



Defying Societal Expectations: A Study Through Sudha Murthy's Female Characters

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper explores Sudha Murthy's female characters' resistance in light of their actions, behavior, and decisions. It highlights how her female protagonist celebrates resilience, courage, and determination against societal constraints. The paper aims to discover how Murthy highlights female characters who break collective expectations by their determination of power and overcoming restrictions with their individual preferences. The purpose of the study is to describe how her female characters reject male domination, domestic violence, injustice, oppression, and traditional norms constructed by the patriarchal system. Further, the study will analyze how her characters' rebellious nature helps them finally find their existence and self-identity.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Oppression, Traditional Norms, Violence.

Introduction:

Since ancient times, India has had a patriarchal system, which means all the social, political, and economic power enjoyed by males. Women are always considered homemakers and seen as inferior beings, obedient daughters, and silent wives. Women are only assumed to be bound by social responsibilities and family duties—these circumstances create significant differences between the power and status of men and women. This kind of discrimination in society is responsible for a woman's self-sacrificing image. It affects her social achievements and confidence. As Justice Bhatt Says, "It perhaps needs no elaboration that Indian society is deeply patriarchal culturally and economically, severely affecting the condition of working women." (Hindustan Times)

Literature is the reflection of society and opens the window for human knowledge. The purpose of literature is not only to entertain or aesthetic but also to reflect on everyday social, political, and cultural issues. Over time, many Indian writers have started to highlight female concerns in their writings. Many female novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Geeta Hariharan, Anita Nair, Kamala Markandaya, and Manju Kapoor explore women's issues and define how they survive or fight for their social rights in a patriarchal society. Kamala Markandaya, in her book *The Nectar in the Sieve*, through Rukmani, presents the picture of a woman who is struggling in domestic life and loses her existence in the hope of pleasing her husband, same as the character of Maya in the whole narrative of *Cry the Peacock*, questioning on the Patriarchal system where women face trauma and agony in her entire life. These kinds of problems motivate women writers to revolt against women's objectification and victimization. Now, they follow the resistance mode of writing and deny the male's superiority and cultural patriarchal beliefs through their works. Whereas Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists are the epitome of self-awareness and self-love, Manju Kapoor's women are fearless and raising their voices against social practices. No doubt, Shoba Day portrays courageous women who are ready to stand for their freedom and aspirations in all her works. Now, writers have started to depict their female characters as heroes. As N. D. R Chandra points out,

Women writers have been echoing the feeling of marginality and expressing their revolt against a purely masculine world. One of the major concerns of contemporary literature all over the world has been to highlight the plight of women, their increasing problems, their physical, financial, and emotional exploitation, and their mental anguish in the male-dominated society in every sphere of life.

Sudha Murthy is one of the most prolific writers of modern times in Indian English Writings. She is one of the contemporary writers discussing women's social reformation and regeneration through her works. In her writings, she portrays the image of innocent women who lose their identity due to societal stigma and traditional norms. Her works emphasize the pain and suffering of women in male-controlled culture. She not only presents the actual domestic condition of women but also provides them wings to fly so they can achieve their dreams and objectives of life. Her writings give females a new independent face and break all barriers of stereotypes, social practices, cultural taboos, and traditional discrimination. Her characters reflect female power, women's empowerment, and, collectively, women's liberation. As Dr. Chandel Arti states, Her female protagonists are mostly well educated, which helps them to think independently, for which their family and society become intolerant. They struggle between tradition and modernity. Their struggle with family and society is through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity as a qualified woman with faultless backgrounds.

Mahasweta is a captivating novel by Sudha Murthy that tells the story of a girl named Anupama, who faces the burden of societal expectations and finally decides to embark on the journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The tale offers hope and solace for those social prejudices currently grabbing society. Anupama is a gorgeous and educated girl. She falls in love with a boy named Ananda. However, her suffering starts when she gets married to Anand because the treatment of her leprosy is very severe and inhumane towards her. Anupama's life changes when she finds a white patch on her foot, which finally converts into Leukoderma. When Radhakka, her mother-in-law, came to know about Anupama's condition, she started to treat her like an outsider. She refuses her entry into the kitchen and pooja room as the family persists, stating, "This is a nasty disease. She cannot perform any puja now. It must be the result of a sin from her previous life. (54) Anand also abandons her; as a husband, it is his duty to support his wife in her critical condition, but at the same time, Anand leaves an upama and ignores her letters. All these conditions shattered Anupama's dream of a happily married life. This situation shows the pathetic and infuriating condition of women in society. In the marriage, women do everything for their family's happiness but never find support and sympathy; for instance, Anupama's husband left her when she suffered from white patches, destitute of all marriage promises. She was forced to leave the house when she needed her family most.

However, Anupama resists against social norms and denies accepting societal stereotypes. She breaks rules which are attached to outer beauty. Leukoderma is a skin disease that is seen with evil eyes in Indian society. People linked the disease with victims' previous life's sins. Although, Anupama raises a question against this belief and accepts her body as it is. She focuses on her inner sense and breaks the norms of physical beauty. In the Indian patriarchal system, a woman is only considered a beautiful object and has a higher place in inner qualities. She uprising against social stigma and prejudice. Now, she realizes that Ananda is only attracted to her physical beauty. He married her because she was beautiful and had no deep feelings for her. Now, she decides that she does not want a connection with Anand. She rejects living in a restricted space in the name of matrimony or family. She explains to Anand when he wants to bring Anupama back, How can you possibly expect a burnt seed to grow into a tree? Husband, children, affection, love... they are all irrelevant to me now. It is too late for us. I am no longer the naïve Anupama whose world revolved around you. I know my goals and where I am heading, and I do not need anyone's help to reach my destination. (148) Further, the book discusses the traditional norm where education is considered beneficial only for men. As Anupama's mother says, "Let us not educate her further; it might become challenging for her to find a husband; besides, she will not support us. She has to marry and go to somebody else's house" (20). Her father also favors her ungrounded statement and suggests to Anupama that she would have to leave the theatre because, in Indian society, it is assumed to be bad for girls. When he says to Anupama, "Radhika will never allow her daughter-in-law to act. Imagine girls from decent families going on stage" (21). But Anupama resists this traditional argument. She rejects this prejudiced theory of education. She completed her education and became independent.

Further, Sudha Murthy is famously known for her well-constructed plot, *The House of Cards*. The narrative is about a young couple named Sanjay and Mirdula. The book shows that individuality is the foundation of every person. The book of the story centers on a young lady known as Mirdula, who is very good at studying and crafts. The book reflects how the community, in the name of norms and customs, bounds women. In the plot, all the female characters, like Mirdula, Anita, Ratnamma, and Laxmi, are searching for their place and identity in their way and struggle to find their inner self in the male society. Mirdula, deceived and neglected by her husband, shows the inner conflict by saying, "I can not believe that Sanjay has cheated me like this; I have lived with complete belief and trust in him ever since we married. How am I going to live with him for the rest of my life? I do not know what to do." (184)

Mirdula's whole life depends on her husband. She never thinks about her dreams or aspirations in life. She always shares Sanjay's responsibilities as a good wife and never tries to raise a voice against him. She follows him mindlessly and spends her whole life caring for her husband and child. But when Sanjay became a famous doctor, he started to avoid Mirdula. Now, she did not play an essential part in Sanjay's life. Even he cheats on her and prioritizes his family over her. After knowing all the conditions, Mirdula feels alone, which carries her toward depression. As the writer writes, "She felt like crying all the time and did not want to meet anyone. She stopped feeling hungry as well. She wanted to talk- but there was nobody to talk." (185)

In Indian traditional society, women who are divorced or separated from their husbands are often mistreated. But Mirdula decides to rebel against this belief. At this point, she feels that her life can exist without her husband. She denies the patriarchal norm that society will accept those males who cheat on their wives for their social and physical needs. She knows the value of trust in any relationship and decides to become separate from Sanjay rather than accept his deception, as she explains,

It is not about money. Money can be earned and lost. It is about the faith that a wife has in her husband. That's more valuable than money and gold. Faith sustains a marriage and brings joy to the family. Without it, we have nothing. How can Sanjay destroy the faith and trust I had in him? (186)

Her husband's infidelity shook her illusion of a perfect marriage. It forces her to confront the reality of the situation and realize that she deserves better. She recognizes her worth and refuses to settle for a relationship that lacks respect, honesty, and equality. She left the house of her husband. Now, she realizes she can live happily alone rather than with a husband who cheated on her. She chooses to move forward as a single woman, free from the constraints of a marriage that no longer aligns with her values. She left her husband's house by saying-

No, I have spent twenty-five of my most important years with you, yet I never felt I belonged to you and your family. I am still an outsider. Now, I want to live for myself. I have my job, my school, and my village. You don't have to worry about me any longer. (218)

In Brief, Mridula fights for her self-existence in society. She is rebellious in her thoughts and speaks up against traditional norms. No doubt, she tries to mold old customs and defiant ill behavior of society. Mirdula's defiance is not aggressive or confrontational, yet it is subtle and shows the power of self-determination.

Murthy's next book, *Gently Fall the Bhakula*, is the narrative of Shrimati, who has a lot of interest in history and wants to do a doctorate in history. She happily married her classmate Shrikant. She is the epitome of an Indian woman who sacrifices everything for her husband, decides to leave her ambition to pursue higher education, and starts a job to pay a loan, which Shrikant takes. She says, "When you are mine, your loan is also mine. It comes as a package. I can not say I want only my husband. His joys and difficulties are also acceptable to me." (77)

Even after making all these efforts, she cannot win the hearts of the Shrikant family. Her mother-in-law always misbehaves with her. She denied Shrimati to enter the kitchen by saying, "You have just married. You do not know our customs. So please don't bother about cooking. (70). She believes it is inappropriate for Shrimati to address her husband by name. As in many traditional households, addressing a husband by his born name is considered disrespectful and seen as going against societal norms. As Gangakka says hurtful things to Shrimati,

I don't understand your customs. You call Shrikant by his first name and that too in a short form. We believe that if you address your husband by his name, you shorten his lifespan. Your mother should have taught you all the manners. There is a saying, The quality of the saree depends on its thread, and the nature of a daughter depends on her mother. (70)

This act holds significant weight in the context of patriarchal or male-dominant societal norms. Shrimati's decision to use her husband's name highlights her individuality and refusal to conform to societal expectations. Her simple act of calling her husband by his name is a small but significant rebellion against the prevailing norms of society, and she directly challenges the hierarchical structure that is often bound in marriage. Here, she tries to establish a level of equality within their relationship without showing any submissiveness.

Societies have been structured around traditional gender roles that assign different roles to men and women. Whereas men were often seen as the breadwinners, women were primarily responsible for domestic duties, child-rearing, and nurturing. It is commonly believed that professional opportunities are more important for men than women. Shrimati's decision to pursue her career is an act of revolt against societal notions restricting women's aspirations. She rejects the idea that women are limited and incapable of achieving success. When She finds Shrikant has changed after being promoted to a higher position in the company, his success makes him self-centered. Eventually, he forgets the family and its happiness. As the writer says,

What had happened to Shrikant now? The love, affection, and sharing of ideas and dreams had disappeared. He hardly talked to her about the company or other business matters. He only spoke to her to assign a list of chores for her to do. For him, she had undergone so much opposition, criticism, and nastiness from her in-laws. She had even given up her career only because she loved him. But Shrikant was not the same person she knew before their marriage. The Shrikant Deshpande was only interested in name, fame, position, and status. (118)

After this, Shrimati decides to take a stand for herself. She has the strength and willpower to withstand social stigma and prioritize her ambition and dream upon dented relationships. She finally decided to shift to the U.S. to pursue her doctorate. She knows very well that society will not appreciate her step, but she left without even bothering about what people will think. She explains,

I can not live in this kind of atmosphere with these artificial values. I require to breathe fresh air. I do not want to live as your shadow. I want to find my happiness. Once upon a time, I loved you more than history.

But when you lost your finer sentiments, chasing your success in the business world, I was left with nothing but history. But now, I am also clear about my goal and all I want to achieve. (162)

Conclusion:

The research paper shows that Murthy's female characters reject pre-established societal norms. The study reveals how the patriarchal system set the boundaries for women, which is responsible for their lack of social and economic development. The research paper would help to discover that Murthy's female characters are robust and courageous against societal norms and try to find opportunities and equal status through their actions and life decisions. The paper explains how Murthy's heroine provides the message of women's empowerment and self-determination by questioning collective beliefs that restrict women's potential.

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