International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends (IJARMT)
An International Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal
Impact Factor: 7.2 Website: https://ijarmt.com ISSN No.: 3048-9458

Women, Social Stigma and Resistance in Sudha Murty's Mahashweta and House of Cards

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.65578/ijarmt.v3.i04.1385

Abstract
This paper examines how Sudha Murty represents women's experience of social stigma and their resistance to it in two novels, Mahashweta (2007) and House of Cards (2013). Drawing on feminist literary criticism, the sociology of stigma and intersectional thought, it argues that the protagonists, Anupama and Mridula, are constrained by different but related forms of patriarchal control. Anupama is marked by a visible skin condition and is discarded by a marriage market that prizes bodily "purity"; Mridula is bound by a marriage whose respectability rests on her husband's wealth and status, which she gradually discovers to be morally compromised. In both novels, the community's judgement works through the family, and women are expected to absorb the cost. Both women respond not through open rebellion but through self-respect, economic independence and moral refusal. A comparative reading shows that Murty favours resilient, ethically grounded agency over spectacular rupture, while remaining attentive to the material conditions that make such agency possible. The paper concludes that the novels present empowerment as a relational and ethical process, and that their simplicity of form carries a sustained critique of conformity.

Keywords: Sudha Murty; Mahashweta; House of Cards; social stigma; patriarchy; women's resistance; agency; Indian English fiction

1. Introduction

Indian fiction in English has long been a space in which the everyday constraints on women's lives are named, examined and contested. Novels that foreground marriage, family honour, bodily difference and economic dependence do more than record social life; they test the moral claims on which that life rests. Women's stories in particular show how social norms operate at the most intimate scale, through a mother-in-law's remark, a husband's silence or a neighbour's glance. These small encounters are the means by which broader structures of gender, class and respectability are enforced (Fernandes, 2021).

Stigma is one of the most important of these mechanisms. Following Goffman, stigma has often been understood as an attribute that disqualifies a person from full social acceptance, but more recent scholarship insists that stigma is not simply a private burden or a matter of individual prejudice. Tyler and Slater (2018) argue that stigma should be understood as a form of power that is historically produced and tied to inequality, and Tyler (2020) develops this into an account of stigma as a machinery that distributes shame and disadvantage unevenly across social groups. Such

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an approach is particularly useful for literary study because it directs attention from the stigmatised individual to the social relations, institutions and narratives that produce and sustain the stigma.

1.1 Sudha Murty and Her Literary Contribution

Sudha Murty was born in 1950 in Shiggaon in northern Karnataka. She trained as an engineer, taught computer science, and has long been associated with philanthropy as chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. She writes in both Kannada and English, and her books, which include novels, short stories, travelogues, memoirs and a large body of writing for children, have been translated into many Indian languages (Penguin Random House India, n.d.). Her honours include the Padma Shri (2006) and the Padma Bhushan (2023).

1.2 Overview of Mahashweta and House of Cards

Mahashweta (2007) follows Anupama, a talented and intelligent young woman from a modest family who aspires to a career and who marries Anand, a doctor. Her married life collapses when she discovers that she has leukoderma. Her husband and in-laws reject her, and she returns to her father's home in the village, where her stepmother's hostility and the community's disapproval of a married woman living with her parents deepen her isolation (Penguin Random House India, n.d.). After a period of despair, Anupama decides to rebuild her life, moves to Bombay, and gradually finds work, respect and companionship. The title alludes to a figure from classical Sanskrit literature, and it ironically invokes whiteness and "purity" in a story in which a skin condition is treated as a moral flaw.

House of Cards (2013) centres on Mridula, a bright and cheerful young woman from a Karnataka village. Her marriage to Sanjay seems to promise a secure and respectable life, but she gradually realises that his rising wealth and status depend on compromises of principle. When the truth becomes undeniable, she leaves him, and the novel asks whether a woman can find a space of her own beyond marriage (Penguin Random House India, n.d.). The title announces the fragility of a structure built on appearance and moral shortcuts.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Critical Studies on Sudha Murty's Fiction

Critical writing on Murty is growing, much of it in the form of journal articles, dissertations and theses produced within Indian departments of English. A prominent strand reads her work as feminist realism, focusing on how her heroines challenge the roles assigned to them by marriage, family and community. Subhaharini (2024), for example, offers a feminist reading of Mahashweta alongside Gently Falls the Bakula, attending to the female protagonists' search for identity within restrictive domestic structures. Nirudhi and Saranya (2024) similarly read Gently Falls the Bakula as a novel about empowerment, individuality and the tension between social roles and personal growth.

2.2 Women, Social Stigma and Patriarchal Oppression

Theoretical work on stigma provides a useful starting point. The Oxford Handbook of Stigma, Discrimination, and Health demonstrates how stigma operates across levels, from interpersonal interaction to institutional practice, and how its effects on health, well-being and social participation are profound (Major et al., 2018). Tyler and Slater (2018) argue that stigma has been too often treated as an individual or psychological matter, and they redirect attention to the social and historical conditions in which certain bodies, groups and places come to be marked as less

worthy. Tyler (2020) extends this argument, treating stigma as a means by which inequality is made to appear natural and deserved.

For a study of Indian women, this means that stigma cannot be separated from gender, caste and class. Chakravarti (2018) shows how the regulation of women's sexuality and marriage has long been central to the maintenance of caste hierarchy, and how ideas of purity and honour are tied to women's bodies and conduct. Collins and Bilge (2020) provide a framework for understanding how such systems of power interlock rather than operate separately, so that the same woman may experience gender, class and bodily norms as a single constraint.

Empirical research on contemporary India confirms the persistence of these patterns. Bhargava (2022) notes that marriage remains a tightly controlled aspect of women's lives and that divorced and widowed women often face stigma and marginalisation in family and public settings. Afridi et al. (2023) find, in an experiment on an online marriage platform, that employed women receive substantially less interest from male suitors than women who are not working, which they interpret as evidence of the influence of gender norms and patriarchy on partner preferences. Haridarshan (2021), writing on a community in Bangalore, finds that women's voices are suppressed by orthodox beliefs, male dominance, early marriage and domestic responsibility. Taken together, these studies suggest that the situations dramatised in Murty's novels, in which a wife is valued for her appearance, her compliance or her husband's standing, are not literary exaggerations.

Research on skin conditions is also relevant to Mahashweta. Reviews of vitiligo emphasise that, although it is medically benign, the condition carries a significant psychosocial burden, including stigma, reduced quality of life and increased risk of anxiety and depression (Bergqvist & Ezzedine, 2020; Ezzedine et al., 2021; Kussainova et al., 2020). This literature makes clear that the suffering Murty depicts in Anupama is grounded in a recognisable social reality.

2.3 Resistance, Agency and Female Empowerment in Indian Literature

Scholarship on resistance in Indian women's writing has moved beyond a simple opposition between submission and rebellion. Fernandes (2021) and the contributors to her handbook on gender in South Asia emphasise the diversity of women's strategies, which range from negotiation and endurance to open defiance. Ahmed (2017) argues that living a feminist life involves everyday acts of noticing, refusing and reorienting oneself, rather than only dramatic moments of protest. This is a helpful lens for Murty, whose heroines resist through accumulations of small decisions.

Contemporary feminist theory also supplies a note of caution. Gill (2017) and Rottenberg (2018) examine how postfeminist and neoliberal feminist discourses locate responsibility for overcoming inequality within the individual woman, encouraging resilience and self-improvement while leaving structural conditions untouched. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) similarly caution against forms of popular feminism that celebrate individual empowerment without challenging the institutions that produce disadvantage. Such critiques raise an important question for any reading of Murty: when a heroine succeeds by her own effort, does the story challenge the social order or merely reward the exceptional woman?

2.4 Research Gap

Although Mahashweta and House of Cards have each received attention, they are usually studied separately or as part of a broader survey of Murty's novels. Few studies place them in direct comparison through a framework that treats stigma as a form of social power and that traces how

different stigmatising mechanisms, one attached to the body and one to marital status and wealth, shape women's resistance. Nor has the relationship between Murty's celebration of individual resilience and the feminist critique of individualised empowerment been examined closely. This paper addresses these gaps by offering a comparative reading organised around stigma, respectability and agency.

3. Social Stigma and the Construction of Female Identity

Patriarchy in the Indian domestic context is not only a matter of male authority; it is a system of expectations about what women should be, do and endure. A woman is expected to marry at the appropriate time, to adapt to her husband's family, to prioritise household harmony over her own ambitions, and to bear shame quietly when things go wrong. Bhargava (2022) describes marriage as a master narrative that governs when, whom and how women marry, and that casts singlehood and marital breakdown as sources of shame. Such narratives do not operate through law alone. They are carried by family members, neighbours and the woman herself, who may internalise the judgement and begin to police her own behaviour.

3.1 Stigma, Gender Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Stigma and gender discrimination reinforce one another. Tyler and Slater (2018) argue that stigma is not a neutral label but a mechanism that sorts people into those who are worthy of full social participation and those who are not. When the stigmatised person is a woman, existing gender inequality makes her more vulnerable to exclusion, because her social standing is already tied to her relationships with others and to her conformity to bodily and behavioural ideals. A man who falls ill or fails in business may still be defended by his family; a woman who is perceived as flawed may be treated as a liability.

The effects of stigma extend into the emotional and psychological sphere. Research on stigma and health shows that stigmatised people often experience shame, social withdrawal and anxiety, and that anticipated rejection can be as damaging as actual rejection (Major et al., 2018). Murty's attention to her protagonists' inner lives, their hesitations, humiliations and moments of despair, can thus be read as a literary rendering of this psychosocial process.

3.2 Marriage, Respectability and Women's Social Status

Marriage is the institution through which many of these pressures converge. It confers status, and it does so unevenly. A married woman is granted a recognisable social identity, but that identity is contingent on the continuation of the marriage and on her ability to meet the expectations of her husband's family. A woman who leaves, or is left, risks losing both identity and protection. Chakravarti (2018) shows how historically the control of women's sexuality and marital choice has served to maintain social hierarchy, and Bhargava (2022) shows that the stigma attached to divorced and separated women persists today.

Respectability is the currency of this system. It is earned by conformity, displayed through the household's appearance and wealth, and policed by community opinion. Afridi et al. (2023) find that the marriage market penalises women who work, and this suggests that a woman's economic independence can be read as a threat to respectability. This insight is helpful for both novels. Anupama must achieve economic independence in order to survive outside the marriage, and Mridula must reject the material benefits of her husband's status in order to preserve her integrity.

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In each case the woman's refusal of the conventional bargain is what marks her out as an agent rather than a dependant.

4. Women's Suffering and Resistance in Mahashweta

4.1 Anupama's Struggle Against Leprosy-Related Stigma

Anupama's condition is leukoderma, a skin disorder in which white patches appear on the body. Although it is not contagious and is not leprosy, popular belief in many communities has historically conflated visible skin changes with infection, impurity or moral failing, and this conflation is the basis of the stigma that the novel depicts. Clinical reviews confirm that vitiligo is non-infectious but associated with considerable psychosocial distress, in part because of how others respond to it (Bergqvist & Ezzedine, 2020; Ezzedine et al., 2021). Murty's narrative dramatises this gap between the medical reality and the social meaning of the condition.

The novel's structure underlines the point. Anupama is shown at the outset as accomplished and ambitious. Nothing about her character or conduct changes when the patch appears; what changes is how others see her. Her husband's family treats the diagnosis as a defect in the bargain of marriage, and her status as a wife is withdrawn almost immediately. In the terms of Tyler (2020), the stigma functions as a mechanism by which a person who was recently valued is reclassified as undeserving. The fact that this reclassification is carried out by the people closest to her makes it all the more damaging.

4.2 Social Rejection, Gender Inequality and Emotional Suffering

The rejection Anupama faces is layered. She is first rejected by her husband and his family; she is then judged by the village for returning to her father's house as a married woman; and she is made to feel unwelcome within her own family by a stepmother who regards her as a burden. Each layer adds to her isolation, and each is sustained by the same logic: a woman's place is within her husband's household, and a woman outside it must justify herself. Bhargava (2022) notes that women outside conventional marital arrangements often face stigma and marginalisation in both family and public arenas, and Anupama's experience dramatises this at the level of the household and the village.

The emotional cost is severe. The novel depicts a period of profound despair in which Anupama contemplates ending her life. The portrayal is consistent with research which associates the psychosocial burden of visible skin conditions with anxiety and depression (Kussainova et al., 2020), and with broader findings that stigma damages mental health (Major et al., 2018). It is important that Murty does not romanticise this suffering. It is shown as a consequence of social cruelty rather than a test that ennobles the sufferer.

4.3 Self-Respect, Independence and Personal Transformation

The turning point in the novel is Anupama's decision to rebuild her life. She leaves the village for the city, and her move to Bombay represents both a literal and symbolic departure from the community that judged her. In the city she finds work, develops her abilities and builds relationships that are based on respect rather than obligation. Her transformation is therefore both practical and ethical: she acquires a means of earning her living, and she acquires the confidence to define her own worth.

Economic independence is crucial here. The research on social norms and women's work suggests that employment can be both a source of empowerment and a site of social penalty (Afridi et al.,

2023; Jayachandran, 2021). In Mahashweta, work is presented as the condition for self-respect: it allows Anupama to live without needing the approval of the family that rejected her. At the same time, her success is not presented as automatic; it follows a period of struggle, and it is supported by the friendship and goodwill of certain individuals who treat her as a person rather than a condition.

5. Women's Struggles and Resistance in House of Cards

Where Anupama is stigmatised from outside, Mridula's difficulty arises within a marriage that looks, from the outside, successful. She is presented as a lively, idealistic young woman with a strong sense of right and wrong, and she enters marriage with the conventional expectation that it will be a partnership. The novel traces how this expectation is slowly eroded. Her husband's ambitions begin to dominate the household, and her own aspirations and judgements are treated as secondary to the family's advancement.

This pattern is consistent with feminist critiques of marriage as an institution that often demands women's emotional and intellectual sacrifice without reciprocity. Bhargava (2022) notes that marriage is tightly bound up with women's identity in India, and Chakravarti (2018) shows how women's roles within the household have been shaped by hierarchical expectations of duty and honour. Mridula's situation illustrates what these accounts imply: a woman's personal identity can be gradually absorbed into her role as a wife, so that her ambitions and moral perceptions are no longer treated as legitimate.

5.1 Wealth, Status and Gender-Based Power Relations

The novel's central irony is that the very wealth and status that make the marriage socially enviable are the source of its moral corruption. Material success becomes the measure of the family's respectability, and the means by which it is achieved are not to be questioned. In this setting, stigma operates in a different register. The risk for the wife is not that she will be blamed for a bodily difference, but that she will be treated as disloyal, ungrateful or disruptive if she challenges the source of the family's prosperity.

Gender-based power relations are evident in the way decisions are made. Because the husband controls the household's resources and public standing, he is able to define what counts as acceptable conduct. The wife's dependence, financial and social, makes it difficult for her to oppose him without risking her own position. Afridi et al. (2023) and Jayachandran (2021) both emphasise that economic dependence and social norms interact to limit women's choices, and the novel offers a literary illustration of this interaction. Mridula's comfort is the instrument of her constraint.

5.2 Emotional Oppression, Self-Realisation and Resistance

The oppression in House of Cards is largely emotional. Mridula is not physically confined or openly abused; she is, instead, gradually isolated within a household in which her perceptions are discounted. This is a form of control that is hard to name, because it is exercised through silence, neglect and the assumption that the wife will adapt. Ahmed (2017) writes of the importance of noticing the small signals through which a person is told that she is a problem, and Mridula's growing awareness has this quality: it begins with unease, develops into recognition and culminates in refusal.

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The decisive moment is her departure. By leaving, Mridula rejects the bargain of respectability, in which silence about wrongdoing is the price of security. The novel presents this as an act of moral clarity rather than anger. Importantly, it leaves open the practical question of what she will do next, and thereby acknowledges that leaving is a beginning rather than a resolution. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) caution against narratives in which empowerment is presented as an individual achievement that settles structural questions; Murty's ending, by foregrounding uncertainty, avoids this simplification.

6. Comparative Analysis of Mahashweta and House of Cards

6.1 Different Forms of Social Stigma and Patriarchal Control

The most obvious difference between the novels lies in the source of the stigma. In Mahashweta, it is attached to the woman's body and arrives suddenly, as a result of a diagnosis. In House of Cards, it is a latent threat that would fall on the woman if she were to challenge her husband's position. Yet in both cases the mechanism is the same: the family and community define what is acceptable, and the woman is expected to bear the cost of any deviation. Tyler and Slater (2018) emphasise that stigma is a social process rather than a property of individuals, and the two novels illustrate this by showing very different triggers producing very similar patterns of exclusion.

Patriarchal control also operates differently. In Mahashweta it is expressed as rejection and abandonment; in House of Cards it is expressed as expectation and silence. The first is visible and the second is subtle. The pairing is valuable because it shows that patriarchy is not confined to overt cruelty. It can work through apparently benign arrangements, in which a woman is provided for and expected to be grateful. Collins and Bilge (2020) argue that systems of power are interlocking and often operate through everyday institutions, and the two novels together make this visible: the body, the marriage and the household are all sites of control.

6.2 Female Agency, Resilience and Self-Determination

Both heroines exercise agency, but the forms it takes differ. Anupama's agency is constructive: she builds a new life through work, learning and friendship. Mridula's is primarily refusal: she withdraws her consent from a situation she finds morally unacceptable. These forms are complementary. Together they suggest that self-determination involves both the capacity to say no and the capacity to create alternatives.

Resilience is central in each case, but Murty does not treat it as an innate quality. It develops through experience, and it is sustained by relationships, work and a growing sense of worth. This is where the novels engage most productively with critiques of individualised empowerment (Gill, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018). The heroines do display strength, but they do so in contexts that are shown to be unjust, and the novels never suggest that the burden of change should fall on women alone. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the narrative emphasis on individual perseverance can obscure the fact that many women lack the education, support or opportunity that Anupama and Mridula are able to draw on. The novels thus invite both admiration and critical reflection.

6.3 Social Conformity versus Individual Freedom

The central tension in both novels is between conformity and freedom. Conformity offers security and approval; freedom offers dignity and uncertainty. The novels do not minimise the cost of the second option. Anupama endures loneliness and hardship, and Mridula faces an uncertain future

after leaving the marriage. Yet both conclude that conformity at the expense of self-respect is a poorer choice.

This position resonates with research showing that social norms are powerful but not immutable. Jayachandran (2021) explains that norms constrain women's choices, and Dhar et al. (2022) show that attitudes can shift with intervention. Murty's fiction can be seen as a modest contribution to this process: by showing women who reject unjust norms and survive, it enlarges the imaginative range of what is possible. The novels also suggest that freedom is not simply a matter of individual will; it requires means, such as employment, and relationships that affirm a woman's worth.

6.4 Sudha Murty's Representation of Women's Empowerment

Taken together, the two novels present empowerment as a relational and ethical process rather than as a dramatic event. It involves recognising the injustice of the situation, refusing to internalise the judgement of others, securing the practical means of independence and finding people who respect one's worth. This understanding is consistent with the observation in recent scholarship that Murty's women resist patriarchal structures through moral agency and self-realisation rather than overt rebellion (Subhaharini, 2024).

Murty's account has strengths and limitations. Its strength is its credibility and accessibility: it presents change as possible within ordinary lives and speaks to readers who might be alienated by more theoretical or confrontational discourses. Its limitation is that it tends to centre individual perseverance, and it leaves relatively unexamined the structures, such as inheritance, caste and labour markets, that make perseverance harder for some women than for others (Chakravarti, 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Read alongside feminist critiques of neoliberal individualism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), the novels may be seen as both participating in and gently exceeding the language of personal resilience, because they consistently locate the origin of women's suffering in social attitudes rather than in individual failings.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Mahashweta and House of Cards depict women's experience of stigma and patriarchal control with clarity and moral seriousness. In Mahashweta, a visible skin condition becomes the occasion for rejection, revealing the extent to which a woman's social standing depends on bodily appearance and marital compliance. In House of Cards, the apparent security of a prosperous marriage conceals a demand for silence, and the heroine's integrity requires her to renounce it. Although the sources of stigma differ, the logic is shared: the community defines respectability, the family enforces it, and the woman is expected to bear the cost.

The protagonists' responses are likewise distinct but related. Anupama builds a life through work, learning and friendship; Mridula withdraws her consent from a marriage built on compromise. Both assert self-respect against social judgement, and both demonstrate that resistance can take the form of ethical refusal and quiet persistence as well as open confrontation. The novels' emphasis on relationships and economic independence suggests that empowerment depends on conditions as well as character, even if their narrative focus on individual resilience sometimes leaves those conditions in the background.

The comparative approach adopted here has shown the value of reading Murty's novels together and through the lens of stigma as a form of social power (Tyler & Slater, 2018). Further research might extend this approach to other novels by Murty, consider how readers respond to these

narratives, or compare her work with that of other Indian women writers. For now, the two novels stand as accessible and morally serious accounts of women's resistance to social judgement, and they remind readers that the stigma imposed on women is a social act that can be recognised, questioned and refused.

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