

ENCASING THE SELF WITH DIGNITY IN GENTLY, FALLS THE BAKULA

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Sudha Murthy is an Indian woman writer in Kannada and English. Sudha Murthy's women protagonists are all drawn from the middle-class family set up and are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career-oriented. Above all Sudha Murthy's portrayal of women stirs out a universal reach out of their problems. Her works draw on the subtle factors and besetting influences contributing to the none-too-happy position of women in the emerging Indian society. Women firstly find themselves trapped in the roles assigned to them by the society and later on attempt to assert their individuality. Sensitive to the changing times and situations they revolt against the traditions in their search for freedom and eventually succeed in achieving self-identity and independence. The writer presents varied mood and tone in her works with the central being feminist approach.

The novels of Sudha Murthy are relevant to all generations because she writes about the predicament of traditional women. Sudha Murthy's novels generally centre round family relationships. However, women and women's issues form the central part of her novels.

Quest for self has been a popular theme of contemporary Indian English women's fiction. Many writers have portrayed the problem of the place of women in society; their true belonging and their role in marital relationship. More often than not the novels end on a realistic note. Her women are strong in character and take bold decisions to survive in society.

Keywords: Quest for self, Individuality, Patriarchy, Husband and wife relationship, Rights of women, Alienation, Education.

Sudha Murthy was born in 1950 in Shiggaon in North Karnataka. She stood first in her B.E for which she received a gold medal from the Chief Minister of Karnataka. She was the first woman engineer to be selected in Telco (now Tata Motors), Pune. On November 19, 2004, she was presented with the Raja –Lakshmi award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to social work by the Sri Raja-Lakshmi foundation, Chennai. In 2006, she was awarded the *Padmashri*, the fourth highest civilian award from the Government of India and received an honorary doctorate from Satyabama University, Chennai. In 2011, Sudha Murthy was conferred with an honorary LLD, Doctor of laws, an honorary degree for her contribution in promoting formal legal education and also providing scholarships to study law.

Sudha Murthy has obtained a mark of reputation the hard way having shouldered many a responsibility on the way, including supporting her illustrious husband through it all. Though it appears as if she has always taken the back seat in life's journey, she now heads Infosys Foundation, being an engineer, a teacher, writer, mother and wife. She is a prolific writer in Kannada and English. Her books have been translated into all the major Indian

languages. She has espoused her philosophical views on charity, hospitality, social justice and self-realization through her fictional narratives.

In her novel, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati, the protagonist, is deprived of encouragement and recognition for her intelligence and academic excellence in her love marriage. The novel showcases the plight of an educated woman willingly confining herself to the concept of *Sahadharmacharini*. The heat of her husband's fanatic chase of rising high on the corporate ladder burns her down to fatigue and frustration. Lack of companionship is a void in her life. She questions a way out of her personal imbroglio within the standard restrictions of the traditional societal norms. She is a fictional example to the obvious transition that is taking place in the mind-set of modern Indian women. She is the one who chooses to come out of the incompatible relationship within the marriage of love.

Gently, Falls the Bakula (2008) is a tragedy that has a direct bearing on a woman's emotional living. It is a novel that considers human despair in general and women's misery in particular. The institution of marriage and larger social system victimize women resulting in irredeemable emptiness in their lives. When the reader looks into the woman character's struggle against emotional oppression and her insignificant social role, the reader may identify certain instances of delicate resistance which can be legitimately identified as feminism.

Shrikant is strangely attracted to his childhood classmate Shrimati, a plain-looking yet an amiable person. Shrimati too falls in love with the good-natured and handsome Shrikant. Their childhood classroom competition slowly culminates into romance and love blossoms between them under the Bakula, a fragrant flowered tree at Shrimati and Shrikant's homes and against the wishes of their fighting families who are involved in an long time generations feud and rivalry. The bakula flowers are the attachments to her love letters, carrying the symbolic meaning that the fragrance of their love will never go away. The two would meet secretly on his visits to Hubli. Their love blossoms and inevitably leads to their marriage against the wishes of their families.

Even though Shrikant goes to pursue IIT and Shrimati stays back to pursue her degree in History the distance does not diminish their love. Sudha Murthy deftly uses the technique of symbolism to express the feelings and inner emotions of her characters.

Shrikant was restless . . . holding a bakula flower in his palm, he was wondering why he was fascinated by this tiny flower, that was neither as beautiful as a rose nor had the fragrance of a jasmine or a champaka. And yet, it was very special to him. It held an inexplicable attraction for him. (CP)

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Shrimati turns down a research scholarship offer from a foreign visiting professor, Mike Collins, just before her marriage with Shrikant. This is the first of the umpteen sacrifices she makes for her beloved. The humility and readiness in her hearty submission to her beloved is reflected in her sincere rejection of Ph. D. the prestigious fellowship from a foreign university.

Mary Wollstonecraft was the first major feminist from England. In her literary fiction, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she dared to take the liberal doctrine of inalienable human rights and presumed these rights for her own sex too.

One apprehends in *the vindication* Wollstonecraft's profound sense that the middle-class girl is not being raised in the world and for the world, but raised instead, protected from the world, for the man she will one day marry, isolated and sequestered. She is taught that life is like an intricate dance she will one day be called upon to perform. She learns to move like a puppet on a string, imitating other puppets as artificial and as unreal as she is. She is applauded for accomplishments which are in themselves hollow and encouraged to anticipate a future which is mostly fantasy. (106)

Kamala, Shrimati's mother warns her that she will never be loved by Shrikant's mother and sister for her individuality as it is considered unconventional of a girl expressing her choice of groom, she desires to marry further every daughter-in-law's desire to be appreciated by her mother-in-law will not be fulfilled even in her case. In our society, you marry not only an individual, but also his family. If I have understood them well, they will never accept you as a part of their family. They will never love you. (53)

For Indians, unlike women in some other countries, they are nurtured by the joint family system. A girl is not just a wife in her in-law's place; she is also a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law, and a co-sister. Therefore, the reality is that she is given in marriage not only to a man but also to his family.

As Shrikant holds ground against his mother who wants him to marry another girl, Shrimati makes it clear to her mother that what matters to her is his love, affection and companionship. Eventually they get married but Shrikant's mother never really accepts Shrimati. Her's is typical of a mother-in-law's behaviour in India. Shrimati has to bear with the taunting mother-in-law, who would show her true colours in the absence of Shrikant by saying hurtful things. This victimization very soon comes to an end when Shrimati leaves for Bombay to stay with her husband. However, as per Shrikant's wishes, as a responsible daughter-in-law, she sends money to her mother-in-law.

Shrimati has intended to continue her studies but has sacrificed her higher education to earn money for repaying the loan taken by Shrikant for his family's needs. However, she receives no appreciation from Shrikant and his parents. Shrikant works tirelessly and achieves great success, even though Shrimati was more intelligent than him. She has given up her further studies and has taken the role of managing the household. She has abandoned her academic aspirations and has become his uncomplaining shadow, silently fulfilling her duties as the wife of a corporate leader. While Shrikant rises rapidly in his career, Shrimati struggles to find her true purpose in life. She begins to doubt whether the promises of life are just illusions. She has exchanged the traditional life of the village for the lifestyle of the "smart young set" in the city, where material well-being often requires sacrificing principles.

Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* (1974):

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society; it is

civilisation as a whole that produces this creature.... Which is described as feminine. (249)

Shrimati's motherly instincts remain unsatisfied because her husband is focused on climbing even higher in his career. She had to endure a new kind of taunt from her mother-in-law, being called "barren." Shrimati's loneliness is deepened, but Shrikant remains adamant about not having children. When she suggests adoption, it is promptly rejected by Shrikant;

This is not the end of our lives.... If we do not have children then we will have only one worry. On the contrary if we have children and if they don't come up well, that will become a constant worry...if you think that you need to have children to look after us in our old age, forget it. What the hell have I been doing to my mother other than sending money?... other people's children will never be ours. (98)

In the Indian context a woman is always looked down upon if she does not bear children for a long time. Motherhood is considered a heavenly gift that gives a purpose and identity to her life and to her family and thus is a redemptive factor on the part of a woman in our society. Sudhir Kakar explains in *The Inner World* (1981) the sociological and psychological factors of the concept of motherhood in the Indian context:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if a child is a son, is both a certification and redemption. (56)

These words of Shrikant totally have put out even the remotest hope of having children of their own or adopted. Her yearning for motherhood which would fill the void in her life is not to be. Amidst all this, she keeps in touch with Professor Collins wherever he is, whether in India or in the U.S. However, her Ph.D. dream is still distant. Shrimati falls ill when her husband is abroad. She does not want him to know of her ill-health, as it can affect his performance in career. This goodness on her part is also not acknowledged by Shrikant.

Prof. Collins notices the sadness in her and advises her to take up Ph.D. if only to rekindle the spark of enthusiasm in her life. Shrimati, if you want to do a Ph.D. even now, you can do it. Age is not a bar. I will get you a scholarship. A person like you can always pick up the threads. (113)

After meeting Prof. Collins, Shrimati eventually goes back with a heavy heart for she cannot think of the possibility of doing her Ph.D. for an immediate occasion demands her to play hostess to Shrikant's official and personal friends, with which she is not comfortable, but does it to perfection. The pretence of official relationships which are made on the basis of profit and loss hits her hard. She does not enjoy 'elite' company, which always harps on expensive sarees, jewellery and other materialistic things. Getting his business done is Shrikant's ultimate intention. Practical living matters to him. This attitudinal difference slowly creates a chasm between them.

The professor's words keep haunting her and she starts examining what she has done with her life only to realize that it is dismally empty. She realizes that life is full of compromises and among the many compromises that she has made in order to keep up the

semblance of a happy marriage, the most distressing one is that she has given up her ambition of pursuing research.

She revisits their love letters of past to get a reinforced understanding of a successful marriage. She realises that it requires only mutual love and intense faith. Beauty and mutual attraction are ephemeral. Shrikant's office colleague says that men work for money and then for power, which requires not only hard work but also the unconditional support from the family and that Shrikant is lucky to have found an intelligent yet unambitious wife, which helped him become phenomenally successful. This opinion of Shrikanth's colleague hurts her so much that she shrinks into some kind of non-existentiality.

Shrimati, in desperation, tries to get some time from Shrikanth for herself, but gets chided. She realizes that a house is only a structure and home is a place of feelings and cosy relationship. She has tried playing the role of a perfect wife in order to keep her husband happy and satisfied only to know that she has gone through a self-effacing process the whole time.

After almost a decade of marriage, she realizes that her husband has become too focused on his career and has no place for family matters or to think about her. Her idea of paradise is lost in the very attempt to gain it. The emotional gap between them has now taken the shape of a chasm due to lack of proper communication. Eventually, she takes a decision that leaves her family life shattered. Residing together does not mean it is a family. There is no emotional bonding between the two of them. Instead of contemplating on suicide, she tries to draw strength from her inner strength. She starts viewing herself as an assertive woman and not merely an obedient wife with an emerging new self, she tries to rebuild her lost vision. Since she cannot return to Hubli, she decides to do her Ph. D. with Prof. Collins.

Education seems to be a gateway to the survival for women in our society. The author emphasises the fact that education empowers women. A woman measuring her success through the achievements of her husband is an age-old belief. It would be acceptable only when the wife is given her due recognition of her role in the success of her husband. As girls are indoctrinated at a very tender age into submission, they almost learn servitude. Proper education for a girl from childhood equips her to take care of herself in a respectable manner either as a married woman or a single woman after a failed marriage.

Marriage, for a woman, is always considered a promised end, and in many cases, it eventually restricts the outward as well as the inward and she has no time or space to know herself. Shrimati has no regrets for openly sharing her feelings of remoteness with her husband as she feels alienated from him. She leaves with an aspiration of establishing communion with her own self. Sudha Murthy's *Gently, Falls the Bakula* is based on the sensibility and experience of a woman of intellect and consequential imbalance in her life. As a woman writer, Sudha Murthy focuses more on protagonist's thought and emotion.

Simone de Beauvoir's trenchant observation projected in *The Second Sex* (1974) "He is the subject; he is the absolute she is the other." (6) is considered radical, yet they are true. A man's suppression and domination force the women to rebel and leave everything and go in quest of realizing her own self.

The parting conversation between Shrikant and Shrimati is heart-touching and overwhelming. Shrimati tells him that she cannot bear the loneliness any longer; nor can she

live with artificial values which eulogise materialistic success. She has loved him more than her studies. When he has lost the finer sentiments of life, she too has lost him and is left only with the past. She is not enchanted by the comforts he provided for her and that she is leaving him to find self-fulfilment. She feels that he treated her as an ornament in the social sphere and she cannot be content being just that. The resultant suffocation caused by the ruthless effacement of the self leads her to find ways of defines to safe guard and to encase the self with dignity. As divorce is an instrument of remarriage, she is not interested in it. Thus, she emancipates herself from the shackles of patriarchy to emerge as an independent woman. As Clara Nubile observes in *The Danger of Gender* (2003):

In modern India the situation is still far from an ideal, liberated, democratic model.

Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system. (12)

Shrimati does not fight for her rights nor does she contemplate on her future life as a lone wife. She wants to be free of all bonds which gave her no fulfilment. She rejects divorce as it is a mere legal paper; her life with Shrikant will be in her memories. As a woman of conviction, she should see that past cannot pain her. She is free being alone pursuing knowledge for its own sake.

Women, as individuals, yearn to be liberated from all kinds of restrictions and strive to get recognition, and respect in society. They wish to fulfil a value-added life. On the face of it, no one can deny that it is insensitive, indeed cruel, for any man or woman not to value a relationship and give it its due share of time and attention. Shrikant has ignored the marital bond and never spent quality time with her. Even though her unexpected departure comes as a thunderbolt he grieves for it only for a while which is a home burial.

The novel ends with Shrikant looking back at his domineering self, and how cruel he was to his wife by not giving her much deserved value and time. The theme of the gentle fall of the relationship is depicted deftly that ends on a low-key emotional note. The bakula tree's flowers symbolize the love between them, has had fallen, sadly, unnoticeably. Destiny has left Shrimati as that fallen tiny self-effacing bakula (31) flower in marriage only to find herself transformed into fragrant *rajanigandha* in the field of her interest, history.

Sudha Murthy strongly believes that women should have the courage to express themselves and expose the evils of society fearlessly. She is indignant at the uncomplaining attitude of the victims in the name of honour ranging from basic issues of existence and survival to aspirations like education career and dignity. Weaving her novels around the traditions and customs of Indian society, Sudha Murthy explores women's oppression and her continuous search for liberation which any woman in the world can be associated with women of the contemporary world.

Sudha Murthy tries to erase the picture of woman as secondary and inferior. In fact, Sudha Murthy dedicates her novel "To all those women who allowed family, commitments and responsibilities to overpower their own aspirations." The novel is a mirror of authentic female experience in contemporary society.

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