



# Symbolic Violence and the Domestic Interior: A Critical Study of Social Excommunication in Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta*

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## Abstract

The contemporary Indian novel serves as a vital record of the shifting parameters of feminine identity, a theme meticulously explored in Sudha Murty's *Mahashweta*. This research interrogates the fragile intersection of intellectual agency and patriarchal aesthetic mandates, focusing on the protagonist Anupama's descent into social ignominy following the onset of leukoderma. By examining the collapse of her marital bond, the study exposes the "transactional" nature of traditional domesticity, where a woman's existential value is often tethered to her perceived physical "purity" rather than her scholarly achievements. Through a theoretical lens focusing on social stigma and ontological resilience, the paper analyzes Anupama's transition from a victim of symbolic violence to a vanguard of the "New Woman". Ultimately, the study posits that Anupama's reclamation of her identity through Sanskrit pedagogy and her categorical rejection of a dehumanizing marital contract represent a radical rupture in the patriarchal script, advocating for a model of fulfillment grounded in economic independence and psychological sovereignty.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

Socio-Aesthetic Marginalization, Post-Modern Feminism, Symbolic Violence, Ontological Resilience, Domestic Devaluation

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of contemporary Indian English fiction has undergone a radical

transformation, increasingly centering on the ontological concerns of the female subject, including the nuanced reconstruction of identity, the shifting dynamics of marital hierarchies and the articulation of suppressed professional and personal volitions. By departing from traditionalist tropes, these writers have synthesized distinct ideological frameworks that prioritize the subjective requirements and socio-political grievances of women, thereby securing a foundational and idiosyncratic position within the global literary canon. This prolific output frequently interrogates the intersections of indigenous culture, metaphysical conviction and nationalistic sentiment, yet it is the intervention of female novelists that has most significantly elevated the intellectual and aesthetic rigor of the Indian novel. Influenced by evolving feminist discourses, these authors meticulously document the systemic obstructions and gendered vulnerabilities inherent in the social fabric. Figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Anita Nair, Sudha Murty and Shoba De have emerged as pivotal voices of dissent, challenging historical inequities and the institutionalized marginalization of women. Their collective scholarship utilizes feminine sensibility as an analytical tool to excavate individual agency from the bedrock of conventionality, ultimately portraying the modern woman as a figure defined by heightened assertiveness, psychological autonomy and a bold reclamation of her own narrative voice.

## **2. The Domestic of Disruption: From Patriarchal Subjugation to Radical Subjectivity**

The evolution of the Indian novel in English represents a sophisticated expansion in both aesthetic maturity and thematic breadth, establishing itself as a cornerstone of global literary history. Throughout the twentieth century, the narrative scope has broadened to encompass a heterogeneous array of concerns, ranging from the intricacies of industrial and political shifts to the nuanced explorations of physiological and gendered experiences. However, a significant contemporary preoccupation involves the encroachment of macroeconomic forces upon the private lives of male subjects, fundamentally altering the traditional domestic landscape. Whereas the home was historically idealized as a sanctuary of communal harmony, filial devotion and collective honor, it has increasingly been transformed into a site of fractured intimacy. In this modern context, the domestic sphere often becomes a theater for the fulfillment of superficial desires, inevitably precipitating a cycle of cognitive dissonance, systemic suppression and interpersonal hostility. This transition mirrors the ‘disembedded’ social relations described by Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity*, where the stability of “traditional localized bonds is undermined by the abstract, transactional pressures of a globalized economic state” [1].

Central to the thematic architecture of these works is the persistent interrogation of patriarchal hegemony, analyzed through the specific lens of the characters’ material and financial constraints. Authors are increasingly focused on the psychological trajectory of the female protagonist, charting her departure from the

“idealized” domestic martyr toward a more complex, assertive and even self-centrally oriented subjecthood. This metamorphosis signifies a radical reclamation of individuality, where the woman prioritizes her own ontological discovery over the historical mandates of self-sacrifice. As Toril Moi argues in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, “the move toward female self-definition requires a dismantling of the patriarchal unified subject to allow for a more expressive, assertive identity that challenges established social hierarchies” [2]. Consequently, the modern Indian novel serves as a critical record of this transition, portraying women who are no longer content with the silence of the domestic interior but are actively negotiating their autonomy within a rapidly shifting cultural and economic landscape.

### 3. The Phallogentric Domesticity: Victimization and the Scholarly Subject in *Mahashweta*

Sudha Murty stands as a preeminent figure in the contemporary literary canon, recognized for her incisive and realistic portrayals of the multifaceted obstacles encountered by middle-class Indian women within a phallogentric social order. Her narratives serve as an ethnographic map of the female experience, meticulously documenting the intersection of social, political and medical challenges that define the domestic interior. Sudha Murty’s novel is primarily concerned with the excavation of the feminine psyche, articulating the suppressed goals, anxieties and disillusionments of women who are often marginalized by both the legal system and traditional customs. Key thematic pillars in her oeuvre include the corrosive impact of victimization, the destabilization of identity through marriage and the intrusive influence of globalization on the traditional familial collective. In her celebrated novel *Mahashweta*, Sudha Murty interrogates the systemic abuse embedded within the kinship structure, particularly focusing on the hostile environment created by the in-laws. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”,

The gendered subject is often silenced by a “double displacement”, trapped between the remnants of traditional patriarchy and the emerging structures of modernity, leaving her without a vocabulary to articulate her suffering within the domestic sphere [3].

This research paper specifically analyzes the precarious position of the educated, intellectually refined woman within the marital contract, examining the dynamics of submission mandated by her spouse and maternal figures, including the mother-in-law and stepmother. Through the protagonist, Anupama, Sudha Murty illustrates the profound psychological and physical taxation imposed by a rigid and controlling social aristocracy. Despite her intellectual pedigree, Anupama is forced into a state of emotional concealment, acting as a vessel for the silent endurance of domestic violence and systemic neglect. Her trajectory exemplifies the tragic paradox of the “learned woman” who, while possessing the tools of intellectual agency, remains structurally disempowered by an aristocratic lineage that prizes lineage and aesthetic purity over individual humanity. This portrayal aligns

with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" in *Masculine Domination*, where the submissive state of the woman is not merely maintained through physical force, but through the "internalized social norms that compel her to accept her own marginalization as an inevitable facet of her cultural identity" [4]. Ultimately, *Mahashweta* serves as a scathing indictment of the domestic space as a site of trauma, highlighting the resilience required for an enlightened subject to survive the dehumanizing gaze of an elitist patriarchy.

#### 4. The Aesthetics of Betrayal: Intellectual Prowess and the Leukodermal Subaltern in *Mahashweta*

The narrative of *Mahashweta* centers on the systematic devaluation of Anupama, a Sanskrit scholar whose intellectual sophistication and artistic agency are eventually eclipsed by the socio-cultural stigmatization of her physical form. Anupama's identity is anchored in classical erudition; she is a scholar of the works of Bana Bhatta and a practitioner of Sanskrit drama, which she has translated, directed and performed. It is through her performance in the titular play, *Mahashweta*, that she encounters Dr. Anand, a man of significant material and social standing. Their union is initially presented as a departure from the domestic trauma of her childhood, a period defined by the neglect of a contemptuous stepmother, Sabakka and the mistreatment of her stepsisters. However, the marriage reveals itself to be a fragile construct predicated entirely on Anand's superficial appreciation of her aesthetic "purity." This dynamic illustrates what Naomi Wolf explores in *The Beauty Myth*, where "the cultural obsession with female physical perfection serves as a mechanism of social control, ensuring that even the most intellectually accomplished woman remains vulnerable to the shifting perceptions of her visual currency" [5]. For Anupama, the transition from a scholar to a marital object is a precarious one, as her husband's affection is revealed to be a commodity traded for her outward beauty rather than a recognition of her intrinsic self-worth.

The structural violence of the narrative intensifies with the onset of Anupama's leukoderma, a condition that functions as a catalyst for her total social and domestic excommunication. This medical shift acts as a test of moral fortitude that her affluent, authoritarian in-laws, led by the protective Radhakka and her husband, Anand, utterly fail. The leukoderma does not merely alter her skin; it destroys the transactional value she held within the aristocratic gaze of Anand's family, leading to a sequence of betrayals and isolation. Sudha Murty utilizes this aesthetic crisis to underscore the "symbolic annihilation" of women whose bodies fail to meet the rigid standards of patriarchal desirability. As Susan Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, certain conditions are culturally imbued with a sense of moral or aesthetic failure, transforming the patient into an "other" who is "subsequently alienated from the healthy community" [6]. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's suffering is exacerbated by the realization that her education and sincerity were insufficient to safeguard her against a society that prioritizes the "mask" of beauty over the substance of the individual. Ultimately, her journey becomes one of painful self-liberation, where she must navigate the wreckage of her marriage to reclaim a sense

of dignity that is independent of both her physical appearance and the oppressive approval of a status-driven elite.

### **5. The Rupture of Domesticity: Vitiligo and the Emergence of the Post-Modern Subject**

Upon entering the marital contract, Anupama's existential focus shifted toward the domestic sphere, where she encountered the formidable and autocratic traditionalism of a mother-in-law whose temperament epitomized the rigid hierarchies of the conventional Indian household. The arrival of vitiligo, manifesting as white patches on her skin, acted as a devastating fracture in her reality, dissolving her optimistic worldview and transforming her into a pariah within her own home. This dermatological shift catalyzed a harrowing descent into social ignominy, exacerbated by the pathological indifference of her spouse and the cruelty of her in-laws. Her clinical visits and internalized trauma culminated in a moment of acute despair atop a cliff, a literal and figurative "peak" of her suffering. While the impulse toward self-destruction was momentary, it was checked by an instinctive drive for survival. This state of social death following a physical imperfection reflects Erving Goffman's theories in *Stigma*, where the individual with a 'spoiled identity' is disqualified from full social acceptance, "forced to navigate a world that views their physical attribute as a profound moral and aesthetic deficit" [7].

Departing from the archetype of the submissive Indian woman who perpetually seeks reconciliation at the cost of her dignity, Anupama exhibits a radical, post-modern agency. She consciously rejects the performative pleas for re-admittance into a hostile domesticity, choosing instead to sever her ties with the household that sought to marginalize her. By refusing to suppress her ego in the face of systemic prejudice and societal shame, she prioritizes the preservation of her personal honor over the maintenance of a fractured and abusive marriage. This transition from a passive victim to an assertive agent illustrates what Homi Bhabha identifies as "the moment of transit", where the subject moves beyond prescribed cultural roles to occupy a space of "self-defined resistance" [8]. Anupama's refusal to 'turn around' signifies a definitive break from the patriarchal scripts of endurance, establishing her as a figure who reclaims her autonomy by choosing the uncertainty of independence over the security of a dehumanizing tradition.

Anupama went to her room, collected the few things that belonged to her, picked up one of Anand's photographs and returned where Shamanna waited for her. She took his hand in hers and silently clutching her bag, walked out of the house. She knew in her heart that this was the last time she would be seeing the house or its people...but she did not look back even once [9].

### **6. The Ethics of Altruism and the Rejection of Marital Captivity**

Within the domestic sphere of her paternal home, Anupama is subjected to a relentless barrage of vitriol from her stepmother, Sabakka, who instrumentalizes

Anupama's leukoderma as a scapegoat for the matrimonial stagnation of her step-sisters. This systemic scapegoating, coupled with the deafening silence of her husband, Anand, who willfully ignores her correspondence despite cognizing her plight, precipitates a profound ontological crisis. The realization that both her marital and biological kin have abdicated their protective roles drives her toward the precipice of self-destruction. However, in a remarkable display of ethical transcendence, Anupama's eventual autonomy is not defined by reactionary malice. Despite the historical trauma inflicted by Sabakka, Anupama assumes the role of the financial provider following her father's demise, facilitating the very marriages for which she was previously blamed. This altruism represents a "superiority of the victim", a concept explored by Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, where "the individual retains the spiritual freedom to choose their attitude toward a fate they cannot change, thereby transforming personal tragedy into a triumph of human dignity" [10].

Anupama's definitive break from the patriarchal institution of marriage is solidified by her refusal to entertain Anand's belated and instrumental attempts at reconciliation. She consciously rejects the notion of being held prisoner in the name of matrimony, viewing the traditional emphasis on procreation and domestic duty as a mechanism of continued subjugation. Even the well-intentioned interventions of figures like Dr. Vasant are rebuffed, as she identifies that re-entry into the family unit would necessitate a compromise with the very prejudices that initially catalyzed her excommunication. Her trajectory signifies a transition from a state of unfreedom to a radical self-ownership that bypasses the need for marital validation. As Simone de Beauvoir asserts in *The Second Sex*, "the liberation of the woman is only achievable when she refuses to be defined solely by her relations to men and instead asserts her existence through her own creative and intellectual projects" [11]. Anupama's refusal to re-engage with a family defined by superficial aesthetics marks her emergence as a truly autonomous subject who prioritizes her psychological integrity over social conformity.

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 revolves around you. I know what my goals are and where I am heading and I don't need anyone's help to reach my destination.

## 7. The Ontological Shift: Pedagogy and the Reclamation of the Post-Modern Self

By choosing to abstain from the institutionalized framework of marriage, Anupama orchestrates a profound internal evolution, manifesting the emergence of a "New Woman" who operates outside the traditional binaries of domestic dependence. Her trajectory serves as a definitive demonstration of feminine self-sufficiency, illustrating that a woman's existential validity is not contingent upon masculine validation or protection. Sudha Murty utilizes Anupama's journey to highlight how

the synthesis of intellectual capital and psychological resilience allows women to navigate systemic adversity and construct meaningful, self-directed lives. In the final analysis, Anupama's transformation into a vanguard of the 'new age' is fueled by a tenacity that refuses to be diminished by social excommunication. This shift reflects what Bell Hooks describes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, where "the move from a marginalized domestic position to a self-defined "center" requires a radical rejection of the patriarchal narratives that seek to define women solely through their utility to men" [12].

As the central figure of the narrative, Anupama personifies the nuances of the modern feminine condition, successfully dismantling the stigmas and discriminatory structures that sought to erase her. Her identity is no longer a fragile byproduct of her aesthetic appearance; rather, it is anchored in her professional mastery of Sanskrit pedagogy and her sophisticated engagement with classical drama. This intellectual fortitude, coupled with an unwavering spirit in the face of betrayal, allows her to transcend the role of a victim and occupy the space of a post-modern subject who is defined by both her career achievements and her personal autonomy. Her pursuit of selfhood maps onto Radha Chakravarty's observations in *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*, which posits that "the modern Indian heroine often finds her voice by reconciling her professional aspirations with a reclaimed sense of individual agency that exists independent of traditional kinship ties" [13]. Eventually, Anupama stands as a testament to the power of self-recovery, proving that the wreckage of a previous life can serve as the foundation for a more resilient and intellectually vibrant future.

## 8. Conclusions

Sudha Murty masterfully delineates the contemporary paradigm shift wherein women have transitioned from a state of perceived domestic dependency to one of radical economic and ontological autonomy. Through the diverging trajectories of Anand and Anupama in *Mahashweta*, the narrative serves as a diagnostic mirror for the modern marital contract, exposing the fragile nature of unions predicated on aesthetic superficiality rather than intellectual or emotional parity. By meticulously documenting Anupama's harrowing experience, Sudha Murty provides an unvarnished examination of the socioeconomic and psychological barriers that continue to impede the progress of the married Indian woman. This portrayal underscores a pivotal cultural realization: that the modern woman's identity is no longer confined to the traditional domestic sphere, but is instead forged through professional self-sufficiency and an unwavering reclamation of her right to exist outside the shadow of masculine provision.

The novel's exploration of the interpersonal violence and social excommunication triggered by leukoderma serves as a powerful critique of the "symbolic annihilation" directed toward women who deviate from patriarchal standards of physical perfection. Anupama's psychological resilience in the face of such betrayal becomes the catalyst for her profound personal evolution, enabling her to trans-

cent the role of the stigmatized victim and emerge as a self-actualized agent of change. By internalizing her trauma and converting it into pedagogical and personal strength, she embodies an active, transformative feminism that challenges oppressive social norms at their very source. Ultimately, this research illuminates how such narratives contribute to a broader understanding of feminist entitlements, advocating for a world where women possess the systemic power to dismantle injustice, redefine traditional roles and pursue the full spectrum of human rights with unapologetic dignity and intellectual vigor.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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