

## The Interplay of Tradition and Modernity in Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*

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### Abstract

The evolving dynamics of tradition and modernity have left profound imprints on human relationships, especially within the Indian socio-cultural context. Sudha Murty, an acclaimed author and social reformer, explores these themes in her novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*. The novel is a powerful portrayal of the conflict between professional ambition and personal relationships, examining the sacrifices and emotional voids created by a life driven by material success. This study delves into the journey of the protagonist, who is torn between the pull of her traditional upbringing and the demands of a rapidly modernizing world. Through her empathetic and evocative storytelling, Sudha Murty reveals the quiet resilience of individuals navigating emotional turbulence amidst societal change. The novel not only mirrors the struggles of human existence but also underscores the enduring value of compassion, understanding, and self-discovery. This paper seeks to explore how Sudha Murty's writing serves as a beacon of hope for readers, encouraging them to strike a balance between personal aspirations and the preservation of core human values.

**Keywords:** Tradition, modernity, relationships, self-discovery, Sudha Murty.

### The Interplay of Tradition and Modernity in Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*

Sudha Murty's vision and value system are deeply rooted in Indian culture and spiritualism, shaped by her upbringing in a Brahmin household. This immersion in traditional values significantly influences her worldview and writing style. Murty's works reflect her admiration for Indian ethos, seamlessly blending these cultural elements into her narratives, positioning herself as both a cultural interpreter within Indian society and a cultural ambassador to the global audience. Her storytelling often delves into the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, a theme that is especially prominent in her novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Murty thoughtfully examines the tension between personal ambition and familial harmony, highlighting how modern aspirations can disrupt the delicate balance of relationships. The novel is rooted in the simplicity of storytelling, yet it draws heavily from the ancient wisdom of Indian epics, puranas, and vedas, which Murty deftly incorporates to craft a narrative that resonates deeply with Indian cultural contexts. The tale of Shrikant and Shrimati, the central characters, symbolically represents the struggles faced by many middle-class families as they try to navigate the pressures of globalization while preserving their traditional values. Through Shrimati, Murty portrays the virtues of love, sacrifice, and devotion, while Shrikant embodies the relentless ambition and material success of a modern professional. Murty's personal experiences and extensive travels across both rural and urban India profoundly influence her writing. As the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, her direct engagement with diverse communities ranging from rural farmers to urban professionals, has given her an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic landscape of India. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, this extensive exposure is reflected in her portrayal of the struggles of individuals who are caught between the comfort of traditional values and the allure of material success in modern life. The novel thus becomes a window into the emotional complexities faced by individuals, particularly women, as they try to reconcile personal aspirations with societal expectations.

Murty's storytelling is marked by clarity, simplicity, and emotional depth. The linear narrative of *Gently Falls the Bakula* makes it accessible to a broad audience, and the characters are sharply defined, with the focus placed squarely on their emotional journey. Shrimati's quiet suffering and eventual self-realization resonate deeply with readers, especially women navigating societal pressures in a patriarchal world. Murty's ability to portray these nuanced emotions with sensitivity and understanding is one of the key strengths of her writing.

The novel critiques the modern obsession with professional success, emphasizing its detrimental impact on family life and emotional well-being. However, Murty does not indulge in overt moralizing; instead, she presents her characters' struggles with empathy and nuance, allowing readers to connect with their internal dilemmas. This exploration of ambition and its consequences reflects Murty's perspective as a "critical traditionalist." While she upholds values like compassion, humility, and sacrifice, she also advocates for rational acceptance of change, particularly in the face of modern challenges. The transformative power of resilience and self-discovery is another central theme in Murty's work. Shrimati's journey from subservience to self-realization is a example of the triumph of inner strength over external adversity. In this sense, Murty reinforces her belief in the enduring relevance of traditional virtues even in a rapidly changing world. Through

Shrimati's growth, Murty conveys the importance of maintaining one's individuality and sense of self in the face of societal pressures, suggesting that true progress lies not in abandoning traditional values but in adapting them to contemporary realities.

The tension between tradition and modernity in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is further enriched by Murty's firsthand observations of India's evolving socio-economic landscape. Having witnessed the effects of globalization and the rise of neo-millionaires, she critiques the shifting values in Indian society. The novel contrasts the warmth and simplicity of rural life with the cold, transactional nature of urban existence, highlighting the widening gap between India's past and present. This contrast serves as a backdrop for the emotional struggles of the central characters, whose lives reflect the larger societal shifts taking place in India.

The story begins in a small town in North Karnataka, where Shrimati and Shrikant grow up as neighbors. Shrimati is intelligent, self-assured, and deeply passionate about history, while Shrikant is driven by ambition and a desire to achieve professional success. Despite their contrasting personalities, they fall in love during their college years and eventually marry. However, as Shrikant's professional ambitions grow, the couple's relationship begins to face subtle discord, with Shrikant's career overshadowing their emotional connection from the outset.

Shrikant's professional rise comes at the expense of emotional neglect. As he becomes consumed by his career, Shrimati sacrifices her own academic pursuits and personal dreams to support him. Murty writes, "Shrimati's sacrifices were like the bakula flowers—silent, gentle, and unnoticed, yet essential" (45). This metaphor encapsulates the quiet erosion of Shrimati's individuality, as she carries the weight of her sacrifices in silence. Through this powerful imagery, Murty highlights the often-invisible emotional labor that women are expected to perform in their relationships, a theme that resonates deeply in contemporary society.

As Shrikant's career advances, the couple's relationship continues to suffer. Shrimati feels increasingly invisible in Shrikant's world of boardrooms and business deals. She reflects, "Shrimati was like a piece of furniture in Shrikant's well-decorated life—present, functional, but forgotten" (63). This metaphor starkly illustrates the emotional toll of a relationship dominated by modern aspirations, leaving little room for mutual respect, understanding, or emotional intimacy. Shrimati's sense of invisibility grows as she becomes more consumed by the demands of her role as a wife, leading her to question the true value of her sacrifices.

Shrimati's internal conflict deepens as she recognizes the cost of her sacrifices on her own identity. Her decision to leave Shrikant is not impulsive but represents a moment of profound self-realization. She asks herself, "I gave up everything for him, but who am I now?" (56). This marks the culmination of her emotional journey, as she comes to understand that her happiness and fulfillment are as important as her duties toward her husband. Shrimati's growth symbolizes the power of personal agency and the importance of balancing traditional roles with individual aspirations. It underscores Murty's belief in the need for self-realization and personal autonomy, even within the constraints of traditional roles.

The novel's turning point comes when Shrimati receives a letter from her former professor, offering her the chance to pursue a PhD in history. This opportunity reignites her passion for learning and forces her to confront the sacrifices she has made. Shrimati's internal struggle is deeply moving, as she contemplates whether it is wrong to want something for herself. Murty writes, "Is it wrong to want something for myself?" (82), articulating the silent dilemma faced by many women torn between societal expectations and personal desires. This moment of self-reflection becomes a pivotal point in Shrimati's journey, marking the beginning of her self-empowerment.

Shrimati's decision to leave Shrikant is a powerful assertion of self-worth, symbolizing the triumph of individuality over societal norms. Murty writes, "Shrimati walked out of the house, not with anger or regret, but with the quiet strength of a woman who had found herself again" (98). This moment of quiet strength is emblematic of Shrimati's transformation, and it underscores the novel's central theme: that tradition and modernity need not be mutually exclusive but must coexist in a way that respects individual dignity and aspirations.

Murty critiques modernity in her portrayal of Shrikant, whose materialistic world and corporate competition alienate him from his spouse. His transformation from a loving partner to a self-absorbed executive illustrates the emptiness that often accompanies unchecked ambition. Murty observes, "Success can buy many things, but it cannot buy the warmth of a companion who truly understands you" (112), reminding readers of the human cost of prioritizing professional achievements over personal relationships.

The novel also critiques the limitations of tradition, particularly the self-sacrifice demanded of women in the name of familial harmony. Shrimati's journey reveals the need for a balance between tradition and modernity, suggesting that true progress lies in integrating both. Murty's narrative emphasizes that blind adherence to either tradition or modernity leads to dissatisfaction and loss, as neither extreme can provide the fulfillment and emotional well-being that individuals seek. The title *Gently Falls the Bakula* is rich with symbolic meaning. The bakula flower represents Shrimati's quiet, self-effacing nature and her connection to traditional values. Just as the bakula flower falls unnoticed, Shrimati's identity is overshadowed by Shrikant's pursuit of success, capturing the erosion of traditional virtues in the face of modernity. Yet, just as the bakula flower gently falls, symbolizing a transition, Shrimati's eventual departure from Shrikant marks the beginning of her own transformation and self-empowerment.

The novel is a profound exploration of the complexities of modern life, ambition, and familial relationships. Through the struggles of Shrimati and Shrikant, Murty provides valuable insights into the impact of ambition on personal relationships

and advocates for a balance between personal fulfillment and traditional values. The novel's timeless reflection on the human condition urges readers to find harmony between personal dreams and societal expectations. Ultimately, *Gently Falls the Bakula* underscores the importance of nurturing relationships, prioritizing emotional well-being, and adapting tradition to remain relevant in a changing world. Through its rich emotional journey and nuanced portrayal of complex themes, Murty's work challenges readers to question the conventional dichotomy between tradition and modernity and to envision a future where both coexist in a manner that respects individual dignity and fosters collective well-being.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Sudha Murty also continues to explore the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity, delving into how the values of the past clash with the desires and demands of the present. The lives of the central characters, Shrimati and Shrikant, serve as a powerful lens through which Murty reflects on the complexities of modern relationships. As Shrikant's professional success flourishes, the emotional fabric of his marriage to Shrimati begins to unravel. His growing ambition gradually distorts the emotional intimacy and mutual respect that once defined their relationship. What once was a partnership based on love, devotion, and shared values becomes overshadowed by the pressures of modern life. The story captures this transformation, particularly through Shrimati's emotional journey. As Shrikant's career takes precedence, the emotional distance between the couple widens, and Shrimati, who had embraced her role as a self-sacrificing wife, is forced to confront an existential crisis of her own identity. Murty captures this process of growing disconnection with the statement: "Shrikant's dreams were growing, but so was the distance between them" (65). This metaphor powerfully reflects how unchecked ambition can drive a wedge between two people who were once bound by love and shared purpose.

At the heart of Shrimati's journey is an internal struggle between the societal expectations placed upon her and the deep personal yearning for fulfillment. The traditional role of the wife as the pillar of support, sacrifice, and loyalty has always been her identity's foundation. Shrimati, in her devotion to her husband, is often compared to the bakula flower, an element that beautifully symbolizes her quiet and often unacknowledged sacrifices. "Shrimati was always there, just like the bakula tree, its fragrance ever-present yet never acknowledged" (52). Just as the fragrance of the bakula flower is often taken for granted, Shrimati's dedication, inner strength, and contributions to the family life go unnoticed, despite their crucial role in sustaining the marriage and family unit. This metaphor becomes a powerful image of how tradition, when interpreted rigidly, can suppress individual growth and cause emotional erosion.

As the years pass, Shrimati's disillusionment with her role as a passive caretaker becomes more apparent. Her sense of self is slowly erased in the shadow of Shrikant's success. Murty captures the internal toll of such a relationship when Shrimati reflects, "It seemed that Shrikant's world had expanded so much that there was no place for her in it anymore. She had become a spectator in her own life" (76). This sentiment speaks to the emotional void that can develop in a life lived solely in service to others, where one's own identity is marginalized or altogether forgotten. Shrimati's role as a spectator in her own life reflects the deep internal conflict faced by individuals, particularly women, who are expected to subjugate their desires and dreams for the sake of others.

However, Shrimati's journey is not one of passive suffering. Instead, it becomes a story of resilience and self-discovery. The turning point in the narrative comes when Shrimati receives an invitation from her former professor to pursue a Ph.D. in history, an opportunity that reignites her dormant passions and invites her to reclaim a part of her identity that she had sacrificed. Murty writes, "The years spent in silence, supporting Shrikant, had taken away something precious from her. Was it too late to rediscover herself?" (89). This moment of reflection marks a critical juncture in Shrimati's life, where she is forced to confront the cost of her self-sacrifice and contemplate the possibility of rediscovering her own identity. The Ph.D. offer is not just an academic opportunity but a doorway to emotional and intellectual fulfillment, a chance to reclaim a piece of herself that had long been stifled by the demands of her traditional role.

Shrimati's decision to leave Shrikant is an act of self-liberation, a rejection of the passive role she has occupied for so long. It is a profound moment of self-assertion and self-respect, one in which she steps out of the shadows of her sacrifices and asserts her right to her own identity and aspirations. Murty eloquently describes this turning point: "Shrimati stepped out into the night, not with a feeling of anger, but with the calm certainty of a woman who had found her own voice" (104). This marks the culmination of her journey from self-neglect to self-realization, and her departure from Shrikant represents not only a physical but a symbolic rejection of societal norms that demand women's self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Through Shrimati's transformation, Murty emphasizes the importance of individual fulfillment and the necessity of asserting one's voice, even in the face of societal expectations that seek to silence it.

While Murty critiques the materialistic and success-driven world that Shrikant inhabits, she also reflects on the pressures and limitations of tradition that shape Shrimati's life. The tension between the demands of tradition and the allure of modernity is not only an external conflict but one that plays out within Shrimati's own psyche. Murty addresses the oppressive nature of tradition when it is rigidly enforced, suggesting that it can often stifle individual desires and aspirations. However, she also offers a more nuanced reflection: "It is not tradition that is oppressive, but the way it is interpreted and enforced. We must learn to adapt it to our changing realities" (110). This statement highlights the necessity of reinterpreting tradition to fit the evolving needs of individuals in a rapidly changing world. Tradition, when adapted with flexibility and self-awareness, can coexist with modernity in a way that nurtures both cultural heritage and personal growth.



Through her exploration of the tension between tradition and modernity, Murty offers a critique of the complexities individuals face when navigating these two seemingly opposing worlds. Shrimati's journey becomes a call for balance, a recognition that the wisdom of the past should not be disregarded but rather adapted to the realities of the present. The novel suggests that true fulfillment can only be achieved when individuals particularly women learn to reconcile the expectations of tradition with the pursuit of their own dreams and aspirations. Murty encapsulates this idea when she writes, "One must learn to strike a balance between the past and the future, for only then can we find peace in our hearts" (121). In a contemporary world where women are increasingly navigating dual roles, the novel resonates as a reminder of the importance of striking a harmonious balance between honoring one's heritage and pursuing personal fulfillment.

Moreover, In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Sudha Murty deeply explores the complex and often painful relationship between tradition and modernity through the lives of Shrimati and Shrikant. As Shrikant's professional life flourishes, he becomes increasingly distant from the emotional intimacy that once characterized his relationship with Shrimati. The narrative exposes how the relentless pursuit of success and ambition in the modern world gradually erodes the bonds of affection and understanding between the couple. Shrimati, who initially takes pride in her traditional role as a devoted wife, starts to feel the weight of her sacrifices and questions her identity as she fades into the background of Shrikant's expanding world.

Murty captures the erosion of their marriage with the line, "Shrikant's dreams were growing, but so was the distance between them" (65). This is emblematic of how ambition, if left unchecked, can foster emotional neglect and create rifts in relationships that were once nourished by mutual love and respect. Shrikant's relentless ambition leads him to prioritize his career over his relationship, leaving Shrimati to bear the emotional burden silently.

At the heart of Shrimati's personal journey lies an internal conflict between the traditional roles imposed upon her and the personal fulfillment she yearns for. The ideal of a wife in Indian culture is one who is loyal, self-sacrificing, and ever-supportive of her husband's ambitions. For years, Shrimati has embraced this role, often at the expense of her own desires and dreams. As Shrikant's career progresses, her personal needs become more invisible, and her sacrifices grow more pronounced. Despite her vital contribution to their shared life, she remains unacknowledged and unnoticed, much like the bakula flower that grows quietly in the background. Murty's metaphor of Shrimati being like the bakula tree is both tender and tragic: "Shrimati was always there, just like the bakula tree, its fragrance ever-present yet never acknowledged" (52). Through this metaphor, Murty underscores the unspoken nature of Shrimati's who sacrifices her quiet devotion and inner strength go unnoticed, even though they are essential to the fabric of their family life.

As time passes, Shrimati's sense of dissatisfaction grows. She begins to realize that she has become a spectator in her own life. The emotional void left by Shrikant's neglect becomes more evident as she reflects, "It seemed that Shrikant's world had expanded so much that there was no place for her in it anymore. She had become a spectator in her own life" (76). The growing emotional distance between them speaks to the deeper implications of modernity, which often prizes success, material wealth, and career advancement over emotional intimacy and personal connection.

However, Shrimati's journey is not one of passive suffering. Her moment of transformation comes when she receives a letter from her former professor, inviting her to pursue a Ph.D. in history is an opportunity that reconnects her with the aspirations she had put on hold. The letter is a catalyst for change, representing the possibility of rediscovering a part of herself that had been neglected. Murty captures the gravity of this moment, highlighting Shrimati's internal struggle: "The years spent in silence, supporting Shrikant, had taken away something precious from her. Was it too late to rediscover herself?" (89). This moment of self-reflection signifies a turning point in Shrimati's life, where she is forced to confront the life she has been living and question whether it is too late for her to pursue her own dreams.

Shrimati's ultimate decision to leave Shrikant marks the culmination of her emotional evolution, a powerful assertion of self-worth. It is not driven by anger or resentment but by a calm certainty that she deserves more than a life of quiet self-effacement. Murty describes her departure with quiet dignity: "Shrimati stepped out into the night, not with a feeling of anger, but with the calm certainty of a woman who had found her own voice" (104). This moment signifies the breaking free from the rigid societal expectations placed upon her and the reclaiming of her own identity. It is an act of self-liberation and personal empowerment, reinforcing the notion that one cannot truly find peace or happiness by sacrificing oneself completely for others.

Through Shrimati's journey, Murty examines the complexities of tradition and modernity. The novel acknowledges the pressures exerted by both modern success-driven aspirations and traditional roles. Murty's reflection on the evolving nature of tradition is crucial when she writes, "It is not tradition that is oppressive, but the way it is interpreted and enforced. We must learn to adapt it to our changing realities" (110). Tradition, when applied rigidly and without consideration for personal growth, can become stifling. However, when adapted to the changing needs of individuals, it can coexist with modernity, creating a balance that honors both personal development and cultural heritage.

Murty's nuanced portrayal of the conflict between tradition and modernity invites readers to reflect on how these two forces shape our lives. Through Shrimati's transformation, Murty calls for a balance that integrates the wisdom of the past with the opportunities and freedoms that modernity affords. The novel underscores that true progress and fulfillment can only be achieved when individuals, especially women, learn to reconcile the pressures of tradition with the pursuit of their own dreams and aspirations. As Murty writes, "One must learn to strike a balance between the past and the future, for only then can we find peace in our hearts" (121). In today's world, where women continue to navigate the challenges of

balancing tradition and modernity, this message resonates strongly, emphasizing the need for both self-awareness and adaptability in the face of changing societal expectations.

Ultimately, *Gently Falls the Bakula* is a meditation on the delicate balance between personal growth and societal obligations. Murty skillfully explores the complexities of relationships, the impact of ambition, and the importance of individual fulfillment. Through the emotional journey of Shrimati from self-sacrifice to self-empowerment, the novel highlights the potential for personal transformation, even in the face of adversity. By finding harmony between the values of the past and the opportunities of the future, individuals can navigate life's challenges with strength and resilience. Through the story of Shrimati, Murty demonstrates that it is possible to honor both tradition and personal growth, paving the way for a more fulfilling and harmonious life. The quiet strength of Shrimati, like the bakula flower, shows that renewal is always possible, and that true happiness lies in embracing both the wisdom of the past and the possibilities of the future.

In conclusion, *Gently Falls the Bakula* offers a rich and layered exploration of the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. Through Shrimati's emotional evolution from self-sacrifice to self-empowerment, Murty critiques not only the pressures of modern success but also the restrictive aspects of traditional roles that stifle individual aspirations. The novel emphasizes that true progress lies in the ability to reconcile these competing forces and find a harmonious balance that allows for personal growth and self-expression. Through Shrimati's transformation, Murty reminds us that fulfillment comes not from blindly adhering to tradition or chasing success at all costs but from finding a path that honors both our past and our potential. The novel is a powerful call for introspection and personal growth, urging readers to strike a balance between tradition and modernity and to embrace the opportunities for renewal that come with change. The novel serves as a timeless reflection on the human condition, emphasizing the importance of connection, growth, and the courage to pursue one's dreams while remaining grounded in the values that matter most.

The novel also beautifully portrays the conflict between tradition and modernity, using the lives of Shrikant and his wife, Shrimati, as a lens to explore this tension. Shrikant's ambition and desire to break free from the constraints of tradition to pursue a career in the modern world contrasts with Shrimati's deep-rooted commitment to the values of family, loyalty, and tradition. Their relationship reflects the emotional cost of this dichotomy as they struggle to balance personal fulfillment with societal expectations. Through the novel, Murty explores the sacrifices both characters make in their pursuit of success and happiness. While Shrikant's modern ambitions bring him professional achievement, they also lead to alienation and emotional disconnect from Shrimati, whose traditional values bind her to her role within the family. Ultimately, the novel highlights the complexities individuals face when caught between tradition and modernity. Sudha Murty doesn't offer a simple solution but instead encourages the reader to reflect on how both forces can coexist, and how one might navigate them to lead a more harmonious and fulfilling life.

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