

Analysing Marital Dynamics, Gender Roles, and Self-Discovery in Sudha Murty's Novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*

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Abstract:

Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula* delves into the intricacies of marital relationships, gender roles, personal aspirations, and emotional alienation. The novel centers around Shrimati, a woman who devotes herself to her husband's ambitions, only to realize the emotional cost of her self-sacrifice. Through a lens of psychological and socio-cultural critique, Murty explores the impact of patriarchy on women's lives, the tension between personal growth and marital duty, and the quest for identity. The novel employs powerful symbolism, notably through the Bakula flower, to underscore the fragility of love and the emotional journey toward self-realization. This paper seeks to explore Murty's narrative strategies, her depiction of gender dynamics, and the feminist undertones embedded in the text. Drawing on scholarly interpretations, the paper argues that *Gently Falls the Bakula* is not just a story about one woman's journey but also a larger commentary on the constraints placed upon women within traditional Indian marital structures.

Keywords: *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Sudha Murty, marriage, gender roles, ambition, self-realization, emotional alienation, societal expectations, feminism, symbolism, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Sudha Murty, one of India's most prominent contemporary writers, is known for her exploration of social, emotional, and cultural issues through the lens of familial and marital relationships. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Murty presents a nuanced portrayal of love, sacrifice, and the societal pressures faced by women in traditional marriages. The novel focuses on Shrimati, a woman who, in her desire to support her husband's ambitions, loses her own sense of self and her dreams. This narrative offers a stark critique of gendered expectations in Indian society, where a woman's role is often defined by her relationship to her husband rather than her personal identity.

The story of Shrimati and Shrikant is not just about individual relationships but reflects a broader social commentary on the inequities inherent in patriarchal marriages. The novel's emotional depth and its reflection on the psychological toll of self-sacrifice make it a poignant critique of how women are expected to function within marriages without acknowledging their own needs and desires. This paper examines the dynamics between the two protagonists, analyzing how Murty's portrayal of marriage critiques the unequal distribution of emotional and social power between the genders.

2. Gendered Dynamics in Marriage: The Cost of Sacrifice

At the core of *Gently Falls the Bakula* is the theme of gendered dynamics in marriage, particularly the societal expectations placed on women. Shrimati's selflessness and emotional labour throughout her marriage are emblematic of the traditional view that women's identities are to be centered around their roles as wives and mothers. She dedicates herself entirely to her husband's success, forsaking her own ambitions for the sake of marital harmony and her husband's career. In a traditional patriarchal structure, marriage is often seen as the ultimate fulfilment for women, and personal growth becomes secondary. Murty writes, "For years, I had been carrying a burden, not knowing it, thinking that it was my duty. But now, when I look back, I realize that I was not living my life, I was living his" (Murty, 2008, p. 98). This statement encapsulates Shrimati's growing realization of her personal alienation. Her identity has become so intertwined with Shrikant's success that she has lost her sense of self. While Shrikant's career flourishes, Shrimati's dreams and aspirations are sidelined, revealing the emotional cost of such sacrifices. Scholars such as Shubha (2016) argue that Murty's works consistently expose how societal norms condition women to embrace sacrifice as an inherent part of their marital role. Women, in Murty's novels, often become the silent architects of their husbands' success, at the cost of their own desires and identities. The female protagonists, like Shrimati, are thus shown to be subject to a "double burden"—they bear the emotional weight of the family while remaining invisible in the eyes of society (Shubha, 2016, p. 102). In contrast, Shrikant's pursuit of his ambitions is seen as acceptable, even noble, in the societal framework, which emphasizes male success and growth as integral to family prosperity. As Nair (2014) notes in her study on Murty's characters, "The male characters in Murty's novels are often presented with the space to grow and succeed, while the women remain confined within the boundaries of domesticity" (Nair, 2014, p. 67).

3. Emotional Alienation and the Struggle for Identity

The emotional alienation that Shrimati experiences is one of the central themes of *Gently Falls the Bakula*. She begins the novel as a devoted wife, fully invested in her husband's success. However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that her emotional needs are continuously neglected by Shrikant. The neglect is not just a matter of physical absence but also of emotional withdrawal, where Shrikant's focus on his career leads to a failure to recognize his wife's sacrifices and desires.

Shrimati's sense of isolation is further compounded by the absence of any real emotional connection or communication with her husband. At one point, she reflects, "He talks to me as if I am just a part of the furniture in the house. I am there to take care of his needs, but never to share his joys or sorrows" (Murty, 2008, p. 126). This statement reflects the emotional disconnect that has developed between the couple, with Shrimati's role reduced to that of a caretaker rather than a partner.

This emotional alienation is a key critique of the traditional marriage structure, where the emotional and psychological needs of women are often disregarded in favour of fulfilling the expectations placed on them. As Mishra (2015) observes, Murty's works frequently explore the theme of alienation, highlighting how the emotional and intellectual isolation of female characters can lead to a gradual sense of self-neglect (Mishra, 2015, p. 55).

4. Symbolism of the Bakula Flower: Love, Sacrifice, and Self-Realization

One of the most striking symbols in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is the Bakula flower itself, which serves as a metaphor for both the fading love between Shrimati and Shrikant and Shrimati's journey toward self-

realization. Initially, the Bakula represents the purity of Shrimati's love for her husband. However, as the novel progresses and her personal sacrifices go unrecognized, the flower begins to wilt, mirroring the decline of their emotional connection. Murty writes, "The Bakula bloomed quietly in the garden, untouched by the wind, its fragrance the last vestige of a love that had once seemed eternal" (Murty, 2008, p. 57).

The withering of the Bakula flower symbolizes not only the decay of their relationship but also Shrimati's emotional and personal growth. As the flower fades, Shrimati begins to awaken to the realization that she cannot continue living for someone else's dreams. She must reclaim her own identity. Scholars such as Kumar (2017) have noted that Murty's use of natural symbols, such as flowers, in her novels often reflects the emotional and psychological states of her characters, providing readers with a deeper insight into their internal struggles (Kumar, 2017, p. 74).

Shrimati's final decision to leave Shrikant and pursue her academic ambitions is symbolized by the blooming of a new, vibrant Bakula flower. This marks her personal rebirth and the beginning of her journey toward self-empowerment. As Murty poignantly writes, "Sometimes, it is only when we lose something that we realize how much we have given up. And sometimes, in that loss, we find ourselves" (Murty, 2008, p. 176).

5. Feminist Reading and Empowerment

From a feminist perspective, *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a powerful commentary on the limitations placed upon women within traditional marital roles. Murty critiques the idea of female fulfilment being synonymous with marriage and sacrifice. Shrimati's eventual journey toward independence represents the feminist ideal of self-empowerment through self-discovery and autonomy. As Bhatt (2019) argues, Murty's portrayal of Shrimati's empowerment is a challenge to the notion that women should define their existence through their relationships with men (Bhatt, 2019, p. 142).

Shrimati's decision to step away from her marriage and pursue her own academic goals challenges the traditional view that women's happiness lies in their devotion to their husbands. As Murty's narrative suggests, true fulfilment can only come when a woman acknowledges her own worth and aspirations, irrespective of societal expectations. This aligns with the feminist critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution that often limits women's freedom and growth.

6. Conclusion

Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula* offers a profound exploration of love, sacrifice, gender roles, and personal identity. Through the emotional and psychological journey of Shrimati, Murty critiques the traditional structures of marriage that demand self-sacrifice from women while providing little space for their personal growth. The symbolism of the Bakula flower serves as a poignant reflection of the fragility of love and the transformative potential of self-realization.

In offering a feminist critique of patriarchal marriage, Murty provides a voice to the silent struggles of women, urging readers to reconsider the conventional notions of love, sacrifice, and fulfilment. Through Shrimati's journey, Murty emphasizes the importance of individuality and self-respect, ultimately asserting that the path to true happiness and self-empowerment lies in the recognition and nurturing of one's own aspirations.

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