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FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY: TRAUMA, MEMORY, FEMININE EXPERIENCE IN SUDHA MURTHY'S *MAHASHWETA* AND SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE BINDING VINE*

RITU KALRA[1] and Dr. SHIVANI VASHIST[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies.
Email: pratimamohanty76@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0001-1065-7685
[2]Registrar, Department of English, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies.
Email: shivani.smeh@mriu.edu.in, ORCID:0000-0002-5534-7381

Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of trauma and memory in feminism through the lens of illness and societal rejection, focusing on Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. Both novels present deeply personal and gendered experiences of trauma, wherein illness, societal stigma, and sexual violence marginalize the protagonists, leaving lasting emotional scars. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama, the protagonist, is diagnosed with leukoderma, a condition that subjects her to severe ostracization by her husband and society. Her journey from being rejected due to her illness to regaining her self-worth and autonomy mirrors the larger feminist critique of how women's bodies are policed and stigmatized by societal norms. In *The Binding Vine*, alongside the trauma of sexual violence suffered by Kalpana and the emotional repression of Mira, Urmi's grief over the loss of her infant daughter becomes a central emotional focus. Her trauma, marked by profound loss and mourning, intertwines with her search for meaning, creating a connection between personal suffering and collective female experiences of trauma. This study uses feminist trauma theory to analyze how memory and trauma are interconnected, shaping the female characters' identities, relationships, and healing processes. The paper also examines how these novels reflect societal structures that worsen women's suffering through silence and erasure, highlighting the emotional and physical impacts of illness, violence, and societal rejection. The research aims to show how these works critique patriarchal oppression while illustrating the resilience of women in the face of trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Feminism, Societal Rejection, Illness, Leukoderma, Sexual Violence, Grief, Patriarchal Oppression, Sudha Murthy, Shashi Deshpande.

Trauma originates from the Greek word *trauma*, meaning wound. In contemporary discourse, it refers to the psychological, emotional, and physical distress caused by deeply disturbing experiences. Trauma can disrupt an individual's sense of identity, relationships, and worldview, often leaving long-lasting effects. Trauma is an emotional response to an overwhelming event that exceeds an individual's capacity to cope. Psychologically, it can manifest as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and dissociation. Cathy Caruth, in her work Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives, and History (1996), defines trauma as "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomena" (Unclaimed Experience 11).

Judith Herman defines Trauma as "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Trauma and Recovery 33). Trauma often has a delayed impact, meaning the distressing event itself may not immediately affect the individual. Instead, its effects manifest later, long after the incident has passed, and fragments of trauma remain as memories and leave painful experiences.

Trauma disrupts an individual's sense of self, leading to fragmented identities or a struggle to reconcile past and present selves. societal structures and cultural norms shape the experience and recognition of trauma. Victims may face societal stigma, silencing, or blame, especially in patriarchal or hierarchical cultures. Trauma theory explores the psychological, emotional, and societal impacts of traumatic experiences, particularly focusing on how individuals process and articulate these experiences.

Studying trauma through a gendered lens is essential to understanding how societal structures and cultural norms shape women's experiences of trauma. Foundational theories by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and others provide critical insights into the psychological and narrative complexities of trauma, while feminist perspectives emphasize the importance of breaking silence and reclaiming agency. When analyzed through a feminist lens, the theory broadens its scope to examine how gender shapes the experience, representation, and recovery from trauma, especially in patriarchal societies. Rape, domestic violence, and emotional abuse are key forms of gendered trauma.

Women's experiences of trauma are further influenced by caste, class, and religion. Indian society often silences women who experience trauma, particularly in cases of sexual violence, illness, or marital discord. Societal silencing of women's traumas is a critical issue, deeply entrenched in patriarchal cultures worldwide. This silence stems from a combination of social stigma, cultural taboos, and systemic inequalities that prioritize patriarchal values over women's experiences. Topics such as sexual violence, domestic abuse, and marital rape are often deemed taboo in many cultures, including India. Victims are discouraged from speaking out to protect family honor or avoid societal judgment. In cases of marital rape, legal frameworks in some societies still fail to recognize it as a crime, effectively legitimizing the silencing of women. Patriarchal norms impose rigid gender roles and expectations that exacerbate women's suffering by invalidating their trauma and obstructing their recovery. These norms operate across personal, familial, and societal levels, creating systemic barriers for women. Women are often judged by their physical appearance and adherence to societal beauty standards.

In Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta*, Anupama's leukoderma leads to her rejection by her husband and society, reflecting the societal emphasis on beauty and the stigma attached to medical conditions. Her journey of self-reliance challenges patriarchal norms, offering a counter-narrative to the silencing of women's suffering. Marriage is often seen as a woman's primary role in patriarchal societies.

In *The Binding Vine*, Mira's marital rape is dismissed as a private matter, reflecting the societal reluctance to challenge male dominance within marriage. Patriarchal norms discourage women from speaking out against abuse, framing silence as a virtue and prioritizing family stability over individual well-being. Urmi's role as a witness to other women's traumas, such as Kalpana's sexual assault, underscores the importance of breaking societal silence.

Overview of *Mahashweta* by Sudha Murthy and *The Binding Vine* by Shashi Deshpande

Mahashweta narrates the story of Anupama, a bright and ambitious woman whose life is tragic when she is diagnosed with leukoderma. This skin condition leads to her rejection by her husband, family, and society.

The novel explores how societal standards of beauty and patriarchal expectations of women as wives and mothers exacerbate her suffering. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama demonstrates remarkable resilience in the face of societal rejection and personal grief. Anupama's memories of rejection and betrayal are a constant source of pain, but they also help her to overcome

societal ostracism and rebuild her life independently, challenging patriarchal norms. Anupama's skin condition symbolizes how societal norms prioritize external appearances over inner worth.

The Binding Vine intertwines multiple narratives of women's traumas, focusing on Urmi, who is grieving the loss of her infant daughter. In her grief, Urmi uncovers the hidden stories of other women: Mira, her mother-in-law, whose poetry reveals the trauma of marital rape; and Kalpana, a young woman recovering from a sexual assault. Deshpande delves into themes of loss, silence, and suppressed pain, portraying how patriarchal norms stifle women's voices and agency.

In *The Binding Vine*, Mira's poetry captures her traumatic memories; her poetry reflects her struggle for self-expression in a patriarchal marriage, while Urmi's recollections of her daughter's death and her interactions with Kalpana's family uncover layers of suppressed pain. Urmi transforms her grief into a mission to give voice to the silenced narratives of other women, acting as a witness to their pain.

This research paper aims to explore the intersection of trauma and memory in the lives of female protagonists Anupama in *Mahashweta* and Urmi in *The Binding Vine.* Through the lens of Mahashweta and The Binding Vine, a nuanced understanding emerges of the feminine experience of trauma, its articulation, and its transformative potential.

Mahashweta: Tale of Anupama's Trauma, Pain Memory, Resilience and Her Assertion

Sudha Murthy's *Mahashweta* is a poignant narrative that explores the societal and personal challenges faced by its protagonist, Anupama, a young, educated woman with aspirations for a fulfilling life. The story begins with Anupama's seemingly ideal marriage to Dr. Anand, which soon unravels after she is diagnosed with leukoderma, a skin condition that becomes a catalyst for her social and emotional alienation. Her condition leads to abandonment by her husband and in-laws, pushing her into a cycle of trauma and rejection.

The novel charts Anupama's transformative journey as she confronts societal prejudice, grapples with her inner anguish, and ultimately reclaims her autonomy, emerging as a symbol of resilience and self-assertion. Anupama's trauma is multilayered, stemming from both her medical condition and the societal reactions it provokes. The stigma associated with leukoderma subjects her to intense psychological distress, as the condition is perceived not merely as a health issue but as a blemish on her worth as a woman. This societal rejection, coupled with her husband's abandonment, shatters her sense of self, plunging her into isolation and despair.

The personal anguish she endures is compounded by the harsh judgments of a patriarchal society that equates a woman's value with her physical appearance and marital status. Her mother-in-law Radhakka sends her away to her father's house. "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, and I will inform Anand about this" (Mahahsweta 59).

She steeled herself to confront the world on her own and ultimately decided to leave her father's house, not wanting to burden or embarrass him. She attempted to reach out to Anand, who was in England, but her efforts were in vain; he had lost interest in her due to her leukoderma. Anupama struggles with so many questions in her mind and speaks to herself, "Samuktha, Vasavadata, Noor Jahan, and countless others.

She would get so immersed in the characters that, long after the plays had been staged, she would still remember the dialogues. But Anand, who had never been on stage, surpassed her in

real life! Anand was a Doctor; he knew more about the 'disease' than most people. Then why was he behaving in such a manner? What would he have done if his mother or sister had fallen prey to the affliction? Would he have deserted them as he had her? He would probably have sympathized with them and taken care of them, but when it was his own wife, the woman he claimed to love, he had abandoned her. The rules were different... and society would not question his behaviour… They could not imagine the difficulties, the sorrow and the despair of someone in her position." (Mahashweta 75)

Memory plays a dual role in Anupama's journey, both haunting her and empowering her to move forward. The memories of her marital life and the subsequent betrayal by her husband serve as constant reminders of her pain, making it difficult for her to detach from her suffering. However, Anupama's relationship with her memories evolves as the narrative progresses. Initially, her memories are sources of shame and self-doubt, but through self-reflection and inner resolve, she begins to reinterpret them.

Anupama recalls moments of humiliation and sorrow not as defining her identity but as experiences that shaped her understanding of her own strength. Anupama flies to Mumbai and there she transforms into a new personality. Though life keeps on throwing challenges, but she makes herself stronger every day to survive. She deals with a lot of difficulties and harsh realities of life, but she keeps on fighting. This moment signals a turning point, where memory transitions from being a burden to becoming a wellspring of resilience. The introspective process allows Anupama to reclaim her agency.

Her memories no longer have the power to paralyze her; instead, they serve as lessons that enable her to grow. Her journey toward independence, symbolized by her decision to pursue a career in teaching and live on her own, is deeply intertwined with her ability to reinterpret her past. Anupama realizes that while she cannot erase her memories, she can choose how they influence her. This encapsulates the transformative role of memory in her journey, demonstrating how trauma, when confronted and processed, can lead to empowerment. Her decision on her married life is well explained in her words to Anand: "How can you possibly expect a burnt seed to grow into a tree? Husband, Children, affection, love… all are irrelevant to me now. It is too late for us. I am no longer the naïve Anupama whose world revolved around you. I know what my goals are and I am heading and I don't need anyone's help to reach my destination." (Mahashweta 150)

In *Mahashweta*, Sudha Murthy poignantly explores the feminine experience by highlighting the societal expectations that confine women and diminish their agency. Anupama's journey reflects a courageous critique of these norms, illustrating her eventual rebellion against the patriarchal framework that seeks to define her worth. The novel masterfully depicts her transformation from a submissive victim of societal prejudice to an empowered individual who asserts her independence.

At first, Anupama's life is focused on her societally prescribed roles as a loving wife, daughter-in-law, and woman who needs to be physically flawless. Her diagnosis with leukoderma becomes a turning point, revealing how these societal expectations can be both oppressive and conditional. Her husband Anand, once loving and supportive, abandons her when her condition is deemed a blemish on his social image.

Anupama's decision to leave her marital home is a bold act of defiance against the societal norms that demand her compliance and submission. As she chooses to build a life for herself in Bombay, she reflects on the futility of conforming to expectations that stifle her individuality. This marks a pivotal moment in her journey, where she rejects the need for validation from a

society that has failed her. In Bombay, Anupama embarks on a journey of self-reliance, taking up a teaching job to support herself. This career symbolizes not just financial independence but also her assertion of her intellectual and emotional capabilities. Through her work, Anupama reclaims her agency, demonstrating that her identity is not confined to the roles dictated by her family or society. Anupama's resilience is not limited to surviving her traumatic experiences; it becomes a powerful statement of her independence. She no longer seeks reconciliation with those who wronged her but instead builds a life on her terms. Her emotional and physical scars are changed from representations of suffering to ones of strength.

Anupama's journey in *Mahashweta* is a compelling narrative of resistance against the patriarchal norms that seek to diminish women. By leaving behind an oppressive environment and asserting her independence, she challenges societal structures that equate a woman's worth with her conformity to traditional roles. Her resilience and determination serve as a testament to the strength of women who refuse to be defined by their circumstances, offering an inspiring critique of the societal constraints that continue to affect women.

The Binding Vine: Tale of Urmi, Breaking Cycle of Silence and Suppression

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* intricately weaves a narrative of personal and inherited trauma, focusing on the protagonist, Urmi. The novel begins with Urmi grappling with the devastating loss of her infant daughter, Anu, a grief that permeates her every thought. In parallel, she discovers the story of Mira, her deceased mother-in-law, through a collection of poems and diaries. These writings reveal Mira's anguish as a victim of marital rape, her dreams thwarted by an oppressive patriarchal system. She encountered another rape victim, Kalpana, who was forced to remain silent because of societal pressure. Urmi's own trauma becomes intertwined with Mira's, as well as with the experiences of other women in her community, forming a tapestry of shared pain and resilience.

The novel thus becomes a profound exploration of how personal and collective histories shape the feminine experience while also highlighting the power of solidarity and storytelling in breaking cycles of silence and suppression. The novel revolves around Urmi's sorrow over the passing of her daughter, Anu. Urmi's struggle to reconcile her longing for Anu with the emptiness of her absence is portrayed with pure emotional intensity. She is grieving and in pain over the death of her child, and her dreams were crushed when Anu passed away. Her desires have been broken, and she has tried to repress everything, even feeling like dying. Even though she is well-educated and well-off, she feels that her life is meaningless and chaotic. Urmi says, "It was the smell of hopelessness that's what haunts me now, the smell of hopelessness; I've lost hope entirely" (*The Binding Vine* 21).

Her grief is not only personal but also a reflection of societal expectations of motherhood as a woman's ultimate identity. In one moment of introspection, this tension between personal loss and societal pressure reveals how grief is often gendered, placing an unfair burden on women to endure silently. Mira's poetry, which Urmi discovers and translates, serves as a haunting testament to her suppressed suffering. Married off at a young age and subjected to marital rape, Mira's voice is silenced both in her marriage and in her family. Her poetry becomes the only outlet for her anguish, a silent rebellion against a system that denies her autonomy.

One of her verses poignantly conveys her despair: "My body, a battleground, my spirit a prisoner." Urmi discovers a lot about Mira through her poetry, which also highlights her feelings and the reasons why she is unable to get over her problems. Urmi thinks that, "perhaps it was her writing that kept her going that kept her alive" (*The Binding Vine* 127).

Mira's trauma underscores the pervasive nature of patriarchal violence, where even the most personal relationships become sites of oppression.

In *The Binding Vine*, Kalpana's story adds another poignant layer to the novel's exploration of trauma and feminine suffering. Kalpana, a young woman who becomes a victim of rape, represents the pervasive societal stigma that silences survivors and prioritizes family honor over justice. Her trauma is compounded by her mother Shakutai's reluctance to seek justice, fearing societal judgment and the ruin of Kalpana's prospects. Shakutai's concern over what people will say reveals the societal tendency to hold women accountable for crimes committed against them.

In one telling moment, Shakutai says, "If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her. Doctor, she turns to him, even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't let anyone know of it, I have another daughter, what will become of her…? If I talk, who will marry her? What will happen to her future?"(*The Binding Vine* 59).

This heartbreaking sentiment reflects the cultural obsession with a woman's purity as tied to her worth, often leading to the suppression of her voice. Mira's writings bring her voice to life, allowing Urmi to confront the intergenerational silence surrounding women's suffering. Urmi's discovery of Mira's poetry not only uncovers Mira's pain but also helps Urmi process her grief over Anu.

Memory becomes a bridge that connects their experiences, allowing Urmi to find meaning in her suffering. By engaging with these memories, Urmi transforms her grief into empathy, recognizing the universality of women's pain and the potential for healing through understanding. Storytelling emerges as a crucial act of resistance in *The Binding Vine*.

Mira's poetry, Urmi's narration, and the stories of other women serve as testimonies against the silencing forces of patriarchy. By bringing Mira's voice to light, Urmi challenges the erasure of women's experiences, asserting the value of their stories. Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* is a profound exploration of trauma, memory, and feminine resilience.

Through Urmi's journey, the novel delves into the intersections of personal and collective grief, highlighting how memory and storytelling can serve as tools for healing and resistance. The novel challenges patriarchal systems that sustain trauma and presents a vision of empowerment and solidarity by giving voice to the stories of women like Mira who have been silenced. Urmi's ability to navigate her pain and find strength in shared experiences underscores the transformative potential of connection and understanding in the face of oppression.

Comparative Analysis of both Mahashweta and The Binding Vine

The Binding Vine by Shashi Deshpande and Mahashweta by Sudha Murthy both explore the themes of female trauma, memory, and resilience in great detail, providing different but complementary perspectives on the difficulties faced by women in Indian society. The centrality of female trauma and the frequent social rejection that goes along with it are central to both novels. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's diagnosis of leukoderma triggers ostracization and abandonment, with her condition symbolizing societal prejudice against women who fail to meet physical standards of perfection.

Similarly, in *The Binding Vine*, characters like Mira and Kalpana endure societal silencing, with Mira's marital rape dismissed as a marital duty and Kalpana's rape buried under fears of dishonor. These narratives expose the pervasive patriarchal structures that perpetuate silence and shame, placing the burden of guilt on survivors rather than perpetrators.

Memory plays a crucial role in both stories, acting as both a source of pain and a pathway to healing. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's memories of betrayal and societal rejection initially haunt her but later empower her as she reinterprets her experiences to reclaim her agency.

In contrast, *The Binding Vine* uses intergenerational memory to connect past and present traumas, as Urmi engages with Mira's poetry, Kalpana's suffering, and her grief over her own child's death. This exploration of memory underscores its dual role in both preserving pain and enabling empowerment. Both novels also portray the journey from submission to self-assertion, with Anupama breaking free from societal constraints to pursue an independent life and Urmi challenging patriarchal silence by advocating for Mira and Kalpana. These acts of resilience and agency represent a rejection of societal norms that diminish women's worth.

Despite these similarities, the novels differ in their context and scope. *Mahashweta* focuses on individual trauma and recovery as Anupama confronts her condition and societal stigma in a rural and small-town setting marked by conservative middle-class values. In contrast, *The Binding Vine* explores intergenerational trauma and collective healing, set in an urban context that highlights class and caste dynamics. Kalpana's experience, shaped by her lower socio-economic background, exposes additional barriers faced by marginalized women in seeking justice.

While *Mahashweta* emphasizes personal growth and self-reliance, *The Binding Vine* highlights the importance of collective resilience and storytelling in overcoming trauma. Together, these novels offer a comprehensive critique of the patriarchal structures that perpetuate female suffering while presenting distinct pathways to healing and empowerment.

Whether through individual introspection or collective solidarity, through their nuanced portrayals of female trauma, both stories illuminate the complexities of women's experiences, challenging societal norms and offering hope for resilience and self-assertion, highlighting both individual and collective pathways to reclaiming agency and challenging patriarchal norms.

The study of *Mahashweta* by Sudha Murthy and *The Binding Vine* by Shashi Deshpande reveals profound insights into the psychological and social dimensions of trauma. Both novels showcase the alienation, shame, and grief that arise from trauma, compounded by societal norms that amplify women's suffering through rejection, silencing, and victim-blaming. These narratives emphasize how societal stigma transforms personal struggles into broader collective issues, demanding a critique of patriarchal structures.

Central to both stories is the role of memory in reclaiming identity and agency. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama's introspection allows her to reinterpret her past, turning it from a source of anguish into a foundation for resilience. Similarly, in *The Binding Vine*, memory connects generations of women, enabling Urmi to channel her grief into advocacy for justice and solidarity. These novels illustrate how revisiting and reframing memories can empower women to reclaim their identities and assert their agency.

Both works significantly contribute to feminist and trauma studies by contextualizing trauma within the Indian socio-cultural framework. They explore how gender, class, caste, and geography intersect to shape women's experiences, offering critical insights into the systemic nature of their struggles. By centering female voices and examining societal silencing, these novels challenge patriarchal narratives and enrich global feminist discourse.

Literature such as this plays a vital role in voicing female trauma, providing a platform for silenced and marginalized experiences. Through the nuanced portrayal of characters like Anupama, Urmi, Mira, and Kalpana, these stories emphasize the importance of validating

women's experiences and fostering resilience and solidarity. Through their nuanced portrayal of trauma and resilience, *Mahashweta* and *The Binding Vine* underscore the transformative power of memory, the strength of feminine agency, and the urgent need to challenge the societal silencing of women's experiences. These narratives serve as powerful reminders of literature's role in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of female trauma, ultimately inspiring empathy, solidarity, and change.

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