Social Determinism and Identity Formation in Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta*

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Abstract— Sudha Murthy's Mahashweta intricately explores the tension between individual identity and the socially constructed forces that shape and often suppress it.Moreover, it reveals the strict determinism of Indian patriarchal hierarchies based on class, caste, beauty, and gender via the heroine Anupama's path from social exaltation to ostracism and ultimately self-realization. This paper looks at how Murthy presents social determinism that reveals and constrains the process of identity creation. It explores the woman protagonist's psychological transformation throughalienation, empowerment and rejection using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity development. In addition, it reveals that the author turns into a symbol of defiance against societal destiny. Therefore, the article shows how moral strength and self-awareness exceed deterministic constraints, even when identity is shaped by social circumstances.

Keywords— Social determinism; identity, patriarchy, resilience, self-realization

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature includes many different types of writing and looks at many different topics, such as the difficulties of identity, culture, history, politics, and social justice. The depiction of women's suffering in Indian English literature is a persistent motif that mirrors the stark realities of Indian society. Indian English authors emphasise the challenges women face in asserting their voice and agency within a patriarchal culture. The portrayal of women enduring various forms of oppression, including physical and emotional abuse and discrimination, in Indian English literature exemplifies the resilience of Indian women, who persist in their struggle for rights and the challenge of entrenched patriarchal norms. Indian English authors emphasise how difficult it is for women to express themselves and acquire agency in a patriarchal culture. Indian women's tenacity in fighting for their rights and defying the patriarchal norms that have long held them back is demonstrated by the representation of women in Indian English literature as being subjected to various forms of oppression, such as discrimination and emotional and physical abuse.

Indian women have a long history of being involved in both society and their own households. Patriarchy has shaped and controlled women's lives throughout history and across all cultural boundaries. In their writings, twenty-first-century Indian women authors have openly shared their experiences of emotional, racial, and family exploitation. Motivated by a strong need to establish themselves, the writers have since been able to use their identities as a source of power. In her works, Sudha Murty expresses a deep concern for Indian women. Moreover, she lays up the hardships that women in contemporary India endure in each of her works. Accordingly, her literature gives voice to societal, domestic, and other real-life events, and she adamantly believes that women's affirmation is the answer to injustice. Thus, she highlights that in order to improve self-esteem, a person must realise their inner potential.

The women characters of Sudha Murty's work have a positive attitude on life. They respect hard work and diligence. Further, their view on life is quite optimistic and their desire for a situation that drives them towards their passion, self-esteem, and respect is precisely perceived by the female characters.The idea that societal and cultural

factors, rather than an individual's free will, dictate their behaviour and identity is known as social determinism, and it has its roots in sociology and philosophy. By presenting a society in which a woman's social value is based on her marital status and her attractiveness, Murthy's story challenges this mindset. The study also honours human tenacity by implying that selfhood may be rebuilt by bravery and awareness in spite of deterministic forces.

Mahashweta depicts the interaction between societal determinism and human evolution, Sudha Murthy, who is renowned for her clear language and moral realism, adds to this conversation. The protagonist of the tale is Anupama, a bright and attractive young womanwhose life takes a terrible turn when she is diagnosed with leukoderma, a skin condition that is stigmatised in Indian culture. In addition, her fall from grace and eventual path to self-discovery perfectly captures the extent to which one's sense of self is influenced by outside societal influences, such as marriage, beauty standards, caste identification, and gender expectations.

II.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ERIK ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY

The psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson offers a useful framework for comprehending the moral and psychological development of Anupama. According to Erikson, there are eight phases of human development, and each one is marked by a psychological conflict. The stage that is most pertinent to the novel in which a person tries to find harmony between their own identity and what society expects of them.When Anupama's social image crumbles due to illness and prejudice, this struggle becomes apparent. Her former identity as the wife of a prominent physician and a model of beauty is not self-defined; rather, it is socially manufactured. Anupama has an existential crisis after being rejected by society, which compels her to re-establish her identity apart from approval from others. Through effort and education, she moves to subsequent phases of Erikson's paradigm, gaining generativity and integrity,which represent adulthood and inner completeness. Her experience therefore supports Erikson's theory that genuine identity develops via crisis and resolution as opposed to conformity.

Social Determinism in *Mahashweta*

The sociological and philosophical idea of social determinism describes how social and cultural systems, rather than an individual's free will, shape—and often constrain—their behaviour, beliefs, and identity. It implies that outside factors like class, caste, gender, religion, family, education, and social conventions have a significant influence on people's behaviour and life results. In different,

a person's choices, opportunities, and even identity are determined by their social environment.The idea of social determinism is used by authors to examine how the social circumstances around people shape their lives, particularly in realism and social novels. The conflict between destiny and free choice, or society and self, is often portrayed by authors as people fight against or give in to social influences.

Social determinism is portrayed in Murthy's *Mahashweta* as a complex structure that governs women's life via cultural norms and expectations. Patriarchal rules have governed Anupama's life from the start. Particularly, she is a candidate for marriage rather than self-actualization because of her father's financial difficulties and her attractiveness. She is married to the wealthy Anand, who stands for both social acceptance and the brittleness of appearance-based social approbation.The appearance of leukoderma immediately devalues Anupama. Moreover, Anand's desertion and her mother-in-law's brutality highlight the brittleness of social bonds based on outside standards. In keeping with the long-standing correlation between female virtue and physical beauty, society's deterministic views on illness and femininity make her impure.

In *Mahashweta* by Sudha Murthy, social determinism is portrayed as a complex and deeply ingrained system that controls women's lives via a network of gendered expectations, social hierarchies, and cultural standards. In addition, the book reveals how patriarchal ideals that value marriage, looks, and social conformity above uniqueness and inner worth dictate women's identities. Anupama's life is planned from the beginning by the expectations of her family and community, not by her own goals. Predominantly, the notion that a woman's ultimate fate rests on her capacity to maintain social and family status is reinforced by her father, a failing Sanskrit professor, who sees her knowledge and beauty as advantages that may lead to a successful marriage. As a result, Anupama's agency is enmeshed in the patriarchal system that values her more for her potential as a bride than for her intelligence or emotional capacity.

The illusion of social achievement and acceptability is best shown by the marriage to Anand. Rich and well-educated, Anand is the epitome of social approval, and his proposal is seen as a victory of riches and beauty rather than compatibility or love. Sudha Murthy utilises this relationship to show how women's choices and sense of fulfilment are determined by social determinism. Despite her brilliance, Anupama first adopts this socially acceptable definition of femininity, according to which happiness is defined by marital stability and outside acceptance. The

internalisation of deterministic beliefs that place a higher priority on social image than on personal authenticity is evident in her early childhood. But when Anupama has leukoderma, this delusion falls apart completely.

In fact, her physical metamorphosis turns into a moral and social crisis, exposing the true fragility and conditionality of societal acceptability. The illness turns become a symbol of society's intolerance for individuality and flaws. Apart from this, the instantaneous depreciation of Anupama's value highlights the cruelty of a deterministic system that uses a woman's physical attributes to determine her morality and purity. Indeed, Anand's apathy and her mother-in-law's brutality serve as an example of how deeply embedded patriarchal biases function, turning a woman into a social and aesthetic liability as soon as she fails to live up to expectations. Especially, Murthy's story challenges the deterministic mindset that links moral failure and societal contamination to physical defects.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitusa system of internalised inclinations and socialised norms that unintentionally mould people's views and actionsis reflected in this dehumanisation process. The power of habit is shown by Anupama's first reaction to her illness: she internalises the guilt and humiliation society has placed on her, thinking she is undeserving of love or acceptance. Besides, her retreat into seclusion and quiet is a reflection of the profound psychological conditioning imposed by patriarchal society, not just an emotional response. Additionally, Sudha Murthy illustrates the widespread influence of social determinism across gender, class, and moral domains through Anupama's estrangement. Even males are limited by deterministic factors like social standing and economic uncertainty, as shown by Anupama's father's incapacity to protect her from social censure. Further illustrating how determinism transcends individual bias to group ideology is the institutionalised stigmatisation of sickness, which has its roots in cultural taboos concerning purity and contamination.

Sudha Murthy offers the prospect of change within this deterministic framework. As Anupama progressively realises the unfairness present in her social surroundings, the story starts to change. In addition to this, her relocation to Bangalore represents a psychological and physical break from the deterministic systems that once governed her life. By looking for work and financial autonomy, she starts to break down the internalised hierarchy that had controlled her identity. Similarly, Murthy resists that social determinism is not absolute and that awareness and education may break its cycle.

Sudha Murthy reveals how society influences women through beauty standards, marital status, and moral judgments. She also illustrates how the heroine breaks free from these constraints. Anupama's change from a socially judged "fallen woman" to an independent individual shows the potential to overcome limited circumstances through knowledge and determination. Thus, the plot becomes a study of both oppression and freedom. It shows that while social conditions shape identity, they do not have to define it permanently. Anupama reinforces the enduring human capacity to rise above the restrictive roles set by society by reclaiming her sense of worth and purpose. The novel powerfully depicts the complex relationship between social circumstances and the development of female identity within the patriarchal systems of Indian society. It explores how outside influences such as family expectations, caste norms, gender roles, and societal biases shape and often limit the protagonist Anupama's identity. It also traces her psychological journey toward self-understanding and strength. The plot highlights how caste and class distinctions affect relationships and self-esteem. Anupama's pain is both physical and social; being ostracized leads to inner conflict and emphasizes the disparity between her true self and the identity that society imposes.

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory offers a helpful way to analyze Anupama's changing identity in a restrictive environment. At first, Anupama faces confusion and rejection as she tries to align her true self with the identity of a sick and unwanted woman imposed on her by society. As the story unfolds, Anupama begins to assert her individuality and control, moving toward a more solid sense of identity despite societal pressures. Her relationships, particularly those providing emotional support, help her face the challenges of intimacy versus loneliness. This change marks a slow yet important shift away from social determinism through inner strength. The domestic space in the story serves both as a place of confinement and transformation.

Initially, it represents patriarchal control and societal expectations that undermine Anupama's identity. However, as she displays her resilience, the domestic setting shifts into a space for self-discovery and quiet rebellion. The tensions within these spaces highlight the contradictions women face while trying to balance social roles with personal growth. *Mahashweta* captures the conflict between social constraints and the development of personal identity, presenting the protagonist's struggle as representative of the experiences many Indian women face. Viewed through Erikson's theory, Anupama's path from confusion about her role to achieving her identity underscores the potential for psychological growth even within restrictive social structures. This paper sets the stage for examining similar themes in Sudha Murthy's other

novels, showing the nuanced ways that domestic life and societal expectations shape and sometimes support female resilience.

III.   IDENTITY CRISIS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ALIENATION

The psychological harm caused by social determinism is shown through Anupama's estrangement after her husband and family reject her. Her exclusion highlights the strict moral code that links physical defects to moral flaws. She experiences what Erikson would call role confusion, as her identities as a woman, wife, and daughter are undermined. In a culture where women's worth relies on others' approval, she questions her own existence and value. Sudha Murthy presents this psychological pain in a clear and relatable way. Anupama's inner thoughts and moments of sadness reflect the identity crisis that arises from patriarchal judgment. However, these experiences also lead to transformation. Her decision to move to Bangalore and look for a teaching job symbolizes her quest for independence. Essentially, her journey from dependence to self-reliance represents a form of rebellion and self-redefinition.

Anupama navigates the typical family environment in the book, which includes many conflicts. Before she falls ill, her life appears to be going well. She has clearly faced alienation within her own family, similar to Shrimati and Mridula. She lacks anyone to share her pain with. Anupama has endured feelings of isolation at both her father's home and her in-laws' house. She has felt alone and disconnected since childhood. Her mother died when she was young, leaving her feeling envious and stigmatized by her sister and stepmother. Most importantly, she lives with a father who is powerless. Her leukoderma prevents her from having a happy life with Anand, and a sense of gloom envelops her. Anupama reflects on her isolated existence, comparing it to a cemetery:"Her own life would be as silent as a graveyard. She wondered whereshe had gone wrong. Why she has been punished? Was there noescape from this ordeal? It seemed as though even God had turned adeaf ear to her prayers." (65)

Resilience and Self-Realization: Overcoming Determinism

Primarily, Anupama's journey from being a victim to becoming an independent woman marks the moral high point of the book. It is important to note that she chooses to define herself by her own integrity and achievements rather than by society's views. Anupama gains psychological independence through her involvement in school and her connections with supportive figures like Vasanth. In Murthy's story, education becomes a tool for freedom, a

way to overcome the limiting barriers set by class and gender. Moreover, her final release from social constraints is shown by her refusal to reconcile with her repentant husband, Anand, at the end. By refusing to make amends, Anupama regains her moral and emotional autonomy. Thus, Murthy promotes independence, moral strength, and inner peace as paths to developing a true identity, while also criticizing the patriarchal systems that limit women. Furthermore, the plot serves as a powerful example of domestic violence. It thoroughly explores a woman's experiences and the challenges she faces.

Mahashweta adopts a tone closely linked to the feminist movement. On the first page of the novel, we meet the male protagonist, Anand. In the early chapters, he works as a doctor and assists in delivering a baby girl. The experienced nurse in the hospital delivery room holds certain beliefs that apply universally, but they resonate strongly in India: "For amoment Prabhavathi was lost in thought. Even though the female child is strongerthan the male child at birth, as adults it is the man who becomes the oppressor, andthe woman who suffers."(1)

From a feminist viewpoint, Mahashweta reflects the ideas of liberal feminism, which highlights equality, independence, and education as paths to empowerment. Murthy's portrayal of Anupama aligns with the feminist works of writers like Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai, who also depict women's struggle for identity against oppressive societal systems. However, Sudha Murthy distinguishes herself by framing empowerment within moral realism rather than outright rebellion. In Mahashweta, social determinism also includes caste and class dynamics. The story subtly critiques how patriarchal beliefs and upper-caste power maintain restrictive norms. Anupama's father, a Sanskrit professor, illustrates how gender and class intersect to shape social destiny. Thus, Murthy shows social determinism as a system of oppression that affects not only women's positions but also the moral and economic frameworks of Indian society.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Sudha Murthy offers a powerful look at social determinism and the persistent development of identity despite its challenges. Overall, she questions the deterministic ideas that tie a woman's worth to her looks, social status, or marital success by following Anupama's journey from societal victimization to personal and intellectual awakening. Using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory highlights that identity is ultimately shaped by inner strength and self-awareness, even under societal pressures. Beyond personal challenges, Anupama's story carries a broader message of resilience and hope: the human spirit

can resist and reshape social destiny. On a global scale, Murthy's narrative advocates for a more compassionate, inclusive, and self-defined understanding of identity, reinforcing literature's role as both a reflection and critique of the societal structure.

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