

Mahashwetha:

A Jouney from Objectification to Subjectification

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Abstract

The paper attempts to study the unique problems of Indian women, in the context of economic deprivation. Sudha Murthy, an active social activist, author of the novel *Mahashwetha* (2007) presents her central character Anupama, a slave of emotions, a victim of the Indian patriarchal society bound by customs and conditions. When Anupama is identified of leukoderma, she was deserted by her husband and her mother-in-law. She was mercilessly driven away from her mother in law's house. Though her father takes care of her, her step mother barbs her due to the poor life condition prevails in her father's home. When all her hopes end, she determines to rebuild her life without anybody's support, against all the oddities. Anupama's struggle represents the condition of many Indian women in similar context, thus the character is a metaphor of many women who struggle to live a meaningful independent life. Though many scholars have written research articles on problems of women, this paper is, unique hence it focuses on how a woman's beauty and body is commoditized in the marriage market, in India. In addition to the social relevance, to bring about the critical significance, Simon De Beauvoir's ideas from 'The Second Sex' also would be discussed in this article.

Key words: *patriarchal society, leukoderma and commoditized.*

1. Introduction

Padma Shri, Sudha Murthy is an active social worker and a feminist, writes in Kannada and English. She got her B.E. Degree and had been a chairperson of the Infosys Foundation for some time. She worked in different places of India. She actively participates in different social works like, health care camps, education and empowerment of women, public hygiene, art and culture and poverty all alleviation. She has set at least 50,000 libraries, built 10,000 public toilets, 2300 houses for the poor and needy. She has received 'Attimabbe Award' from the government of Karnataka and on the whole she is a recipient of 18 different awards for her social works.

Sudha Murthy has witnessed much of the problems pertaining to women in the society from her own experience in different places of India, so she established a trust and started doing social works, which proves that her writings, and creations of characters are not only imaginary but also they are the real life characters whom she might have met in her real times. In her novels namely, *Gently Falls Bakula*, *Dollar Bahu* and *The House of Cards*, she focuses the insensitive attitude of men towards women.

2. The outline story of the novel

The outline of the novel is given to make the reading of the article more comfortable and meaning making. Anupama, a poor middle-class girl's fairy tale marriage to Anand breaks apart, when her mother-in-law discovers, by chance, a white leukodermic patch on her foot. Abandoned by her uncaring, selfish, insensitive and irresponsible in-laws and husband, she is forced to return to her father's home in the village. The social stigma of a married woman living with her parents in India, her stepmother's continual barbs and the ostracism that accompanies her skin condition force her to contemplate suicide. At that moment, she realizes the value of her life, which is indeed an epiphanic moment in her life. Determined to rebuild her life against all odds, Anupama accepts the invitation from her friend to live in Bombay, undergoes a lot of hardships, at the end she is successful, reaches a respectable position, gains promise of an enduring friendship and rebuilds her life against all difficulties.

2.1 Ugly woman and Beautiful woman

Sudha Murthy very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical 'Ugly Indian woman' who was ruled by the patriarchal order as well women dominance whose wounded spirit remains helpless. She does not only present a victim through her novel, she concentrates on the rebuild of woman which proves the readers the real activist spirit in the author.

Around the world, from Cleopatra to actress Ishwarya Roy, beauty brings fortune in the lives of women. It means woman's beauty has an immense role in her social and personal life. Even in fairy tales, beautiful girls were liked by the Princes' and they become very prosperous and live a more contented life. On the otherhand the ugly looking or ordinary looking women, live poor lives. In the famous Tale of Cinderella when she was shabby looking nobody liked her, when she was beautiful she was liked by the Prince of the country. Similarly, Anupama gets surprisingly prosperous and happy married life when she was beautiful in the novel, and loses everything as she was affected by leukoderma. Mary Wollstonecraft an early feminist writes in *Frankenstein chapter 23*, "Nothing is as painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change." Thus, Anupama is shocked by the change of color of her skin which changes her life suddenly.

As a humanist, the novelist has profound concern for the women. She tries to tell the readers that women like Anupama should not be neglected for their loss of physical beauty. Women should be treated at least as a fellow human being. So,

she presents her heroine a fighting woman against all the unjust norms of the social order including a woman should be beautiful.

3. Simon De Beauvoir's Theory

Simon De Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex' theorises the role of the female body in social life of a woman. She says "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world" (Beauvoir 39). She further discusses that men considering themselves essential being or 'default', has treated woman as the unessential being or 'other'. She talks about the 'everlasting disappointment' of woman and concludes that men and women despite of their differences should affirm a mutual respect relationship. Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* says "I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves."

In the beginning of the novel, Anupama was presented by the author as a woman of beauty and attraction, she was presented as a module 'of Feminine' in this given critical category. The author presented her like a fairy girl, where things around Anupama were ideal and beautiful until her marriage with Anand. She was presented in a way where her beauty is focused more than the person in her. Anupama is objectified by Anand and his family members, as in Coventry Patmore's long poem 'Angel in the House'. The poem reads like this:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She cast her best, she flings herself

Similarly, at the first sight, Anand falls in love with her beauty, sweet voice and charms without any consideration for her character and inner heart. He shows a lot of interest in meeting her, talking to her and marries her irrespective of his mother's telling not to marry Anupama. 'Clad in a deep red sari, she reminded him of a beautiful rose' (12). Even her marriage is mentioned as a 'fairy tale' marriage by the author. 'Anupama feels as though she was in the midst of a fairy tale' (35). It means that the marriage is not a real-time marriage but it is dreamlike, above the reality.

A few months after the departure of Anand to London for his master degree in medicine, Anupama is expecting him to invite her to go to London soon. She was waiting for the visa and other formalities but to her shock, the white patches in her leg make her life dark. She was driven away from home by her in-laws when they find the white patches in her leg. She was eagerly expecting her husband to understand her and to be invited by Anand to live in London and that could be an escape from the present poor conditions of her life. She writes a series of letters to Anand but he did not reply to her. When Anupama understands that Anand has abandoned her, the life becomes miserable. Anupama lost her hopes in everything

and everyone. She is very critical about the silence of Anand and understands his irresponsible nature. Now she realises the role of leukoderma in her life. It gives her another understanding that she was loved and married by Anand only for the external charm.

3.1 Elaine Showalter's Theory

Elaine Showalter says, "women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature" (qtd. in Krishma Chaudhary).

When Anupama realises the irresponsible and body loving attitude of Anand, she breaks up in to pieces, tries to commit suicide but somehow, overcomes even the suicidal instinct. At that time, she receives a letter from one of her friends Sumithra. Sumithra invites her to Bombay and suggests her to take up a job there. Anupama makes use of this opportunity and goes to Bombay and take up a simple job. Here again her friend's husband tries to misuse her for his sexual pleasure. That the author tries to portray that the men do not want an ugly woman in their lives to marry and live but for sexual relationship anybody is consumable and any disease is okay for the majority of men. Overcoming the troubles caused by Hari, she finds a new job and new place to live. As the novel moves, she becomes more confident, takes up a decent job and earns well which makes her self-sufficed. She sends money to her father, even forgets about spreading of the patches in her body. She keeps a good friendship with the right spirited men, like Vasanth and Giri since she is matured in her understanding of men, she does not compare them with either Anand or Hari. At the end of the novel, she becomes a professor in a college; training and teaching art that actually wonder the readers.

4. Findings

The novelist takes her characters from object or 'Angel women' metaphor to subject or 'female' position. The author pictures how women are treated like an object or commodity; women are considered just the possession of men in the society. The men want to show off to their world that they have got a beautiful wife. In *The Dark Room* by R.K. Narayanan the hero Ramani takes pride in taking his beautiful wife to public places but treats very differently at home. So, it is an evident through the novel *Mahaswetha*, that men take pride in having a beautiful wife. Anupama symbolises, the trauma of any woman who is a victim in similar life condition, when a woman becomes an 'ugly woman', her life becomes miserable.

5. Conclusion

The paper proves that women are treated as an object of men's choice in India and the situation becomes worse when the women lose their beauty on various reasons. There are signs like Anupama who fights against the unjustifiable attitude of men and creates an independent life and become a successful woman.

Anupama's character is a prototype of many Indian women who are fighting and moving forward, towards a better life in spite of the hardships they encounter.

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