

**Societal Stigma and the Portrayal of Anupama as a Woman Protagonist in Sudha  
Murthy's *Mahashweta***

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**Abstract**

Sudha Murty is a renowned Indian woman novelist, philanthropist and chairperson of Infosys Foundation. There is representation of predicaments of women in the prominent literary works. Through her simple yet impactful storytelling, she has addressed important social issues, including gender equality, education and resilience. Her novels often highlight on the strengths of women in overcoming these hardships, making her one of the most influential contemporary woman writers in India. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama is portrayed as a bright and talented woman whose life is shattered after she develops leukoderma (vitiligo) after her marriage. Once admired for her beauty, she is suddenly rejected by her husband and shunned by society. The novel powerfully portrays how the worth of woman is often judged by her physical appearance, leading to discrimination and isolation. Instead of accepting defeat, Anupama chooses to redefine her life. The novel is poignantly depicting Anupama's struggles and transformations highlight on deep rooted societal stigma surrounding skin disorders. Through her journey, Murty critiques patriarchal mindsets and superficial beauty standards. Anupama's resilience and determination help her reclaim her dignity through education and self-reliance. Her character is a symbol of strength, challenging norms and proving that true worth lies beyond external appearances. *Mahashweta* presents a powerful message about self-empowerment and social change. This research paper primarily deals with identification of social stigma and the portrayal of woman protagonist.

**Keywords:** Social Stigma, Struggle, Gender Discrimination, Resilience, New Identity

**Introduction:**

Sudha Murty is a renowned Indian author, philanthropist, and social worker celebrated for her simple yet impactful storytelling. Writing in both English and Kannada, she addresses social issues, women's empowerment, and human values. As the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, Murty has made significant contributions to education, healthcare, and rural development in India.

Her novel *Mahashweta* tells a poignant story that highlights societal stigma—particularly surrounding leukoderma, a skin condition—and its profound impact on a woman's life. The narrative follows Anupama, a talented and beautiful woman whose life is dramatically altered when she is diagnosed with leukoderma. Rejected by her husband and ostracized by society, Anupama embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Through her story, Murty critiques deep-rooted prejudices and

advocates for inner strength, resilience, and self-respect.

### **Definition of Societal Stigma:**

Societal stigma involves negative perceptions, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors directed toward individuals or groups that deviate from established norms. In literature, stigma often emerges as a barrier to acceptance and self-worth—especially when associated with physical appearance, health conditions, or social status.

### **Relevance to the Novel's Themes:**

In *Mahashweta*, societal stigma is central to Anupama's experience. Her leukoderma becomes a metaphor for how society marginalizes those who are different. The novel critiques superficial judgments and cultural biases that strip individuals of their dignity and identity by equating physical imperfections with moral or personal shortcomings.

### **Research Problem:**

This paper examines the question: How does *Mahashweta* depict societal stigma through Anupama's journey? The study focuses on the interplay between societal prejudice and personal transformation, highlighting the ways in which Murty challenges traditional notions of beauty and worth through her protagonist.

### **Methodology:**

The analysis employs a combination of literary and thematic exploration. A primary reading of *Mahashweta* is supplemented by secondary sources—including scholarly articles and critical essays—to situate the narrative within broader socio-cultural and feminist discourses.

### **Thesis Statement:**

The paper argues that in *Mahashweta*, Sudha

Murty effectively uses Anupama's transformative journey to expose and critique the pervasive nature of societal stigma in contemporary India, demonstrating that personal resilience and self-empowerment serve as powerful counterforces to prejudice.

### **Societal Stigma in *Mahashweta*:**

Definition in the Context of Health, Gender, and Marriage

In Indian society, societal stigma manifests as negative labeling, discrimination, and marginalization of those who deviate from normative expectations.

- **Health:** Visible conditions like leukoderma mark individuals as different or inferior, often provoking unwarranted pity, fear, or rejection.
- **Gender:** Conventional beauty standards and expectations of delicacy subject women to harsh judgments if they deviate from these norms.
- **Marriage:** Social norms dictate that a partner should meet specific physical and social standards; any deviation, such as a noticeable skin condition, can result in ostracization and destabilize marital relationships.

### **Portrayal of Societal Discrimination:**

Murty employs Anupama's struggle with leukoderma as a powerful symbol of societal prejudice. The novel shows that individuals with visible skin conditions are marginalized not because of their inner qualities or talents but due to their deviation from idealized norms. This condition is intertwined with notions of beauty and purity, transforming a medical issue into a marker of social inferiority. The narrative exposes how society conflates physical imperfections with moral or personal shortcomings, thus curtailing social opportunities and eroding

self-worth.

### **Analysis of Character Reactions:**

Anupama's in-laws exemplify entrenched societal norms, responding with a mix of pity and disdain that underscores the conditional nature of familial acceptance based on adherence to external beauty standards.

Her husband, Anand, reflects internalized societal expectations through his inability to see beyond her physical appearance. His reaction illustrates how personal relationships are often shaped by cultural pressures that equate a partner's value with conformity to conventional norms.

The broader community's view of Anupama mirrors a collective bias, dismissing her inner qualities and reducing her to her physical traits. This widespread prejudice reinforces her isolation and emotional distress.

### **Anupama as a Woman Protagonist**

<b>Character</b>	<b>Development:</b>	<b>From</b>
<b>Vulnerability to Independence</b>		

Initially, Anupama is portrayed as vulnerable—overwhelmed by the stigma of leukoderma and the consequent rejection from both her marital home and society. However, her experiences of marginalization catalyze a profound transformation. Through introspection and self-discovery, she develops inner strength, reclaims her identity, and forges an independent path. This evolution from vulnerability to empowerment illustrates how personal adversity can be transformed into resilience and self-determination (Murty, 2007; Mitra, 2009).

### **Challenging Societal Norms**

Anupama's journey: directly challenges traditional societal norms that expect women to conform to rigid standards of beauty, submissiveness, and domesticity. In a context where a woman's worth is measured

by her physical appearance and marital status, Anupama's refusal to be defined solely by her condition or by patriarchal expectations is revolutionary. Her struggle and subsequent triumph serve as a critique of a society that marginalizes those who do not fit conventional molds, inviting a broader reconsideration of gender roles (Singh, 2010).

### **Comparison with Traditional Female Protagonists**

Historically, female protagonists in Indian literature have often been portrayed as passive, sacrificial figures whose identities are defined by their relationships with male characters—for example, Sita in the Ramayana or Draupadi in the Mahabharata. In contrast, Anupama in Mahashweta emerges as a modern feminist archetype. While she begins in a state of vulnerability akin to her traditional counterparts, her narrative trajectory diverges as she actively challenges societal norms and transcends imposed limitations. Her evolution into an autonomous, self-determined individual resonates with contemporary feminist discourses in Indian literature (Chandra, 1992; Dutta, 2014).

### **Feminist Perspective and Empowerment**

#### **Analyzing Transformation Through a Feminist Lens**

Anupama's journey is a powerful narrative of personal transformation that aligns with feminist ideals. Although initially defined by societal beauty standards and the stigma attached to her condition, she gradually challenges these norms through introspection and resilience. Her transformation—from internalizing societal judgments to actively reclaiming her identity—illustrates the feminist claim that a woman's value should derive from her inner strength and individuality rather than

external validation.

### Challenging Patriarchal Structures

Murty uses Anupama's experiences to confront and subvert the patriarchal framework that dominates Indian society. The negative reactions of male characters, particularly Anand, expose the societal pressure for women to conform to narrow definitions of beauty. By asserting her independence and defying these constraints, Anupama not only redefines her own identity but also challenges cultural narratives that enforce female subservience.

### Message on Self-Worth and Independence

At its core, Mahashweta advocates for the idea that true beauty and strength are intrinsic, not determined by physical appearance or societal approval. Anupama's journey demonstrates that self-acceptance and inner resilience are key to resisting external pressures. By embracing her individuality and rejecting imposed limitations, she redefines her value on her own terms—a message that calls for empowerment and celebrates self-determination as essential to overcoming stigma.

### Conclusion:

The analysis of Mahashweta reveals that societal stigma—rooted in prejudices related to health, gender, and marital expectations—plays a central role in shaping Anupama's

early struggles. Her leukoderma becomes a potent symbol of how external judgments and patriarchal norms marginalize women. Despite rejection from her in-laws and the indifference of her husband, Anupama's journey is marked by a transformative progression from vulnerability to empowerment. Her evolution underscores the idea that self-worth and inner resilience can transcend oppressive structures.

This narrative remains highly relevant in contemporary society. In a world where discrimination based on appearance and gender persists—in professional environments, media representations, and everyday interactions—the novel's themes resonate with ongoing debates about body positivity, feminist agency, and social justice. Anupama's story challenges societal norms and highlights literature's capacity to inspire both personal and cultural change.

Future research could expand on this analysis by comparing Mahashweta with other literary works from diverse cultural contexts to examine how stigma is depicted across different societies. Additionally, further exploration into the interplay between health-related stigma and gender in modern narratives may offer valuable insights into current social challenges. Investigating the influence of digital media on traditional gender norms through literature could also broaden our understanding of art's role in social transformation.

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