



## Empowerment through adversity: A feminist analysis of Sudha Murthy's Novels *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*

Manju

Associate Professor, Department of English, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

### Abstract

This paper explores the theme of empowerment through adversity in Sudha Murthy's novels *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*. By employing a feminist analytical framework, the study delves into how Murthy portrays the struggles and resilience of her female protagonists. The analysis highlights the intersectionality of gender, culture, and personal growth within the socio-cultural contexts of contemporary India. The paper argues that adversity acts as a catalyst for empowerment, leading the protagonists towards self-realization and autonomy.

**Keywords:** Mahashweta, Sudha Murthy, Bakula

### Introduction

Sudha Murthy, a renowned Indian author, has significantly contributed to contemporary Indian literature, particularly in highlighting the lives and struggles of women. Her novels *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* offer profound insights into the societal expectations and personal challenges faced by women in India. This paper examines how Murthy's female protagonists navigate through their adversities and emerge empowered.

### Feminist Framework

A feminist framework is a perspective or approach that examines societal structures, cultural norms, and individual experiences through the lens of gender equality and women's rights. It seeks to understand and challenge the ways in which power dynamics, discrimination, and oppression based on gender intersect with other forms of oppression, such as race, class, sexuality, and ability. Feminist analysis often focuses on critiquing patriarchal systems that privilege men and perpetuate gender inequality. Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and authority, while women are systematically subordinated and marginalized. Feminism emphasizes the importance of empowering women and marginalized genders to assert their agency and autonomy. This includes advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and representation, as well as challenging restrictive gender roles and stereotypes that limit individuals' choices and potential. In both novels, Sudha Murthy employs a feminist framework to critique patriarchal norms, advocate for women's agency and empowerment, and promote social justice and equity. Through the experiences of their female protagonists, *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* offer insightful reflections on the complexities of gender inequality and the importance of challenging oppressive structures in society.

### *Mahashweta*: Resilience and Redefinition of Self

*Mahashweta* tells the story of Anupama, a woman who contracts leukoderma, a skin condition that leads to her ostracization. The novel explores themes of beauty, societal rejection, and self-worth. It deals with societal expectations and beauty standards, particularly through the lens of the

protagonist Anupama. She faces immense pressure from her family and society due to her physical appearance, as she suffers from vitiligo, a condition that causes depigmentation of the skin. This condition becomes a significant barrier for her in conforming to the conventional standards of beauty upheld by society.

Throughout the novel, Anupama grapples with feelings of insecurity and inadequacy due to her appearance. She experiences rejection and discrimination because of her skin condition, which reflects broader societal attitudes towards beauty and physical appearance. The novel highlights how these societal expectations can deeply impact an individual's self-esteem and sense of worth.

Moreover, *Mahashweta* also delves into the theme of resilience as Anupama strives to overcome the challenges posed by societal beauty standards. She finds inner strength and courage to assert her identity and worth beyond physical appearance. Through Anupama's journey, the novel critiques the superficiality of societal beauty standards and emphasizes the importance of inner beauty, self-acceptance, and empathy.

### Journey of Self-Discovery

The protagonist, Anupama, embarks on a profound journey of self-discovery amidst the challenges she faces due to societal expectations and her own physical condition. Her journey is marked by various stages of growth and realization, ultimately leading her towards self-acceptance and empowerment. At the beginning of the novel, Anupama grapples with feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem due to her vitiligo, a condition that sets her apart from societal standards of beauty. She faces rejection and discrimination, which exacerbates her sense of isolation and worthlessness. This phase represents her initial struggle with accepting herself and finding her place in the world.

Despite the challenges she faces, Anupama yearns for acceptance and validation from society, particularly from her family and romantic interests. She undergoes various experiences that challenge her perception of herself and others, leading her to question the importance of external validation in defining her worth. As she confronts adversity, she discovers a reservoir of inner strength and resilience within herself. She learns to confront societal prejudices and

assert her identity on her own terms, rather than conforming to narrow standards of beauty and social acceptance.

Through her journey, Anupama gradually learns to embrace her individuality and celebrate her uniqueness, including her physical differences. She realizes that true beauty lies not in conforming to societal norms but in embracing one's authentic self, flaws and all. Ultimately, her journey culminates in a sense of empowerment and self-actualization. She recognizes her own worth independent of external validation and learns to prioritize her own happiness and fulfillment above societal expectations. In doing so, she emerges as a stronger, more confident individual who is unafraid to chart her own path in life.

Throughout *Mahashweta*, Sudha Murthy skillfully portrays Anupama's journey of self-discovery with sensitivity and depth, offering poignant insights into the complexities of identity, acceptance, and resilience in the face of societal pressures.

### Challenging Patriarchy

The theme of challenging patriarchy is central to the narrative, particularly through the character of Anupama. Her journey involves confronting and resisting the patriarchal norms and structures that seek to control and limit her agency as a woman. She questions the traditional gender roles assigned to women in Indian society. Despite societal expectations that dictate women should prioritize marriage and family over personal aspirations, Anupama challenges these norms by asserting her desire for independence and self-determination. She faces pressure from her family to conform to the institution of marriage, which is often seen as a measure of a woman's worth in patriarchal societies. However, she refuses to succumb to this pressure and insists on pursuing her own dreams and ambitions, thereby challenging the idea that a woman's ultimate goal should be to find a husband and settle down.

Anupama's struggle with vitiligo not only highlights societal beauty standards but also serves as a metaphor for the ways in which women's bodies are policed and scrutinized in patriarchal societies. Despite facing discrimination and stigma because of her condition, she refuses to be defined by her appearance and asserts control over her own body and identity. Her pursuit of education and independence is a direct challenge to patriarchal notions that limit women's access to knowledge and opportunities. By asserting her right to education and carving out a career for herself, she asserts her autonomy and challenges the idea that women should be confined to domestic roles.

Through Anupama's journey, *Mahashweta* advocates for women's rights and gender equality. Her defiance of patriarchal norms serves as a powerful critique of the systemic inequalities that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and oppression in society. *Mahashweta* offers a compelling portrayal of a woman's struggle against patriarchal oppression and her quest for autonomy, agency, and equality. Through Anupama's journey, the novel underscores the importance of challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for gender justice in society.

### *Gently Falls the Bakula: The Struggle for Personal Fulfillment*

*Gently Falls the Bakula* centers around Shrimati, a brilliant woman whose academic and professional aspirations are

overshadowed by her husband's career and traditional marital role. The theme of gender roles and marital expectations is intricately woven into the narrative, particularly through the lives of the main characters, Shrikant and Shrimati. The novel portrays the traditional gender roles prevalent in Indian society during the time period it is set in. Women are expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers above their personal aspirations and ambitions. Shrimati initially conforms to these expectations, dedicating herself to her husband and family, while Shrikant pursues his career ambitions without much consideration for his wife's dreams.

Shrimati's character epitomizes the sacrifices and compromises often made by women in traditional patriarchal societies. Despite her own academic talents and aspirations, she willingly sets aside her career ambitions to support her husband's career and take care of her family. This reflects the societal expectation that women should prioritize the needs of their husbands and families above their own desires.

The novel explores the societal pressure on couples to conform to traditional marital expectations, including the importance of marriage as a social institution and the role of women as dutiful wives and homemakers. Shrimati's decision to prioritize her husband's career over her own ambitions is influenced by these expectations, highlighting the sacrifices women are often expected to make for the sake of their marriages. As the story progresses, the imbalance in Shrikant and Shrimati's relationship becomes increasingly apparent, with Shrimati feeling unfulfilled and unappreciated in her role as a homemaker. This underscores the limitations of traditional gender roles and the importance of mutual respect, equality, and communication in a marriage.

*Gently Falls the Bakula* explores themes of personal growth and self-realization as Shrimati undergoes a journey of introspection and discovers her own identity and worth beyond her role as a wife. Her decision to pursue her academic ambitions later in life reflects her rejection of traditional gender roles and her assertion of agency and independence. Through its portrayal of the complexities of marriage and gender dynamics, *Gently Falls the Bakula* offers a nuanced commentary on the societal expectations placed on individuals, particularly women, and the importance of challenging traditional norms to pursue personal fulfillment and happiness.

### Adversity as a Catalyst for Change

In Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, adversity serves as a catalyst for change, particularly in the lives of the main characters, Shrikant and Shrimati. Adversity arises in the form of a conflict between Shrimati's academic ambitions and her marital responsibilities. Despite her passion for academics and her potential for a successful career, Shrimati sacrifices her dreams to support her husband's career and uphold societal expectations of marriage. This internal conflict becomes a catalyst for her eventual transformation as she begins to question the choices she has made and the societal norms that have shaped her life.

Adversity also manifests in the emotional distance that develops between Shrikant and Shrimati as they prioritize their individual pursuits over their relationship. Shrimati's growing dissatisfaction with her role as a homemaker and Shrikant's preoccupation with his career create tension and

resentment in their marriage, prompting them to reevaluate their priorities and values. When Shrimati decides to pursue her academic aspirations independently, the physical separation from her husband becomes a pivotal moment of self-discovery. Adversity forces her to confront her own desires and priorities, leading her to rediscover her passion for academics and reclaim her sense of identity beyond her role as a wife. This period of separation becomes a transformative experience that empowers Shrimati to assert her independence and pursue her dreams on her own terms. As Shrikant and Shrimati navigate the challenges in their marriage and individual lives, adversity becomes a catalyst for growth and reconciliation. Through communication, empathy, and mutual understanding, they confront their differences and rebuild their relationship on a foundation of respect, equality, and shared aspirations. Adversity ultimately strengthens their bond and catalyzes their personal and relational growth.

Adversity also serves as a catalyst for redemption and renewal in Shrimati's life as she finds fulfillment and purpose in her academic pursuits. Her journey from sacrifice and self-denial to self-realization and empowerment reflects the transformative power of adversity in shaping her character and guiding her towards a path of personal fulfillment and happiness.

Overall, *Gently Falls the Bakula* portrays adversity as a catalyst for change, prompting characters to confront their limitations, reevaluate their priorities, and embark on journeys of self-discovery and growth. Through adversity, characters find the strength to challenge societal norms, pursue their passions, and rebuild their relationships, ultimately leading to personal redemption and renewal.

### Empowerment through Autonomy

Sudha Murthy portrays empowerment through autonomy as a central theme, particularly in the character arc of Shrimati, the protagonist. Her journey towards empowerment unfolds as she asserts her independence and pursues her own dreams and aspirations, breaking free from the constraints of societal expectations and traditional gender roles.

Shrimati's empowerment begins with self-discovery. Despite initially conforming to societal expectations of a dutiful wife and sacrificing her own ambitions for her husband's career, she gradually realizes the importance of pursuing her own dreams and finding personal fulfillment. This realization marks the beginning of her journey towards autonomy and empowerment. As she becomes increasingly disillusioned with her role as a homemaker and the limitations it imposes on her autonomy, she begins to assert her independence. She makes the bold decision to pursue her academic aspirations independently, despite societal norms that prioritize marriage and family over personal fulfillment. This act of defiance against traditional gender roles symbolizes her growing empowerment and determination to carve out her own path in life.

Shrimati's empowerment is also evident in her ability to break free from emotional dependence on her husband, Shrikant. She realizes that her happiness and self-worth are not contingent upon his approval or validation, and she learns to prioritize her own needs and desires. By asserting her autonomy in both her personal and professional life, she demonstrates her capacity to define her own identity and shape her own destiny.

Throughout the novel, Shrimati learns to navigate her relationships, including her marriage, on her own terms. She refuses to be defined solely by her role as a wife and instead insists on maintaining her individuality and pursuing her own interests and passions. This autonomy in her relationships empowers her to assert her needs and boundaries, fostering a sense of self-respect and agency. Ultimately, her empowerment through autonomy is reflected in her personal growth and self-realization. By embracing her independence and pursuing her academic ambitions, she discovers a sense of purpose and fulfillment that transcends societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Her journey towards empowerment serves as a powerful example of the transformative potential of autonomy in shaping one's destiny and finding true happiness and fulfillment.

### Comparative Analysis

*Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula*, both written by Sudha Murthy, explore various themes that resonate with the human experience and societal dynamics. Despite being distinct narratives, they share several common themes. Both novels delve into the complexities of gender expectations and roles in Indian society. They portray the challenges and constraints faced by women as they navigate societal norms and expectations regarding marriage, career, and personal fulfillment. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's struggle with vitiligo highlights societal beauty standards and the pressures women face to conform to narrow definitions of beauty. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's journey explores the sacrifices and compromises often made by women in traditional marriages, as well as the importance of autonomy and self-determination.

Marriage and its impact on individual identity and fulfillment are central themes in both novels. They examine the dynamics of marital relationships, including the expectations placed on couples, the challenges of balancing personal aspirations with marital responsibilities, and the consequences of sacrificing one's dreams for the sake of a relationship. While *Mahashweta* focuses on Anupama's struggle with societal pressures and rejection within her marriage, *Gently Falls the Bakula* explores the emotional distance that develops between Shrikant and Shrimati as they prioritize their individual pursuits.

Both novels portray journeys of self-discovery and empowerment as the protagonists navigate adversity and societal expectations to assert their autonomy and pursue their own paths. Anupama's journey in *Mahashweta* involves reclaiming her sense of self-worth and identity beyond her physical appearance, while Shrimati's journey in *Gently Falls the Bakula* centers on her quest for personal fulfillment and independence outside of her role as a wife.

Both novels critique the societal pressures and expectations that shape individuals' lives, particularly women. They highlight the limitations imposed by traditional norms and the importance of challenging societal expectations to pursue personal happiness and fulfillment. Whether it's Anupama's rejection of societal beauty standards or Shrimati's defiance of traditional gender roles, both novels underscore the importance of individual agency and autonomy in navigating societal pressures.

Identity and self-realization are recurring themes in both novels as the protagonists grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and self-worth. They undergo journeys of

introspection and growth, discovering their own strengths, passions, and values in the face of adversity. Through their experiences, they learn to assert their identities and prioritize their own happiness and fulfillment, ultimately finding empowerment and self-realization on their own terms.

Overall, while *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* are distinct narratives with unique characters and settings, they share common themes that resonate with readers, including gender expectations, marriage, self-discovery, and empowerment. Through their poignant storytelling and exploration of these themes, Sudha Murthy offers insightful reflections on the complexities of human relationships, societal dynamics, and the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfillment.

### Different Contexts of Empowerment

In the two novels, Sudha Murthy explores empowerment in different contexts, reflecting the unique circumstances and challenges faced by the protagonists in each novel. In *Mahashweta*, the protagonist, Anupama, confronts societal prejudice and discrimination due to her vitiligo, a condition that affects her physical appearance. She faces rejection and ostracism, particularly from her husband and in-laws, who are unable to accept her because of her condition. Her empowerment is rooted in self-acceptance and resilience. Despite the challenges she faces, she refuses to be defined by her appearance and finds strength in her inner resilience. Through her journey, Anupama learns to reclaim her sense of self-worth and identity, recognizing that true beauty lies in embracing her uniqueness and authenticity. Her decision to assert her autonomy and reject societal beauty standards, her pursuit of education and independence, and her eventual realization of her own worth beyond societal validation are all manifestations of empowerment in *Mahashweta*.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the protagonist, Shrimati, struggles with her own aspirations and ambitions as she navigates the expectations of marriage and societal norms. She sacrifices her academic dreams to support her husband's career, leading to feelings of unfulfillment and resentment. Her empowerment is depicted through her journey towards autonomy and self-realization. She recognizes the importance of pursuing her own dreams and aspirations, independent of societal expectations or her husband's approval. Through her pursuit of education and personal growth, Shrimati asserts her independence and finds fulfillment on her own terms. Her decision to pursue her academic ambitions independently, her assertion of independence in her marriage, and her rediscovery of her own identity and worth beyond her role as a wife are all instances of empowerment in *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

To summarise, while both *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* explore themes of empowerment, they do so in different contexts that reflect the unique experiences and challenges faced by their respective protagonists. Anupama's empowerment is rooted in self-acceptance and resilience in the face of societal prejudice, while Shrimati's empowerment is characterized by autonomy and self-realization as she asserts her independence and pursues her own dreams and aspirations.

### Conclusion

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* and *Gently Falls the Bakula* offer rich narratives that highlight the empowerment of

women through adversity. Through a feminist lens, these stories underscore the intersectional challenges faced by women and celebrate their resilience and strength. Murthy's works encourage a re-examination of traditional gender roles and advocate for the autonomy and empowerment of women.

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