist movement in India has sought to define, establish, and defend women's rights, advocating dynamically for women's identity. Marital pressures, especially in the early years, are particularly taxing on women. Throughout their marriage, couples often face the challenging task of balancing family responsibilities [8]. Sharing daily activities can become difficult, leading to anger and conflict. This vulnerability can result in irreconcilable differences.

Sudha Murty's two novels examined in this study, *Mahasweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*, showcase the crises faced by protagonist couples, leading to separation either in the early stages of marriage (*Mahasweta*) or after many years of wedlock (*Gently Falls the Bakula*). Stressors in marriage can arise at any stage, and while many couples manage to overcome them, this is often due to the compromising or sacrificing nature cultivated among Indian women. Traditional gender roles in Indian society create significant disparities between males and females, and the institution of marriage reinforces these inequalities [9-12]. This paper focuses on gender inequalities in the distribution of authority within marriage. It highlights the marginalization of Indian wives in decision-making processes and suggests the need for an open-minded approach to empower wives and enhance their influence within the family. Furthermore, it emphasizes that there are pivotal moments in an individual's life when personal ideas, values, and knowledge shape their decision-making capacity and role within society, influenced by both self and societal conditioning.

Methodology:

The methodology employed in this paper involves a close reading and textual analysis of Sudha Murty's novels *Mahasweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*. It incorporates feminist literary criticism to examine the portrayal of female characters and their experiences within the narratives. It is analysed based on three aspects namely

Literary Analysis: The paper begins with a comprehensive overview of feminist literary theory, setting the framework for the analysis of the novels. It discusses key concepts such as patriarchy, gender roles, and feminist resistance, which are crucial for understanding the depiction of women in literature.

Character Study: The main focus is on the protagonists, Anupama and Shrimati. The paper examines their characterization, development, and agency throughout the novels. It explores how they negotiate their identities in relation to societal expectations, familial pressures, and personal aspirations.

Thematic Exploration: The paper identifies and analyzes key themes such as identity, empowerment, resilience, and societal norms. It discusses how these themes manifest in the lives of the female protagonists and contribute to their journeys of self-discovery and empowerment.

Evolving Portrayals of Women in Postcolonial Indian Fiction

This paper aims to develop a theory that addresses the empowerment of wives by reflecting on factors of change, applying this theory to the 'decisive moments' framework. It uses case studies of the protagonists Anupama and Srimati from Murthy's novels to highlight the transformative potential for empowering wives. Historically, women have not held significant roles in most Anglo-Indian novels. During the pre-Independence era in India, women had a different societal status. The portrayal of womanhood during this time was often stale and distorted - either exaggerated or neglected [5]. Women were considered burdens and, in literature, were often depicted as non-entities whose sole obligation was to fulfill their family's needs.

Post-Independence Indian writers have portrayed women in a variety of roles and shades.

The first group comprises women from an earlier generation who regard their husbands as their supreme authority, either by choice or circumstance. This second group comprises of women who courageously maintain their uniqueness and autonomy, even in the face of societal pressure, while still honoring their marital vows. They oppose the undesirable to pursue their own goals. The third generation includes women who are willing to leave their marriages as they struggle to find compatibility and experience challenges in their transition to marital life. These women often strive for personal autonomy and self-expression, even if it means violating the established patterns of existence [13,14]. Feminism in India seeks to address the socio-cultural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality, rather than pitting women against men. In the context of postcolonial India, English writers have spotlighted the struggles of females including their journey towards self-discovery, autonomy and empowerment, breaking away from traditional images, their relationships with men, and their aims and objectives.

In Sudha Murty's fiction, we witness the rise of a contemporary woman who harmoniously integrates timeless values with modern sensibilities, embodying the evolving needs and aspirations of the society. This new paradigm of womanhood seamlessly merges the wisdom of tradition with the dynamism of modernity, forging a unique identity that resonates with the complexities of our era. These women are depicted as advancing positively within society, empowered by their inner resilience, they unlock their true potential and find freedom in being their authentic selves.. Women of this group embody the third wave of feminine evolution, distinct

from the western paradigm of liberation. Women in India embrace a unique trajectory, reconciling personal empowerment with cultural heritage, and reframing traditional values to suit their contemporary needs. Rather than rejecting societal norms, they seek to redefine and enrich them, forging a distinctly Indian feminist identity. With their feminine insights, it empowers them to push boundaries in Indian English fiction, creating a rich and nuanced world that resonates with sensitivity and compassion. The female characters in post-colonial writing are aware of their identity and are works hard in a way of asserting one's entitlement. They are engaged in a constant struggle for equality with men. Despite long periods of camouflaging the distress and embracing the ethos and values being glorified in fictions of Indian writing, females persist in their struggle for equality and recognition.

Women are expected to perform various roles in life - such as mother, wife, sister, or daughter-but rarely are they seen as individuals separate from their familial roles [15]. In a male-dominated patriarchal society, they are often denied the freedom to discover their true selves and pursue their passions. The gradual emergence of women with new thoughts and ideas has led to a transformation in their image within the family and society. This paper explores how woman is always trapped in a web of cultural and religious orthodoxy as depicted in Sudha Murty's novel *Mahasweta*. The novel presents a classic and mythological narrative, focusing on the characters Anupama and Anand and their evolving relationship based on faithfulness. This work aims to contextualize Indian consciousness and provides a comprehensive examination of women's issues.

Exploring Women's Strength and Struggle in Sudha Murty's Novels

In the novel *Mahasweta*, Anupama is brought to light as a wonderful artist and excellent student with enriched knowledge of Hindustani classical music. Dr. Desai introduces her to Dr. Anand, highlighting her familiarity with Sanskrit novels by the grand scholar Bana Bhatta, which she has translated and dramatized. She takes up the important role in the play "Mahasweta," attracting Dr. Anand with her beauty and artistic talent [16]. Her performance leaves the audience spellbound, earning admiration from all, including a wealthy bridegroom interested in marrying her after seeing her play.

Gently Falls the Bakula delves into the life of Shrimati, a woman torn between personal aspirations and familial obligations. Murty portrays Shrimati's journey from a young, ambitious student to a supportive wife overshadowed by her husband's career success. The novel explores themes of sacrifice, identity, and the evolving dynamics of marital relationships in modern India. Shrimati's resilience is depicted through her quiet determination to pursue education and personal growth despite societal pressures to prioritize her husband's career. Murty's portrayal of Shrimati's internal conflicts and emotional struggles highlights the complexities of women's roles within traditional family structures [17]. Through feminist analysis, we examine how Shrimati's journey reflects broader themes of agency, autonomy, and the quest for self-actualization amid familial expectations.

After marriage, Anupama lives solely for her husband's love, neglecting her career. However, her mother-in-law, embodying traditional Indian sensibilities, is ruthless and authoritative. Anupama's life takes a tragic turn with the onset of vitiligo, making her a social outcast and leading to abandonment by mother-in-law and her irresponsible husband. Her visits to the dermatologist and her emotional turmoil, including a moment of contemplating suicide, highlight her suffering. Yet, an unseen power holds her back, prompting her to question why she should die for an uncaring husband. Sudha Murthy draws attention to the plight of patients with cosmetic diseases like leukoderma while portraying a woman's hidden courage and dignity in the face of adversity. Despite her efforts, Mridula discovers Sanjay's dishonesty and struggles to free herself from marital obligations, ultimately deciding to live independently.

This paper also investigates the selected novels from a standpoint of gender critical- viewpoint, uncovering the ways in which women are subjected to physical, emotional and psychological abuse. It examines male-female relationships, the quest for belonging and the pain of isolation in contemporary society, focusing on the characters Anand and Sanjay, who are driven by a desire for opulence and social ascension. Their greed for power and status proves costly for the central female figure, who realizes that the superficial standards and wealth-driven goals do not equate to personal fulfillment. The women tirelessly work to overcome societal barriers and lead purposeful lives.

The Impact of Women's Liberation on Sudha Murty's Perspective

The writer is aware that women have their own rights and desires, fighting against both women's timid nature and men's protective shell. Her novels depict women not as mere goddesses or automatons but as individuals who evolve from weakness to strength, transforming from uncertainty to confidence, and constraint to autonomy. A wide range of women personalities in her studies feel trapped in the so-called sacred bonds of marriage and resist being treated as mere furniture or doormats. They challenge traditional values and strive to establish a new order where they can be their true selves. Murty's nuanced portrayal of Anupama and Shrimati's journeys underscores the intersectionality of gender, class, and caste dynamics shaping women's lives. Through intersectional feminist analysis, we explore how these intersecting identities influence women's agency, resilience, and access to opportunities within patriarchal structures

Murty renders two archetypes of women: the conservative housewife and the liberated, fashion-forward woman". The former are timid, soft-spoken, and god-fearing with the exclusive interest on their husband's welfare. Resistance in her novels ranges from rebelliousness and aggressive behavior to organized collective movements against domination. Her narratives radiate an aura of inner freedom and a newfound consciousness. Through their journeys, Murty's female characters confront and overcome their insecurities, solitude, apprehensions, and emotional susceptibility, emerging stronger and more empowered.

Conclusion

Worldwide, females face unrelenting violence, discrimination, marginalization, and economic hardships, despite their vital contributions to society. The journey to claim their legitimate position in life is ongoing, hindered by systematic obstacles to their fundamental rights and empowerment. This study showcased the strength and resilience of a vibrant women's movement, where women are empowered to challenge patriarchal norms, tackle the root causes of inequality, and claim their full range of rights. Empowerment builds capacity through key concepts: choices, control, and power. The two novels by Sudha Murty- *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*- illustrate how the pain experienced by the protagonists, Anupama and Shrimati, transforms their journeys towards empowerment. Their stories reflect the strength and resilience needed to overcome adversity and establish their identities. The metaphor of acquiring skills, similar to the chopping and scissoring techniques used by the famous Portuguese football player Cristiano Ronaldo, highlights their ability to fight back against wrongdoings. This is portrayed as 'Naari Shakti' (Women Empowerment), showcasing the empowerment of both Anupama and Shrimati. By examining Anupama and Shrimati's journeys through a feminist lens, this paper highlights the enduring relevance of Sudha Murty's novels in contemporary discourse on women's rights and empowerment. Through their resilience and agency, Anupama and Shrimati emerge as symbols of strength and determination, inspiring readers to envision a more inclusive and equitable society.

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