



A TRAJECTORY OF SHRIMATI FROM SELF-DENIAL TO SELF-ASSERTION IN SUDHA MURTHY'S *GENTLY FALLS THE BAKULA*

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ABSTRACT

Equality is only a Utopian ideal which practically exists neither in the deep dark forests nor in the most civilized and developed human cultures. Inequality and discriminations have always been there on one basis or the other but the worst and almost universal is gender discrimination which has been in almost all the ages. Socializers who give secondary position to women and consider it as predestined often cite from scriptures and literature to evade the human responsibility. According to the Bible, God created the man first, and when he felt lonely the Lord God created the woman from the man's rib only after all the animals proved inadequate companions (Gen 2:18-23). The words, "suitable helper" in verse 18 have traditionally been interpreted to imply a functional subordination of the woman to the man as part of God's design in creation and even the emphasis of Adam's outburst that she is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23) also emphasize that man is possessor and therefore has the right to dominate. Moreover, considering Eve responsible for Adam's fall, God utters a three-part curse on her promising her increased labour pain and further adds, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Gen 3:16) It is believed that it was from here that in human relations the notion of possession, dominance and submission first appeared. Manu is also often (mis)quoted to have supported this notion that woman should never be left independent; she should be under the control of father before marriage, husband after marriage, and sons during old age.

INTRODUCTION

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To assign a definite role both to men and women, most of the social and cultural constructs have systematically devised various myths, social ethos, ideals, images and examples which expect the people to conform to their traditional roles. The dominant male formations and social constructs of patriarchal set up made their best efforts to reduce women to womb by erasing her whole identity and limiting her to be a mere reproductive machine. Women's disinheritance from immovable property, exclusion from the productive economy, seclusion to the domestic sphere, depersonalization behind a veil (burka or purdah) are a few of such strictures. Holding such social construct responsible for women's position, Simone de Beauvoir writes: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (139-146). Supporting this view, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her book *We Should All Be Feminists* writes:

We teach girls shame. Close your legs. Cover yourself. We make them feel as though by being born females, they are already guilty of something. And so girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desires. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretence into an art form. (33)

However, women's position in India was comparatively better in Vedic period when she had equal access to education, studied Vedas and fine arts, participated in discussions and debates, and could choose her groom through 'swayamvar'. They had equal participation in rituals, free opinion in domestic matters and enjoyed right to property. Gargi, Maitreye and Lopamudra are examples of outstanding scholars of this period. The concepts of veil (purdah), dowry and divorce didn't exist then. During the epic period women enjoyed an honourable position and freedom of choice. Women like Savitri, Sita, Kunti and Draupadi are often quoted for their boldness and individuality. During the Budhist period also women occupied a better position and place of respect in religious and cultural activities as well as in social services. Their independent 'sanghas' were called Bhikshuni Sangha'

The long enduring institutions of marriage and family have undergone many changes from time to time. The process of industrialization, urbanization and westernization, excess to education and knowledge, awareness about individuality and rights, realization of the needs of fulfilment, gratification and self-respect have given it a big jolt and has almost led to the breaking up of the traditional joint families. It also has brought about political, ethical, economic, cultural and socio-psychological changes in the life pattern and attitudes of the people of India also, especially among the urban populace. Excessive self-centeredness has shaken the concepts of love, devotion, loyalty, sincerity, sacrifice and self-denial.



If marriage is a must, mutual understanding, compatibility, harmony and respect for each other are necessary to make it meaningful and a bliss. Earlier when the ego-centres were not so developed and rigid, the relationship prospered smoothly despite some defiance, demur, and arguments. Since change is the only constant, with the change of times, priorities and attitudes have changed. Ego clashes, opinionatedness and war for dominance have made compromises, adaptations and adjustments difficult and therefore, the institution of marriage itself stands on the brink of disaster and dissolution. For the perpetuation of the institute of marriage, every society has devised certain codes of conduct and has set norms for both men and women which impose certain restrictions on both genders likewise. However, in most of the traditional societies, women are expected to accept a subservient position to their husbands and husbands are expected to play a passive role in relation to their wives in family and society. But its worst aspect is that women are the equal custodian and perpetuator of hegemony over other women in the curious power structures and hierarchies in the Indian family system. In most of the joint families in India, husbands are not allowed to intervene in the domestic matters to support their wives even if they observe some unjust treatment being given to them. This makes it almost imperative that the condition of women must be studied by relating them to other women in the family. Jayant S. Cherekar's observation is very much applicable to Indian family system:

Mainstream feminists' scholarship attributes the dominance of patriarchal ideology to the activities of men, while regarding women as innocent victims of patriarchal authority. However, a close reading of texts by some African women writers like Mariamma Ba provides the critique of this standpoint and examines the direct and indirect roles played by some women in the sustenance and perpetuation of patriarchal oppression. The focus is on elderly women who often are so ignorant, selfish and manipulative that they make life hard for younger women. (23)

Easy access to education and digital media, awareness of their own rights and consciousness of their human dignity has brought tremendous changes in the condition and status of modern Indian women. Realizing their own potential, they are shouldering and even competing with men and have evinced their superiority to men in many fields. Earlier, women were victims of self-denial and abnegation and therefore moulded themselves completely according to their traditions, customs, and conventions and forgot about their own identity. Women, their socio-familial conditioning, their wretched plight due to numerous social evils, their own struggle to face various social ills and prejudices, efforts of their amelioration and nevertheless succeeding in searching and even asserting an identity of their own have been successfully depicted by so many writers right from the inception of Indian English Literature. Indian English fiction, more than other genres, has found a new world after the globalization and liberalization of Indian economy. In the complex modern life style, we face

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numerous problems at every juncture of life which find their reflection in literature also. Usual themes like poverty, dowry, widow immolation, child marriage, illiteracy and many more have been replaced by new themes like exploitation, crumbling family relationship, search for self-identity and widening of their socio-familial horizon, etc.

Feminist movements in the west mainly aimed at questioning, rejecting and overthrowing the dominance of the man over woman; more precisely, of husband over wife since the social structure of the west is considerably different from that of India. In the west, woman is related primarily to her husband only and has hardly much to do with her husband's parents and other relatives. Despite their closeness, they are separate individuals and in-laws and relatives hardly ever interfere in the couple's life. But the same is just opposite in Indian families wherein a woman is not only a wife to her husband but a daughter-in-law and a sister-in-law also. Every single citizen in India has a social identity and not an individual identity. Therefore, a woman also is identified through her social and familial relations. A woman's conduct and behaviour are expected according to her husband's relations with various members of the family. Post-modern feminism represents transformation and change in feminist thoughts also and therefore though they are turning back to traditionalist, motherly image with their own conditions, they exercise their own choices—domestic role or career. The amenities and tools of post modernism provide them better scopes, strong voice and immediate support to voice their concerns. Elaborating the characteristics of post modernism, Kanwar Dinesh Singh writes: "It lays emphasis on individual woman's inner freedom and awakening on resolving the issues and problems raised by feminism and on understanding the relationship of interdependence between man and woman" (18).

Among the modern Indian feminist writers, Sudha Murthy is a prominent and somewhat different feminist writer whose literary works deal with crucial subjects related to the modern Indian women in the era of liberalization and globalisation. Her writings highlight a fair perspective of women's relations with men as well as with other women. She has portrayed her women protagonists as individual and independent human beings who seek fulfilment of their ideas and aspirations while struggling for space in the traditional social set-up of the Indian society. All her novels portray men who love their wives, use them as ladder to their career and ambition but eventually neglect and demean them which ultimately lead to inevitable destruction of domestic happiness and personal relations.

Sudha Murthy, in her novels, focuses mainly on women's quest for their own identity and their continuous struggle to come out from the four walls of male dominated and patriarchal society. Her dedication of her novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*— "To all those women who allow family commitments and responsibilities to overpower their own aspirations"—clearly brings forth to us what the novelist actually wants to show. She has excellently penned down the absurdity of the social evils, peculiar mindset of familial hierarchy and their consequent

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stifling. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, she has portrayed Shrimati as an assertive woman in the last chapter of the novel where she ultimately walks out of her meaningless married life to find solution to her problems. She belongs to a middle-class family, inherits traditional value system, carries a positive attitude towards life without having even a tinge of complaint or blame against her fate or destiny.

Murthy's grasp of Indian family system is much deeper and more practical. As far as the condition of women in Indian society is concerned, Murthy holds women, more than men, responsible for a systematic suppression of women as opposed to the traditional idea of feminism wherein men are considered as the perpetrators of gender inequality. She dives deep to understand the reason of inequality and discrimination and finds that certain women in the Indian society continue to worsen the condition of other women. In most of her novels, Murthy has depicted the mother-in-law in a negative role holding her responsible for most of the sufferings of the daughter in law. The social setting that Murthy has shown in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is conservative and staunch with a very little scope for adaptation. She writes: "It was a purely patriarchal society where the head of the family decided everything—be it arranging a marriage, making a donation to a temple or an ordinary household matter. The women were always in the background, suppressed, and subservient, irrespective of their age" (12).

Even in a patriarchal society it is the women like Gangakka in *Gently Falls the Bakula* who are responsible for distressed and deplorable condition of the protagonist Shrimati. Murthy does not directly blame husbands or any other patriarch in the family for the ills against women or as perpetrators of cruelty on them. Her characters also face numerous problems but despite all that they fight for themselves and create a new world of their own.

Shrikant's mother Gangakka is "a cunning, manipulative, fierce and extremely practical lady" (15). She lost her husband even before her children could complete their schooling. She is out and out Machiavellian. She takes all help from her brother Sheenappa in bringing up her children and performing Rama's marriage, but she very cleverly sets aside the proposal of his daughter's marriage with her son Shrikant. She has elaborate plans and expectations of getting huge dowry in her son's marriage. She widens her social circles and begins to make more pomp and show to impress the prospective brides and their families. She doesn't like Shrikant's idea of getting married so early and that to with Shrimati who will bring no dowry. She already harbours so much of bitterness against Shrimati and her family.

Some people are so fastidious that even the best efforts to please them fail. Shrimati does her best to please her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, but in spite of all her dedication, diligence and sacrifice, she is treated as an alien only. Gangakka and Rama never miss any opportunity to taunt and humiliate Shrimati when she comes to Hubli on Diwali. She comes to know that



Shrimati wants to pursue her Ph.D. Gangakka doesn't want to let this opportunity slip from her hands. Along with Rama, she makes a shrewd plan to entangle her into her emotional trap through Shrikant. Rama writes a letter to Shrikant on behalf of Gangakka that she had taken a loan of Rupees on lac for Shrikant's education and now she is being pressurized to return the same. When Shrikant fails to find any solution to this immanent problem, Shrimati, as a dutiful wife, immediately offers to postpone her Ph.D. She compromises to do a private job so as to earn money and supplement Shrikant's income and enable him to repay his mother's pretended loan. She tells Shrikant: "When you are mine, your loan is also mine. It comes as a package. I cannot say I want only my husband. His joys and difficulties are also acceptable to me" (77). Shrimati neither thinks nor ever mentions that by making this sacrifice she is anyhow obliging her husband or his family. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes in her book *We Should All Be Feminists*:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, pretend that you are not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him'. (27-28)

Gangakka is a shrewd planner and expert manipulator who never hesitates in sentimentally exploiting her son. She makes him believe that his mother took extraordinary pains in bringing him up and in educating him. She sentimentalizes him to the extent that even when Gagakka insults, humiliates or neglects Shrimati, he never considers his mother wrong. As a patriarch, he also believes that a daughter-in-law should silently submit herself to whatever way she is treated by her in-laws.

Shrimati is a curious synthesis of very ordinary and extraordinary human characteristics. In her appearance, dressing style, food habits, sharing households, she is an ordinary woman, but in intellectual level, depth of understanding, giving proper respect to elders, patience, sacrifice and determination, she is certainly extraordinary. Appreciating her simple but registering personality, the novelist writes: "Ms. Shrimati Deshpande was a slim tall girl with a wheatish complexion and good clear features. She had unusually long hair that reached below her knees. She always wore a string of bakula flowers in her hair. Shrimati was one of the brightest students in her class" (04). The novelist further writes: "She grew up a bright, extremely accommodating but introverted young girl" (15).

Shrimati had obtained the first position in the whole state in the Secondary School Certificate examination. Though everyone during her school and college education appreciated her extraordinary curricular and co-curricular achievements, Shrimati has been unassuming and innocent without ever showing even a tinge of pride or arrogance. Her attitude towards



success and life reflects amazing steadiness and balance in her character. Despite being young, Shrimati had the equanimity of an ascetic.

Shrimati's love and dedication for Shrikant is unconditional and undemanding. Though they have different career orientations—Shrikant pursuing I.I.T. and Shrimati pursuing her studies in history—both of them prove their excellence in their respective fields. Shrimati's depth of understanding history is evident even from the example that professor Rao asked her to prepare notes for him on Buddhism as he was going to Japan and Indonesia to deliver lectures on Buddhism. Appreciating her scholarship to Professor Mike Collins says Professor Rao, "...Shrimati is an excellent student and one of my favourites. Her interest in history is similar to Dorothy's. She has prepared extensive notes on Buddhism. You can see how she writes" (43). Realizing her potential, Prof. Collins also appreciated her saying: "Shrimati, students like you who are passionate about history must do research. If you wish, I can get you a scholarship at our university" (49). Collins knew it very well that though Shrimati has preferred love and marriage at this stage, an inquisitive scholar like her cannot resist herself from the pursuit of knowledge for a long time. He said: "I don't want to intrude in your personal life. But don't you feel that if you don't pursue your love of history, you will get frustrated and bored?" (49)

As a traditional wife, Shrimati has wholly effaced herself and at this stage of life her love for Shrikant and wifely duties are her priorities. She makes it clear to Shrikant that she won't be able to bring a lot of gold or silver to match his mother's expectation and also she has no interest in how much he earns. She tells him: "Regarding yourself, you know Shri, the figure of your salary is immaterial to me. The foundation of my happiness is not the digits that you earn, but the digits of your love, affection and companionship" (63). She makes another compromise by postponing her Ph.D. programme when Shrikant is posted to Delhi. However, Shrikant proposes that either he should reject the offer to go to Delhi or Shrimati can stay alone in Bombay to enrol for her Ph.D. But Shrimati is clear in her mind. She says: "No Shri, neither option is acceptable. I don't want you to forgo your promotion by rejecting this offer, nor do I want to stay alone. We will stay in Delhi for one year and I will take up my studies next year. Any way north Indian has a lot of historical places that I can visit" (84). It's really very surprising that an inquisitive scholar like Shrimati can be so complacent and self-sacrificing.

Tradition bound women like Shrimati consider their husband's success and happiness as their own. The age old saying that behind every successful man there is a woman is quite befitting in case of Shrikant and Shrimati. On Shrikant's elevation to the post of General Manager of the company, Shrimati expresses her happiness saying: "Shri, I have always been a part of your life. Your achievements have always been mine" (93). Shrikant's friend Ravi also in his letter to Shrikant acknowledges the most important factor behind his success. He writes:

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Shrikant, there are very few achievers in life. Those who achieve what they set out to, are even more rare. What you have dreamt, you have realized. My heart jumps with joy, I also remember 'the other hand of yours' who is behind your success. She has been unassuming, undemanding, and totally submissive to your needs and to your achievements, Shrikant, without her, you would not have been what you are today. (102)

Later on, while working in Bombay with Shrikant again Harish thinks about the real source and inspiration behind Shrikant's success: "To achieve that kind of success, one required a supportive, intelligent but docile and unambitious wife. Intelligent women are normally ambitious. Someone like Shrimati, who never ever demanded anything from her husband, was rare" (142).

Shrimati has been practically acting as Shrikant's personal secretary. Though Shrikant has a secretary in the office but after office hours it is Shrimati who takes care of everything—entering in his diary about appointments, programs, plans, preparing the schedules of meetings, organizing his official parties to entertain his corporate world. Though she often got physically and mentally exhausted in doing all that, she was in the habit of doing everything meticulously well. Appreciating her devotion, the novelist writes, "Shrimati was so used to doing whatever she was told that being obedient had become a habit. It often upset her greatly, yet she could not disobey instructions" (116). In this context, Anees Jung in his work *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* makes very perceptive remarks:

In this complex pantheon of diversities, the Indian women remain the point of unity, unveiling through every single experience, a collective unconsciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power of weakness of age and time. She remains still the centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of racial life which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality concentration. (68)

Shrimati unflinchingly and sincerely carried her responsibilities on her back in all her roles as a daughter, as a student and as a wife. She voluntarily supported her husband and mother-in-law and always stood up with them, even in difficult times. For the welfare of her house and career of her husband, she sacrificed her inquisitiveness, research, career and even motherhood. The fact cannot be denied that motherhood gives a sense of fulfilment to a woman. Regularization of sex act and procreation are the most important motive factors behind getting married. Shrimati felt completely broken and devastated when her husband over looked her wish to have a child. She felt herself completely lonely. Standing lonely on the sea beach, Shrimati dived deep into her past ruminating:



What had happened to Shrikant now? The love, affection and sharing of ideas and dreams had disappeared. He hardly talked to her about the company or other business matters. The only time he spoke to her was to assign a list of chores for her to do. For him she had undergone so much opposition, criticism and nastiness from her in-laws. She had even given up her career, only because she really loved him. But Shrikant was not the same person she knew before their marriage. This Shrikant Deshpande was only interested in name, fame, position and status. In building up his business, he had forgotten his dear wife. This Shrikant appeared a stranger to her. Where could she find her old 'Shri'? (117-18)

Though not with any deliberate intention, Shrikant has completely enmeshed Shrimati's personality and individuality into his own. Now he takes for granted that Shrimati will take care of his official guests or visitors and like a charming hostess she will cater to their needs. But in one of such parties Shrimati couldn't help herself from correcting Dolly, the American guest's ignorant and arrogant remarks about La Giaconda. But this annoyed and infuriated Shrikant who took it to be an insult to his company guest. On the way home in the car he spoke to Shrimati very rudely for exhibiting her knowledge of history: "Enough of your lecture, Shrimati. Don't talk about your worthless subject. The world of business is so different from yours. History cannot feed you. Don't behave like a historian at such parties. You should remember that you represent our company and must be loyal to it. After all, what is there in India's history to boast so much about?" (124).

Shrimati and Shrikant are again poles apart in their attitude to life. Shrikant has grown holistically materialistic and measures success and happiness only on the scale of materialism only but Shrimati's attitude is of ascetic self-denial. For her cerebral life without any pomp and show and materialistic amenities is most important which Shrikant can never understand. In his opinion, he has given her everything a husband can give. He utterly fails to understand her changed behaviour: "She was no longer her calm and docile self. She would argue over silly things. She had everything in life, all the comforts and conveniences. Her mother-in-law was not staying with her, she could do what she liked, buy whatever she wanted....He had no bad habits—he did not drink nor did he womanize. And yet Shrimati was unhappy" (138-39).

Shrikant had agreed to take a three days break and Shrimati made elaborate plans to spend three days with him at Ladakh. But fate willed it otherwise. Shrikant was urgently required to go to US for three weeks on an official tour. He asked Shrimati to cancel the tickets and postpone the tour but this time she was adamant and was in no mood to compromise. For the first time she wanted to firmly put her demand forward to let him know that she did not want to be the lowest priority any more. Realizing too well that Shrikant was living only for himself and his ambition, she burst out angrily:

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Shri, you cannot go anywhere today. You always think of yourself. You are so selfish that you think only of your position, your company and your mother. You never think of me as a human being or what hurts me and what makes me happy! You treat me like a machine. You give appointments to everybody but you don't have any time for me. Don't I deserve one? Don't you have duty towards me? You spend all day occupied by your company, physically and mentally. What is left for me? (147-48)

Shrimati felt that in this humdrum existence of materialistic life she is a mere shadow of Shrikant and she will forever remain so without any identity or individuality of her own. She realized: "Her life would be that of a planet which shines with reflected light, rather than that of a star which radiates its own light" (150). She couldn't forget the way Shrikant had sneered at her. She asked herself: "Indeed, what had she really achieved in life? Nothing. A big zero. If they had children, things might have been a bit better. Even if Shrikant spent all his time in office, she could spend her time with the children. But Shrikant had rejected the idea of adoption too. Maybe even if they had children, Shrikant would have sent them to a boarding school like Harish had done" (150).

Pondering deep over her predicament, Shrimati wanted to seek some happiness and satisfaction at this juncture of life. She had loved only her husband and history. Since Shrikant had made his priorities and feelings clear, she is left with only history. She realized that she had sacrificed her happiness of college days, appreciation on getting gold medals, pride of being sponsored scholarship by Professor Collins, all for the sake of her love for Shrikant. But "Shrikant's love had evaporated like water from a cup. Now the cup was empty, and so was her heart. How true had been her mother's prediction!" (151). Ultimately, she decides to leave everything and go to US for her Ph.D. on a scholarship. She tells Shrikant: "Shri, what have I done all these years? I used to welcome your guests, keep your accounts, look after the house and fulfil the duties just the way your personal secretary does. I was your valuable, glittering ornament in the social circuit. I no longer want to be that. I want to live the way I want" (162).

Her decision was a bolt from the blue for Shrikant because he never expected such a drastic change in her attitude. His thought process continued: "No one in this male-dominated society would appreciate her step but Shrimati had left him without even bothering about what people would think. She had acted on what she felt was right" (165). Thus, she shows that modern Indian woman's adaptation and tolerance is only up to a limit and after that she will launch herself in search and assertion of her identity and individuality. Madhumati Adhikari comments on the Indian woman:



The emerging new women are rebellious, recalcitrant and self-assertive. Economic independence makes her confident and articulate. The emerging New Woman strives for her identity but still she has to depend for emotional support on her family. There are characters in literature who, either live in the conventional old style or are a combination of the old and the new. New Woman is marked by her struggle for her identity and individual aspirations. She is neither subjugated nor defied but a human person desirous of living in society as a responsible member with equal rights and freedom to pursue her own goals. (Adhikari 33)

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