
Gynocritical Perspective on Sudha Murthy's novels: Exploring themes of Gender, Culture and Identity

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Abstract:

The present study aims to examine and identify all the four models of “Gyno criticism” mainly Biological, Linguistic, Psychoanalytic and Cultural within the selected novels (source of primary data) of Sudha Murthy, a renowned contemporary novelist. A gynocritic is someone who reads “Gyno Text” (texts written by women) to describe literary criticism based on a female perspective.

By employing a feminist critical framework, this research aims to uncover the ways in which her female protagonists reflect their experience of turmoil unhealthy relationships, how they challenge, overcome and as a gynocritic it is my aim to foreground all the marginalized voices of women from female perspective. This paper highlights all the ill issues that are still prevalent in Indian society towards women and despite being ravaged by the vicissitudes of fate, these shows courage and bravery to shatter the shackles of their tumultuous past, rising from ashes and forge path towards more empowered future.

One concern of gyno criticism is to identify distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women - the world of domesticity, experiences of gestation, giving birth and nurturing or mother -daughter and woman-woman relations, another concern is to uncover in literary history a female tradition. A third undertaking is to show that there is a distinctive feminine mode of experience or “subjectivity”, in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving oneself and the outer world.

The paper discusses Sudha Murthy’s four novels, namely, “Mahashweta”, “Gently Falls the Bakula”, “The House of Cards” and “Dollar Bahu”.

She has developed 4 models of difference in women's writing or feminist theory, between men and women; through which I'll examine her texts.

1. Women's writing and body
2. Women's writing and linguistic
3. Women's writing and Psyche
4. Women's writing and Culture

According to Maggie Humm, “Feminist criticism is the investigation of universal Sexual portrayal and belief system in writing from the perspective of women.”

“When the foundation of trust cracks, can a marriage remain the same”? (House of Cards)

“What is more important: a successful career or a happy marriage”? (Gently falls the Bakula)

“The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture.”

As a Gynocritic, my aim is to construct a female framework for the analysis of new models based upon the study of female experience, the status ascribed to women and internalized images of femininity interacting with their experience and their changing self-awareness. However, Gynocritics focus on writing by and about women.

Keywords: - gyno criticism, female, linguistic, biological, patriarchy, culture.

Introduction:

Literature Review

Feminist critics have argued that women authors have been excluded from the literary canon, but Showalter argued that a canon of women authors exist ; which she classifies the authors into three main types or main stages in the development of women's writing : Feminine, Feminist and Female phase.

In the earlier phase (Feminist) women writers mostly imitated the male writers or writing under male pseudonyms, in the “feminist phase” women authors rebelled against prevalent patriarchal attitudes. It is later half of the twentieth century in the “Female phase”, women writer's search for their own voice, identity as opposed to the identity imposed by patriarchy started taking a turn.

There are plenty of previous studies that discuss the idea of feminism and the theory of gynocriticism which shed light on the distinctiveness of women's studies . Topics of concern are how women are represented in literature and in novels and method of feminist literary criticism itself. To bridge the gap between literary criticism and literary production and concerned with current developments in literary criticism as well as in the field of women's studies.

In the 21st century world, as well as societal norms, changes rapidly due to globalization. Nowadays, women's role, status progress rapidly amid this progress, how women introduce themselves as writers and the way they are depicted within the world of literature, and the present scenario of women in the society as portrayed in the world of literature through selected literary texts as contexts. To bridge these gaps, as a gynocritic we have to go through close reading of the text. It is undeniable to ignore the socio-political, cultural surrounding in which she exists and grows, and it is found that “women’s subjectivity” discourse privileges women's voices, experiences, stories and creates space for

women's agency and autonomy to take control of their own lives and make their own decisions.

In the novel “Mahasweta”, Murthy asks “Stigma and prejudice breaking up her (Anupma)marriage. Will her life too go to pieces?”

To investigate the gap and consequences of eroding trust, betrayal, trade-offs between professional ambition and marital happiness, those idealised notions of marriage and the realities of women's experience in India reflected in Sudha Murthy's novels and what do these narrative reveals about the societal expectations and pressures faced by women in India.

- ***Women's writing & Women's Body:***

What Anupma learnt from her failed marriage and how her disability of being a woman and being a leukoderma patient contributed to her “female consciousness” and what she learnt from that?

Is she a victim of ‘double marginalisation’?

Being a disabled as “leukoderma” patient and being a woman, she is indeed a victim of double marginalization.

However, women’s experiences in their private lives and injustices they felt towards them related to broader social cultural level is actually worked as raising “female consciousness”, and the content, language, narrative structure and the writings reveal women’s inner lives which seek to recognizing their inner strength and a realization of their own capacities.

In the novel “Mahasweta”, written by Sudha Murthy describes that women writers portray female characters in a different way, they foreground their experience in how they interact with each person in society, but in this context we are looking at the “body” how it can be also a source of feminist criticism to reveal female character's experience and misery that is revealed through their body, how their “body” is source of pleasure, pain, suffering , emotional distress, loss or trauma, attraction of separation & rejection, social injustice, depression and Achievements and new skills as well.

It is the story of our beloved “Anupama”, it is her beauty of “fair complexion, beautiful long hair and dimpled cheeks” that attracted Anand; the orthodox villain in the patriarchal society who later became her husband but went for foreign to study to become a doctor. However, before her marriage to Anand, questions of her mother-in-law to her family priest denotes how a women's body is viewed as a criterion to be fulfilled in order to live in a society, to become someone's daughter-in-law; this “objectification of women's body” to be as an ability to bear only male child or as child bearing object, imposed on women due to their “gender”, the contradiction between “body & gender” and women viewed as “other” .

In an arranged marriage, look at the following description criticizes pre-marital horoscope match, with a strong preference for a male child.

“Narayana, does the horoscope match? How is the girl's horoscope?

Avva, the horoscopes match perfectly. The girl's horoscope is excellent.

Anand is my only son. What about children?

Oh, her horoscope shows only male children.”

The situation gets even worse when after her marriage, she finds that she has leukoderma; a skin disease which is an incurable disease but in few cases it gets cured. However, when her mother-in-law gets to know her “disability” as being a leukoderma patient she cries it is a sin that she must have done in her previous life, which is the result of her previous karma and discards her out of her family. In a second her life gets abandoned.

“Narayana said, this is a bad omen!”

Women's physical appearance determines whom society or in-laws choose, whom they reject because of physical vulnerability and in order to “fit” in society being as a woman you've to take care of your body and treat your body well.

“Narayana kept telling Radhakka, “This is a bad disease, she cannot perform any puja right now. It must be the result of her previous life”.

It is a miserable condition for any woman, a misery engulfed Anupama, she suffers from emotional trauma which keeps her asking whether her beloved Ananad also believes in this that she had leukoderma before her marriage which she hides from everyone or would he believe her.

“Take your daughter back with you; she need not come back until she's completely cured and my son returns and sends for her. We have been deceived.”

The mental and physical trauma which shatters her, because of that one white patch on the body; she gets rejected, the sociocultural norms that is revealed throughout the narratives describes her upbearing condition that impacted her mental health too. Her letters to Annand result in no response makes her condition worse. The sociocultural context in which her body is viewed as sexually objectified; her best friend (Sumi's husband's) tries to molest her equates a woman's worth with her body's appearance and sexual functions. Women are afraid to travel or live in another state or country or afraid to address the problem of sexual harassment to discuss to anyone.

However, women's issues who are victims of sexual harassment needs to be challenged and addressed. The “double exclusion” from society due to her “body with marks” and “sexual harassment”, lead her to cry uncontrollably and ill physical and mental health, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Anupma went into the bedroom and shut the door behind her, but didn't lock it. She started to change out of her new sari when, suddenly she felt a pair of hands grasping her from behind.”

- **Women's writing and women's linguistic**

How does women's language, style and narrative strategies, and her changing different cultures (Indian and American) convey feminist themes, and what insights do these portrayals offer in challenging patriarchal norms, stereotypes and how does it contribute to gynocriticism?

To investigate the narrative strategies employed by Sudha Murthy in her feminist novels to convey a division that women's language creates an identity of their own; how they feel, react and consolidate with other, how their expression is the very construction of gendered stereotypical frustration and use of functional language to express, complain, criticize, aware women. Language works to fill the gap that exists between silence and speech.

Look at these sentences, they are amalgamation of expressions to indicate the inner feminine multi-coloured feelings of women, when they're in love, their dreams, their aspirations, their frustration, their disappointment in love, marriage, unhealthy relationship and their consciousness raising repetition about gendered discrimination, critique the societal structure of gendered discrimination.

~ *"Sir, I do love history but i love Shrikant as well. I can always continue my studies later."*
(Gently falls the Bakula)

It was one such instance where she was talking to Prof Collins about her interest in history and her aspiration to do research on history.

~ *"Maybe I have one more son, I will name him Siddhartha Gautama".*

There is no separate language for female, they can talk about their existence through language; the appropriate task is to foreground those language and concentrate on women's language what they are to convey or intend to mean

~ *"Was his wife's call not important enough for him?"*

~ *"What had happened to Shrikant now? The love, affection and shifting of ideas and dreams had disappeared."*

~ *"Do you mean history is a subject of the dead, the lost and the defeated? Does the past not have any relevance to the present, according to you? You are wrong."*

~ *"Why should I stay alone here? Is it wrong that I am educated? Why should I have to suffer like this?"*

(Gently Falls the Bakula)

Shrimati's narrative reflects poignant tale of gendered burdens of societal expectations, of a fancy marriage tale with the emotional fallout of a failed marriage, the anguish of childishness, the loss of a fulfilling life, her experiences, her repetitive rhetorical questions the ways in which women's bodies are trapped in a traditional family in India under patriarchal norms which results in mental and physical health of women.

~ *"My experiences have taught me this. I have come to realize that courage and confidence are the real wealth in life. Education can improve your chances of success, but ultimately you have to face life all alone. I don't depend on any guru not do I read any philosophy. My conscience is my guru and it guides me well."*

~ *"Of the thousands of flowers that blossom on a tree only a few will bear fruit. And out of*

those few fruits, insects and squirrels will eat some. The tree does not keep anything for itself. Does that mean that the life of the tree is wasted? I have great friends and good students, and I am economically independent. I neither worry about the past, nor brood over the future. I accept life as it comes and I don't have any regrets."
(Mahasweta)

The above philosophical insights truly cover the emotional heart -wrenching past that shaken her once, women who fall and stands up again. This is why we need to ask women to pushback and we gained valuable lessons of transformation, resilience, women's ability to move on.

Linguistic style refers to a person's characteristic speaking pattern. It includes such features as directness or indirectness, pacing and pausing, word choice, and the use of such elements as jokes, figures of speech, stories, questions, and apologies.

~ "I was your wife, lonely, scared and totally dependent on you. All I wanted was to hear a few kind words from you. They would have been my strength, but you never bothered to console me even once." (Mahasweta)

Emotional longing of the speaker conveys from "*few kinds words from you*", and her anguish, resentment and hurt from the words "*you never bothered to console me once*". Apologizing, mitigating criticism with praise, and exchanging compliments are rituals common among women that men often take literally. A ritual common among men that women often take literally is ritual opposition

However, it is a critical method to identify; men are more comfortable with language to hold power but for a woman it is difficult, if she does and talks like a man, she will be redeemed from the women's culture, considered as un-feminine qualities, exclude women from their full participation from society. The way linguistic style reflects status plays a subtle role in placing individuals within a hierarchy. Repetition, dialogue, conversation that demonstrates and creates imagery that is a framework for understanding the women's relationship with others in society.

- ***Women's writing and women's psyche:***

From gynocritical point of view, it is evident that the narrative highlights how women's psychological condition describes her attitudes, behaviour, and character as anxiety driven, hysterical, anxious, and emotional quickly at various things. Women experience these conflict and anxiety due to psychological distress, depression, betrayal, broken faith and trust in marriage, love and women's reproductive process such as pregnancy, menstruation and menopause. In the novel "House of Cards", our protagonist Mridula's sense of perception to all the surrounding things, she was different, she has enormous enthusiasm for life and unlimited energy for reading, cooking and sketching but when trust of cards falls, her depression clouds her enthusiasm.

"Money can be earned and lost; it is about the faith that a wife has in her husband. That's

more valuable than money and gold. Faith sustains a marriage and brings joy to the family. Without it, we have nothing. How can Sanjay destroy the faith and trust I had in him?" ~ Mridula in (House of Cards)

The anxiety that women's conflict starts growing ; here our protagonist "Mridula", exposes the psychological distress that women deals, bears in daily life somewhere in the working place, in family and are considered as weak in their decision making authority , less strong than men, less knowledgeable than men, less experienced than men, it is quite visible through the languages in which we could easily find where women are treated and the division between "men and female", binary opposition juxtaposes each other and the gaps gets wider :

Mridula's words which are an ample source of information that provides a keen insight how the shattering of trust in a healthy relationship leads a women's mental health condition worse ~ *"I'm really tired."*

~ *"My palms sweat. And my fingers tremble. It happens often. "*

~ *"I feel like crying round the clock and don't feel like doing anything. "*

~ *"My heart beats very fast. I have no enthusiasm for anything. I get scared and can't sleep at night."*

~ *"I don't like getting ready or meeting people. But I don't want to be alone either. I get negative thoughts all the time."*

~ *"Does that mean that something's wrong with my brain?"*

~ *"Doctor, I'm suffering from depression. Will I be cured completely?"*

Above lines indicate the health and psychic effect of Mridula that how once a happy cheerful fun-loving girl ultimately ends her life to a psychiatric visit for her mental disorder, which is due to her failed marriage, distrust husband, where her importance and words have no value, no respect. She starts asking doctor all the philosophical questions that are impossible for the doctor to answer for. As she navigates to the complexities of her husband's "inferiority complex" , which has been exacerbated by their newfound wealth she finds herself increasingly disillusioned with the superficiality of their affluent lifestyle and thus she begins to pose profound existential questions to her doctor , not seeking answer per se but rather a deeper understanding of human condition and left her family, and went to live for herself, to do her job in village schools to teach there ,that was only way to recover from her previous mental health condition. Living with them twenty - five years, she still felt *"I'm still an outsider"*.

What choices are left for women in such a situation where nothing goes anything right, the fragility of human wealth leaves a harmful impact on relationships. Psychological struggles that women have while balancing marriage and love, motherhood and career, the isolation that women experience and the hollowness of marriage in the eyes of society leaves her emotionally devastated, traumatized and distressed.

- ***Women's writing and women's culture***

Tylor's definition of culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member

of society. In contrast to Arnold's view, "all folks have culture, which they acquire by virtue of membership in some social group – society.

And a whole grab bag of things, from knowledge to habits to capabilities, makes up culture. Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialized. Women's culture and identity is also perceived through observing the society and family in a patriarchal society.

women's culture defines them to behave in that way, these roles are assigned to them to perform in society and family in order to live.

In the novel "Dollar Bahu", Vinuta's culture defines the "gender performativity" that certain duties are predefined for women to perform.

~ "She would wake up early and help her mother-in-law in the morning before going to school."

~ "Vinu, have you plucked the flowers for puja?"

~ "Vinu, where are the ironed clothes?"

~ "Vinu, where is the bigger kadai?"

~ "Vinu, add some salt to the dal."

~ "Do you have to keep singing all the time? Do some worthwhile work at least some time. If you sit in the garden the whole day, who will do the housework? The dirty vessels are piling up. I am sick of reminding you about every task. God knows when your music for madness will go away."

Freedom, independence, choice, agency, are terms that are absent in a women's culture; the above-mentioned sentences prove that to remain "silent" and doing all duties that are assigned to women in a society from ages is what makes you fit in a women's culture. Rousseau makes clear that, in his opinion, and in a modern society, it is a woman's job to rear children in their early stages of childhood, as it is in this first stage of maturation that children need to be 'civilized'.

Activities related to household works, Girlhood, motherhood and womanhood stand in complex positions in a male dominated society, under patriarchy women are granted this role only. Vinu looked depressed and went about the housework in a listless, machine - like manner, before marriage and after marriage too, and the stress gets more when you're earning and don't get that respect that a woman deserves. Women's aspirations to achieve work-life balance in this part of the world are often frustrated by patriarchal norms, which are deeply ingrained in the culture. The study reveals that women's culture depends on culture and custom which sets standard criteria and limited their ability is to look after housework and caregiving of children. Traditional roles such as Ironing clothes, worshipping puja, cooking, are predefined in women's culture by sacrificing their dreams ;(Vinuta's skill in singing).

Research Methodology

This study will analyse qualitative descriptive research approaches aiming to accurately describe and document the research. It will focus on analysing the selected novels that are "Mahasweta" , "House of Cards", "Dollar Bahu" and "Gently falls the Bakula" , which will serve as the source of data.

The data is collected primary as well as secondary.

The data consists of selected novels written by Sudha Murthy (i.e., *Mahasweta*, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *The House of Cards* and *Dollar Bahu*. This will involve a close reading of textual analysis that will code the texts through women's perspectives, their insights, feelings, their internal experiences as a female, their development in a constantly changing environment which will help me to analyse the fictional narratives pertinent to gyno criticism.

In addition to the novels, I'll also gather data from scholarly articles, essays, Non-fiction texts that will provide discussion on socio-cultural perspectives, highlight discrepancies which will aid in understanding the influences of ethnicity, class, gender dynamics within Murthy's novels.

With above consideration, the study involves literary texts, and existing scholarship, ethical considerations include proper citation of all sources, respect for copyright and acknowledgement of original author's contribution.

How does Sudha Murthy portray women's bodies, struggles and triumphs of “female consciousness” in her works especially “Mahasweta” and “Gently falls the Bakula”?

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, gyno criticism is concerned to revalue femininity in a positive way, and enables women writers to have a space of their own where she can express freely through her female characters, different experiences of their gender, creativity, feminist freedom, uniqueness, individuality. Gyno criticism is not merely concerned with a woman writer's voice but with her expressions that shape her character's experiences as well. It further extends the literary theory by critically examining that women have distinct experiences that require separate analytical tools for examining literature written by and about women. Then the outcome is real, individual, unique, identity of women's literature.

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