

From Sacrifice to Self-Discovery: The Transformation of a Woman in Sudha Murthy's Mahashweta

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120800233>

Received: 08 Aug 2025; Accepted: 01 Sept 2025; Published: 26 September 2025

ABSTRACT

Sudha Murthy's novel *Mahashweta* explores the protagonist's journey from self-sacrifice to self-discovery, highlighting the societal issues and gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society. Sudha Murthy addresses the challenges faced by women, such as arranged marriages, neglect from in-laws, unsupportive husbands and social stigmas. Through the protagonist's transformation, the novel portrays the resilience and strength of women, emphasizing their ability to overcome adversity and achieve self-reliance. The protagonist's story serves as a powerful representation of the unheard voices of many women, breaking the age-old belief that women are only capable of domestic roles. Her journey from dependency to independence underscores the importance of inner strength and the potential for women to thrive despite societal constraints.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Self-Discovery, Empowerment, Patriarchal Society, Resilience

Indian literature in English has earned a special place in the hearts of readers around the world. Many authors have vividly portrayed India through a wide range of themes and issues in their works. Among these writers, Sudha Murthy stands out for her extensive contributions in both Kannada and English. As a visionary, she has tackled numerous topics related to women's experiences and sensibilities.

One of her most notable works, *Mahashweta*, tells the story of Anupama, a protagonist who faces numerous challenges in life. Despite the hardships she endures, Sudha Murthy celebrates the essence of womanhood by depicting Anupama's courageous battle against adversity. Through her journey, Anupama ultimately emerges as a strong, self-reliant individual, embodying the resilience and strength inherent in women. This narrative not only highlights the struggles but also the triumphs of women, making it a powerful and inspiring read.

In her straightforward narrative, Sudha Murthy effectively explores the theme of true love essential for the enduring bond of marriage. Anupama's life initially appears idyllic and dreamlike as she marries Dr. Anand in a fairy-tale wedding. However, her world shatters when she discovers a small white patch on her skin, leading her family to believe she has the incurable disease leukoderma. This revelation results in Anupama facing unjust treatment from both her in-laws and her husband, Anand. The once cherished and memorable wedding moments quickly turn into a harrowing nightmare. The neglect and lack of support from her own family members become a deeply painful and jarring experience for Anupama. Abandoned by her indifferent in-laws and insensitive husband, she is compelled to return to her father's home in the village. The social stigma of a married woman living with her parents, combined with her stepmother's constant taunts and the ostracism associated with her skin condition, drives Anupama to the brink of suicide.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, Anupama's inner strength prevails and she emerges as a new woman determined to live her own dreams. She defies age-old restrictions and societal norms to become successful and self-reliant. Anupama's journey takes her to Bombay, where she receives widespread appreciation for her work and forms meaningful friendships with people who value her inner beauty over her external appearance. Through her resilience and courage, Anupama embodies the true essence of womanhood, proving that she can overcome adversity and thrive independently.

Sudha Murthy highlights the strength of women by addressing several issues that persist in Indian society, such as arranged marriages, neglect from in-laws, unsupportive husbands, stepmother's animosity, social

stigma surrounding married women and misconceptions about leukoderma being hereditary and infectious. Through her writing, Murthy demonstrates that Indian women possess the resilience to endure and overcome these challenges, as exemplified by Anupama's journey.

Sudha Murthy emphasizes how marriage can sometimes bring pain and loss to women, despite their dedication and loyalty to their husbands. Anupama, for instance, has devoted herself entirely to her husband, as illustrated by her words, "Like Rohini to Chandra and Lakshmi to Narayana, am I to him. Just as the creeper depends on a tree, I depend on him" (Murthy 151). She faithfully upholds the vows she made during her marriage to Anand, promising to stand by him in any situation, regardless of societal judgment. Anupama is even willing to sacrifice anything for her husband's happiness, as her love is profound and unwavering. In stark contrast, Anand offers her nothing in return, not even basic sympathy for her struggles, revealing that his love is superficial and shallow.

Anupama's emotional turmoil due to the lack of support is evident when she extends her best wishes to her friend who is about to get married. She says,

"Let your husband be a man who will only shower happiness and love on you. It is better to have an understanding husband than one who is merely handsome and wealthy. Marriage is a Gamble. The result cannot be predicted beforehand. Finding the right match is a matter of chance. I was unlucky in this. May you be more fortunate" (Murthy 65).

This moment highlights Anupama's deep sense of isolation and longing for the support she never received, contrasting sharply with her hopes for her friend's future.

At first, Anupama finds it extremely difficult to cope with her abandoned life. She is constantly plagued by worries about her future, wondering where she will go, who she will live with and what will become of her. At times, she feels as though her life is completely ruined and she is left with nothing and nowhere to turn. These overwhelming feelings even lead her to contemplate suicide. According to Murthy, these negative thoughts stem from the harsh treatment Anupama receives from her own family members, who embody the rigid and orthodox values of Indian society that are often imposed on women.

Anupama's return to her father's home becomes a source of constant ostracism, while Anand's selfish behaviour towards his own wife goes unquestioned. This stark contrast highlights the deep-seated gender biases and double standards that exist within the society. Anupama's struggle is not just with her illness but also with the societal norms that dictate her worth and place in the world. Despite these challenges, her journey is one of resilience and strength, as she ultimately finds a way to rise above the adversity and reclaim her life.

Anand was a Doctor; he knew more about the 'disease' than most people. Then why was he behaving in such a manner? What would he have done if his mother or sister had fallen prey to the affliction? Would he have deserted them as he had her? He would probably have sympathized with them and taken care of them, but when it was his own wife, the woman he claimed to love, he had abandoned her. The rules were different ...and society would not question his behaviour (Murthy 75).

As a perceptive and empathetic writer, Sudha Murthy has conveyed her discontent with the gender discrimination that persists in Indian society, where women often bear the brunt of marriage and familial responsibilities. Women are frequently treated as if they are unintelligent, submissive and of little value, taken for granted in all aspects of life. To challenge these entrenched norms, Murthy has crafted her protagonist, Anupama, in Mahashweta with a fresh and positive perspective, depicting her as an enlightened and empowered woman.

By the end of the novel, Anupama is portrayed as a woman who no longer requires anyone's sympathy to live and thrive. There was a time when she believed she could not exist without her husband's support, but the same Anupama eventually flourishes in the bustling city of Bombay, earning widespread admiration for her stage performances. This transformation highlights her journey from dependency to self-reliance, showcasing her

resilience and strength in overcoming societal expectations and prejudices. Her courage is revealed when she questions:

Was it my fault that I got this white patch? Is it my fault that I am a poor man's daughter? Now that you are here, answer me. You knew that I did not have this before our marriage. You could have told your mother...They wanted an excuse to get rid of me and your silence provided them with the perfect cover. A marriage is a lifelong commitment; for better or worse, till death do us part. Wasn't that what you'd said to me before you left for England? ...

How can you possibly expect a burnt seed to grow into a tree? Husband, children, affection, love ...all are 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 are and where I am heading and I don't need anyone's help to reach my destination (Murthy 134)

These words illuminate Anupama's transformation from self-sacrifice to self-discovery. We witness the rise of a new woman who values her identity and challenges the tyranny and double standards of a patriarchal society.

Sudha Murthy has crafted Anupama's character to represent the many voices that have long been silenced. Anupama's liberation symbolizes the emancipation of countless women who have felt like caged birds. Her emergence as a powerful individual shatters the age-old belief that women are only capable of bearing children and managing household affairs. Instead, Anupama's decision to become self-reliant demonstrates that women are not helpless or dependent. They are equal to men, if not superior in many ways.

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