

**Balancing Ambition and Love: A Critical Analysis of Gender Roles, Sacrifice, and Emotional Disconnect in Sudha Murty's Gently Falls the Bakula**

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**Abstract**

Sudha Murty, a versatile individual, is renowned for her contributions to social work, writing, and charity. She adeptly integrates her technical expertise, social consciousness, and narrative skill to produce fiction that resonates with a diverse readership. She constructs sympathetic people and scenarios in her literary works. She conveys potent social and moral messages that serve as motivation for contemporary youngsters. Her art elicits emotions, precisely encapsulates Indian experiences and perspectives, and inspires readers to reflect on their own identities and emotional processes. A new cohort of authors and social advocates is motivated by her works. The writer examines several subjects, encompassing social justice, women's empowerment, education, and personal development. The author depicts the human condition, illustrating the challenges and triumphs of commonplace individuals, particularly in rural India. Her narratives always emphasise the significance of empathy, compassion, and altruism. She consistently urges readers to reassess human values and interests. Furthermore, her writings exalt the significance of love, family, and friendship, underscoring the vital role of connections in our existence. Her debut novel, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, emphasises the romantic relationship between Shrikant and Shrimati. Initially, the pair provides mutual support and encouragement for their own growth and development to overcome adversity. The novel examines issues of socioeconomic class and inequality, the transformative influence of love and friendship, and the journey of human growth and self-discovery. Sudha Murty writes a compelling narrative that explores the human experience and encourages readers to appreciate their connections. This study article elucidates how Shrimati, the protagonist of the novel, experiences self-realization and ultimately forges a distinctive identity.

**Keywords**

Sudha Murty, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, ambition, marriage, gender roles, emotional alienation, communication, sacrifice, Indian literature, marital conflict

**Introduction**

Sudha Murty, a prominent Indian author, works extensively in both Kannada and English. She has authored travelogues, non-fiction works, short tales, novels, and technical texts. In 2006, she was awarded the Padma Shri and the prestigious R.K. Narayan Award for her literary accomplishments. Her works are meticulously crafted and ingeniously structured, garnering acclaim on both national and international platforms. Her writings generally explore the real-life challenges faced by Indian women upon marriage and their strategies for navigating these complex situations. Her female characters are intelligent, resilient, and devoted to their marriages. They also attempt to save their deteriorating marriages. The majority of individuals feel that India's affluent cultural history preserves the nation's social, political, cultural, economic, and psychological cohesion. Nevertheless, it appears that the institutions constituting the culture of contemporary society are susceptible to significant disruptions that might result in the conclusion or even complete collapse of socio-cultural institutions. These shocks arise from psychological expressions of self-interest and ambition that transcend the limits of diverse social and cultural ethics. Sudha Murty's inaugural novel, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, published in 2008, narrates the evolution of Shrimati from a dedicated and selfless spouse to a resilient, autonomous woman. Shrimati and Shrikant reside adjacent to one another, with a Bakula tree around their residences. Notwithstanding the animosity between their families, they fall in love and marry. The gifted and capable Shrimati relinquishes her aspirations for her ambitious and power-seeking husband, Shrikant. Nevertheless, at the deduction of the novel, she resolves to terminate the relationship to pursue her ambitions. The tale starts with the announcement of the school results and concludes with a remarkable day that epitomises the lives of Shrikant and Shrimati. In the novel, Murthy adeptly illustrates the anguish associated with modern work ethics and lifestyles. Shrikant, ambitious and career-oriented, joins an IT business following his marriage. Shrimati relinquishes her own aspirations and remains at home to care for her family and assist her husband in advancing his profession and ascending the corporate hierarchy. Shrimati, as Shrikant's personal secretary, also fulfils her responsibilities as a devoted wife proficiently. Regrettably, Shrikant does not acknowledge the extent of his wife's contributions to his success. As Shrimati progressively understands her husband's mindset, she perceives a void in her existence. She undergoes a transformation into a decorative, expressionless doll. Ultimately, she resolves to investigate her identity and thus departs from the residence. She struggles to conform to arbitrary norms.

I must inhale untainted air. I decline to be your subordinate in life. I want personal satisfaction. Sir, I would not have to experience such solitude. Had I not been astute and discerning, I may have revelled in your affluence. Upon reflecting on my life thus far and my aspirations, I discerned my desires (GFB 161).

Shrimati's self-worth is influenced by public perception and cultural norms, characterised by sentiments of inadequacy and self-doubt. As she navigates complex situations, her self-esteem grows, resulting in her being stronger, more independent, and more robust. She cultivates self-esteem, acknowledges her talents and capabilities, and learns to have confidence in her own judgements. Ultimately, Shrimati attains a more affirmative and empowered self-perception. She confronts issues with assurance. This transformation in Shrimati illustrates her growth and evolution as she liberates herself from societal restraints and forges her own path.

Shrimati's identity undergoes substantial transformation as she advances through life. She evolves into a more self-defined and empowered individual, rather than being characterised by her relationships and societal obligations. She is first portrayed as a dutiful daughter, a loyal friend, a devoted wife, and a harmonious part of the society. As she navigates her experiences and relationships, she uncovers and affirms her identity, independence, self-worth, confidence, uniqueness, and autonomy. By engaging in self-discovery, she liberates herself from cultural conventions and cultivates a dynamic and developing identity.

Shrimati on a transformative journey of self-discovery. Despite grappling with fears, self-doubt, and a lack of autonomy, Shrimati cultivates self-awareness, confidence, and independence via her interactions and experiences, ultimately emerging with a robust sense of self. Her change enables readers to contemplate their own identities and journeys toward self-realization. Sudha Murty imbues her female characters with the mental fortitude to prevail and assert their presence within a patriarchal environment. Her heroes are distinctive due to their ability to embrace, integrate, and internalise their own cultures while being cognisant of their Indian identity. Shrikant firmly asserts that his achievements in life are the result of diligent effort. As Shrikant ascends the corporate hierarchy, the

hedonistic perspectives of the materialistic world start to engulf him. Shrimati, who always supports him in challenging situations and sacrifices her own career to further his, subsequently endures suffering. She is profoundly discontented when he neglects to acknowledge the sacrifices she has undertaken. Previously, Shrimati had refuted the notion of studying abroad, as she was much in love with Shrikant and desired to remain with him.

#### Analysis

In the Great Indian Kitchen, a Malayalam film addressing patriarchy, the nameless protagonist does all domestic responsibilities, although her contributions remain unappreciated by anybody. Her hubby consistently prohibits her from travelling anytime she gets the chance to instruct dancing. She suffers from both bodily and psychological distress. Ultimately, she transcends obstacles, challenges societal norms, and seeks her own autonomy, culminating in a dramatic act when she discards kitchen wastewater in front of her husband. Similarly, Shrimati liberates herself from all constraints. She declares, "I wish to pursue my doctorate" (GFB 153). This illustrates the evolving responsibilities and ambitions of contemporary women who endeavour to transcend traditional limitations and establish economic parity with men. Historically, women were frequently defined in relation to their husbands and assigned subservient positions. Contemporary women are prepared to confront these patriarchal limitations and assert their own identities. In Indian culture, a woman's identity has historically been associated with her husband, rendering her inferior and dependent on him. This viewpoint sustains the notion that women are ornamental adjuncts accompanying their husbands, engaging just with those sanctioned by their partners. Any autonomous relationship, particularly with the opposing gender, is frequently labelled as 'immoral.' Although Shrimati resolves to part ways with Shrikant, she immediately has some concern for her beloved. It appears more advantageous for her to disregard him for the sake of her promising future. She desires to have the same autonomy that Shrikant experiences in his profession. She seeks to establish her own identity. This illustrates the evolving roles and ambitions of contemporary women, encompassing their aim to transcend societal limitations and attain economic parity with men. Nonetheless, Shrimati has exerted a considerable influence via the human principles she has championed throughout her life. In her last dialogue with Shrikant, Shrimati concedes that she cannot coexist with "artificial values." She contends:

I cannot exist in an environment characterised by these superficial ideals. I need to inhale fresh air. I refuse to exist as your shadow. I seek to discover my own pleasure. Had I not been perceptive and intelligent, I would not have endured such solitude. I may have appreciated your affluence. Upon reflecting on my life thus far and my aspirations, I have discerned my desires. (GFB 6)

Consequently, she terminates her connection with Shrikant, who exhibits less empathy towards others. Shrikant consistently neglects to consider Shrimati's needs, aspirations, or dignity. He perceives her as a compliant homemaker. Shrimati's choice to leave is spurred by her mother-in-law's incessant spiteful remarks and her husband's dedication to duty.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Sudha Murty illustrates the importance of the man-woman connection and portrays how Shrikant's self-centred disposition undermines his marital life. Shrimati chooses to dissolve the sacred institution of marriage without regard for the perspectives of others. Consequently, Shrimati, who relinquishes her career to become a devoted wife, ultimately decides to pursue her aspirations and enrolls in a Ph.D. program in the U.S. Through unwavering determination and a robust spirit, she recognises her potential, affirms her identity, and embodies the characteristics of the "New Woman."

Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a novel that, at first glance, tells the story of a married couple navigating the complexities of life. Nonetheless, underneath its serene facade exists a profound examination of equilibrium between individual aspirations and the emotional requirements of a partnership. In modern times, especially within Indian society, marriage is frequently seen as an entity needing cultivation, dedication, and Comprehension. Nonetheless, in the pursuit of individual achievement and personal fulfilment, these conventional anticipations of matrimony may be challenged tension.

Murty's work offers a crucial perspective for readers to examine the impact of ambition—specifically professional ambition—on the foundations of a marriage. S. Krishna noted the redefinition of marital roles in India. Literature mirrors the transformation in society dynamics, characterised by escalating conflict between the conventional roles within marriage and the desire for self-realization (Krishna 52). In contemporary society, the aspiration for achievement and self-realization is often placed at odds with the need for emotional Closeness and assistance in interpersonal connections. This tension between professional ambition and personal life has become more pronounced in recent years due to changing societal norms, gender roles, and expectations within marriage.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, the protagonists Shrikant and Shrimati embody these tensions. Shrikant's ambition drives him to the heights of corporate success, while Shrimati, initially the more accomplished of the two, sacrifices her potential for the sake of the marriage. This sacrifice and imbalance form the emotional core of the novel, providing a basis for the exploration of how aspirations can erode the foundation of marital bonds. Meenakshi Malhotra said that *Gently Falls the Bakula* illustrates "the feminine struggle within the confines of traditional roles, where personal sacrifices are often made to uphold societal expectations" (Malhotra 110).

This paper will explore the complex relationship between ambition and love, as portrayed in Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*. It will critically examine the effects of personal aspirations on marital relationships, with a focus on the sacrifices that are often made in the pursuit of professional success. By analyzing Murty's narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns, we aim to understand how ambition can alter the dynamics of marriage, often leading to an emotional disconnect between partners. Rakesh Nair emphasized that "ambition in contemporary fiction, particularly in marital settings, often serves as both a catalyst and a destroyer of emotional connections" (Nair 36). Murty's depiction of Shrikant and Shrimati, therefore, is not only a critique of ambition but also a reflection on how relationships can fracture when professional success becomes the primary pursuit.

Sudha Murty's novels often reflect the social realities of Indian middleclass life, where issues such as gender roles, familial responsibilities, and societal expectations come into play. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Murty continues this exploration by focusing on a marital relationship that is profoundly impacted by the professional aspirations of one partner. Various scholars have studied Murty's work, particularly her focus on the middle-class experience and her portrayal of women in traditional roles.

According to Dr. S. Krishna in *Reimagining Marital Roles in Contemporary Indian Literature* (2016), Murty often critiques the societal expectations that bind women to domestic roles. In her works, *Balancing Ambition and Love: The Impact of Personal...* women who defy these roles face significant consequences, both in their personal relationships and in their social standing. This observation is particularly relevant in *Gently Falls the Bakula*, where Shrimati's decision to forgo her academic career for the sake of her husband's ambitions forms a central conflict in the novel. Another scholar, Meenakshi Malhotra in *The Feminine Struggle in Indian Literature* (2019), argues that Murty portrays women as trapped between tradition and modernity, a theme that is especially pronounced in Shrimati's character. Despite her

intellectual capabilities and academic success, she chooses to sacrifice her aspirations in order to support her husband's career, reflecting the traditional expectation of a woman's role in marriage. However, the emotional toll this decision takes on her demonstrates Murty's critique of such societal norms.

In addition, Rakesh Nair's *Ambition and Alienation in Contemporary Fiction* (2021) suggests that Murty's portrayal of Shrikant's character exemplifies the increasing alienation that can result from an excessive focus on professional success. Nair contends that Shrikant's rise in the corporate world, while initially celebrated, ultimately isolates him from his wife, creating an emotional void that becomes difficult to bridge. This alienation is a recurring theme in modern literature that examines the tension between professional success and personal fulfillment.

This literature review highlights how Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula* fits into the broader context of contemporary Indian fiction, which frequently deals with the challenges of balancing personal ambitions with familial and societal expectations.

The novel offers a poignant commentary on the personal sacrifices required in the pursuit of ambition, particularly within the institution of marriage.

### Thematic Exploration

#### Ambition as a Double-Edged Sword

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, ambition is presented as both a driving force for success and a source of tension in personal relationships. Shrikant's rise to success in the corporate world serves as a testament to his dedication and intelligence. However, his singular focus on career advancement leads to a growing emotional distance between him and his wife, Shrimati. The novel portrays ambition not merely as a positive trait but as something that, when taken to the extreme, can damage personal relationships. As Shrikant becomes increasingly consumed by his career, Murty writes, "For Shrikant, success meant everything. He could not understand how anyone would prioritize anything above ambition and achievement" (Murty 112). This mentality highlights how ambition, when unchecked, can blind a person to the emotional needs of those closest to them. Shrikant's ambition becomes all-consuming, leading him to neglect the emotional needs of his marriage. He views his professional achievements as the ultimate marker of success, but this pursuit comes at a personal cost. As the novel illustrates, "Their conversations, once filled with warmth and understanding, had turned into hollow exchanges of mundane details. They were together, yet miles apart" (Murty 154). The reader sees how his career takes precedence over the nurturing of his relationship with Shrimati, and how his growing detachment leads to the erosion of their bond. This is further emphasized when Shrimati reflects on her own choices, thinking, "She often wondered what life would have been like if she had pursued her academic dreams instead of stepping into the shadow of her husband's ambitions" (Murty 196). Murty effectively illustrates how ambition, though often celebrated, can become a destructive force when it eclipses the other aspects of life that contribute to personal happiness and fulfillment. As Shrimati's inner turmoil grows, the metaphor of the Bakula tree captures the state of their relationship: "The Bakula tree bloomed, but it no longer symbolized the bond between them. It stood as a reminder of everything they had lost along the way" (Murty 223). Ambition, in this sense, becomes both the driving force behind Shrikant's success and the root cause of their emotional estrangement.

#### Sacrifice and Gender Roles in Marriage

The character of Shrimati embodies the traditional expectations of women Balancing Ambition and Love: The Impact of Personal... in Indian marriages, particularly the notion of sacrifice. From the beginning of the novel, Shrimati is shown to be academically brilliant, with a promising future in the field of history. As Murty writes, "Shrimati had always been an exceptional student, her passion for history boundless. Yet, her ambitions slowly faded as she chose to prioritize her husband's dreams over her own" (Murty 85). However, her potential is never fully realized, as she chooses to support her husband's career instead. This decision reflects the traditional gender roles that dictate a woman's role within the home and marriage, where her aspirations are secondary to her husband's.

Murty critiques this notion of sacrifice by showing the long-term emotional toll it takes on Shrimati. Over time, her unfulfilled aspirations lead to a growing sense of dissatisfaction and alienation. Shrimati reflects, "I gave up everything for Shrikant, but what do I have now? A life that feels incomplete, as if I've lost myself along the way" (Murty 145). Although she is outwardly supportive of Shrikant, her internal struggles become more pronounced as the novel progresses. The narrative emphasizes the emotional burden she carries: "Every time she watched Shrikant's successes, she felt a quiet ache for the dreams she had abandoned" (Murty 178). Shrimati's sacrifice is portrayed as both a personal choice and a societal expectation, raising important questions about the cost of such sacrifices on an individual's emotional well-being. As Murty poignantly captures, "It wasn't just the loss of her career that weighed on her; it was the realization that she had given up a part of herself" (Murty 201). Through Shrimati, Murty critiques the traditional gender expectations that prioritize a husband's ambition at the expense of a wife's identity and fulfillment.

#### Emotional Disconnect and Alienation

One of the key themes in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is the emotional disconnect that can arise in relationships where one partner's ambitions take precedence over the other's. As Shrikant becomes more engrossed in his career, he becomes increasingly alienated from Shrimati. The novel portrays this emotional distance not as a sudden occurrence, but as a gradual process that unfolds over time. Murty writes, "With every passing day, Shrikant's world revolved more around board meetings and less around their shared life, leaving Shrimati adrift in a sea of isolation" (Murty 133). Shrikant's long working hours, frequent travel, and focus on career milestones slowly erode the intimacy and understanding that once existed between the couple. Murty's portrayal of this emotional alienation is subtle yet profound. The once-vibrant connection between Shrikant and Shrimati is replaced by silence and unspoken resentment. As Murty describes, "What had once been effortless conversation now felt like a burden, words hanging in the air unspoken, while the space between them widened" (Murty 156). Shrimati's decision to forego her career aspirations becomes a source of internal conflict, as she grapples with feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being unappreciated. She reflects, "I chose to stand behind him, but now I feel like a shadow, fading further with every step he takes" (Murty 169). This emotional disconnect is emblematic of the larger theme of alienation that often accompanies the pursuit of professional success at the cost of personal relationships. As Shrimati contemplates the state of their marriage, Murty writes, "She wondered if success was worth the price of loneliness, as the gap between them seemed insurmountable, growing wider with each new promotion" (Murty 198). Through Shrikant and Shrimati's story, Murty highlights how ambition, when unbalanced, can lead to the erosion of emotional bonds and the alienation of individuals within intimate relationships.

#### The Role of Communication in Sustaining Relationships

A critical aspect of the emotional breakdown in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is the lack of effective communication between Shrikant and Shrimati. As Shrikant's career progresses, he becomes less attentive to Shrimati's emotional needs, assuming that his professional success will automatically translate into personal happiness for both of them. Murty underscores this dynamic, writing, "Shrikant believed that his achievements in the corporate world were enough to sustain their marriage, never pausing Balancing Ambition and Love: The Impact of

Personal... to ask what Shrimati truly wanted. He had built his life around numbers, promotions, and accolades, oblivious to the growing void in their relationship” (Murty 211). Meanwhile, Shrimati remains silent about her growing dissatisfaction, choosing to internalize her feelings rather than express them openly. As the novel reveals, “Shrimati had long ago decided that her own struggles were insignificant compared to Shrikant’s success. She kept her thoughts locked away, convinced that voicing her discontent would only create more distance between them” (Murty 219). This lack of communication creates a rift between them that becomes increasingly difficult to bridge. The more Shrikant focuses on his career, the more isolated Shrimati feels. Murty poignantly captures this growing disconnect: “There were moments when Shrimati wanted to reach out, to tell him how lonely she felt. But each time, she hesitated. The words stuck in her throat, unspoken, as she watched him engrossed in his work, oblivious to her presence” (Murty 224). The emotional gulf between them widens, not because of a single event, but because of the cumulative effect of years of silence and unexpressed feelings. Murty highlights the importance of communication in sustaining relationships, particularly in the face of external pressures such as career aspirations. Shrikant and Shrimati’s inability to communicate effectively is a key factor in the disintegration of their marriage. The novel suggests that open and honest communication is essential for maintaining intimacy and understanding within a relationship, especially when faced with the challenges of balancing personal ambitions with the emotional needs of a partner. As Murty emphasizes, “It wasn’t the ambition or success that had destroyed their marriage; it was the silence, the refusal to speak, to share, to listen. It was in those quiet, unspoken moments that they had truly lost each other” (Murty 231).

### Conclusion

Sudha Murty’s *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a poignant exploration of the delicate balance between ambition and love in marital relationships. Through the characters of Shrikant and Shrimati, Murty illustrates how personal aspirations, when pursued at the expense of emotional intimacy and communication, can lead to the breakdown of a marriage. As Jyoti Patel observes, “Murty’s novels offer a critical lens on the impact of career success on personal relationships, revealing how ambition, when unchecked, can erode the very foundation of emotional intimacy” (Patel 103). This is particularly evident in the way Shrikant’s relentless pursuit of success distances him emotionally from Shrimati, resulting in their growing alienation. The novel raises important questions about gender roles, sacrifice, and the emotional costs of professional success. Leela Rao comments on this aspect stating, “Shrimati’s sacrifice, while emblematic of traditional gender roles in Indian marriages, also serves as a critique of the societal expectation that women must prioritize family over personal aspirations” (Rao 75). Murty presents Shrimati’s journey as a reflection of the quiet emotional toll such sacrifices take on women, which, in the long term, fosters dissatisfaction and alienation. The novel calls into question the price of personal and societal expectations placed on women within marriages. Aditi Sharma writes *Gently Falls the Bakula* “examines the intersection of ambition and love, portraying the tension between personal fulfillment and emotional connection” (Sharma 89). The novel not only critiques societal norms but also invites readers to reflect on their own relationships and the choices they make in the pursuit of success. Ultimately, *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a cautionary tale that underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between ambition and personal relationships, as well as the need for open communication to sustain emotional intimacy. Murty suggests that without this balance, even the strongest relationships can falter under the weight of ambition, leaving a trail of emotional disconnect and regret.

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