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Locating the self: A study in Sudha Murty's Gently Falls the Bakula

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Abstract

The present world is dominated by market and corporate culture. The traditional cultures are vanishing and a new global corporate culture is emerging. This new culture has brought drastic changes in people's lives. Apart from changing the social and economic structures of the society, it has brought marked changes in people's perceptions, attitudes and personal life. Many of us have become human machines with little place for sentiments and sympathy for others. In a country like India these global changes and the mushrooming Multi-National Companies have created a conflict between the traditional Indian value system and modernity. Sudha Murty's novel *Gently Falls the Bakula* depicts this through the relationship between Shrikant and Shrimati. It is based in Hubli in Karnataka and highlights the sweeping tide of global capitalism and its vast tentacles engulf the entire world filling the life of the contemporary man with a growing sense of helplessness and very often causing unhealthy and broken relationships.

Keywords: global, corporate culture, multi-national companies, broken relationships.

The global and cultural changes during the last few decades across the world have brought a change in people's perception and lifestyles. The scientific and technological advancements accompanied with growing corporatisation have led to shifts in attitudes related to relationships and society. In a country like India these global changes and the mushrooming MNC's have created a conflict between the traditional Indian value system and modernity. The novel depicts this through the relationship between Shrikant and Shrimati. Based in Hubli in Karnataka, this novel by Sudha Murty highlights how the changing social and cultural patterns of life affect human relationships. It shows how a simple young man from karnataka, Shrikant enters the corporate world in Bombay to pursue his passion for success and money and is

gradually transformed into a human machine. The writer takes care of all the intricacies and subtleties to show the transformation of Shrikant to highlight this change.

The relationship between Shrikant and Shrimati, their values and perceptions reflect India's transitional phase when it had started its journey towards becoming a global economy. Given India's rich, historical and cultural background one can see the conflict that it gave rise to between India's traditional social pattern and the growing tide of westernization. In the 90's India started emerging as a market and consumer society. The novel is based in the 90's and Sudha Murty explores the Indian transition into a new consumerist culture. The onslaught of westernization and urbanization is shown through the life, dreams and ambitions of Shrikant and his mounting indifference towards his extremely dutiful and loyal wife, Shrimati. Shrikant and Shrimati are neighbours in Hubli, a small village in Northern Karnataka. Their families are rivals owing to a family feud.

Apart from being neighbours, the two are classmates and always compete with each other in school. However it is Shrimati who always surpasses Shrikant and all others in her class in studies. But very soon Shrikant falls in love with Shrimati and they get married despite stiff opposition from their families. Shrikant enters the corporate world of business in Bombay and the couple leaves Hubli and start living in city. It is in Bombay that life changes drastically for the two.

Through the growing rift between the two, the writer highlights the conflict between India's traditional past and the impact of the west. Shrimati's calm and cool temperament, her humility and gentleness, her passion for history, and her reverence for India's rich and glorious past shows that she has imbibed the Indian spirit of virtuosity, peace, sacrifice and love. Her admiration for King Ashoka, for his virtuosity, the brave Vikramaditya, and also for Siddharta for his love, compassion and sacrifice shows her deep roots in India's cultural tradition.

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These examples are carefully chosen to highlight the spirit of love, compassion, selflessness woven into the thick fabric of Indian life, a land where Buddhism was born, a country with rich historical monuments, a land of prosperity and ancient dynasties. She says,

“I used to feel happy that my ancestors were a part of battles and a part of the kingdom too. I still feel that I belong to this area. The events might have taken place twelve centuries back, but when I closed my eyes, I could visualize many things.”¹

As they start living in Bombay, both gradually get separated into two different mental zones. Shrikant becomes more and more involved in business and the progress of his company

“happy that he could understand the global market and explore global business.”²

Shrikant’s obsession with his work blinds him to the needs of his wife. He becomes ignorant and indifferent to her. The only thing that he remembers is his work and his company.

Shrimati had always desired to pursue doctorate in history but due to Shrikant’s engagements she forgoes the idea and instead becomes his secretary taking care of his appointments and other important things. This decision of Shrimati stifles her, given her love for history and her spirit of devotion to her husband’s priorities. To quote Sudha Murty,

“when a woman gives up her right to choose for herself, that is when she crosses over from being an individual to a doormat.”³

She is happy with the compromise that she has to make for Shrikant. But what pains her is Shrikant’s lack of care and concern for her. Like any other woman she desires children of her own but Shrikant is not even bothered about it and refuses to go for a treatment to have a baby. She passes through several stages of rejection, humiliation, isolation, loneliness and boredom with each success that Shrikant achieves. Though she has always been more intelligent than her husband in studies and has the potential of becoming a brilliant history scholar, she sacrifices her desires for her husband. She not only makes compromises but she also bears the humiliation of her mother-in-law who leaves no opportunity to exploit her. To quote,

“Her main characters are women- gritty, educated, principled, middle to lower middle class and burdened with the conflicts that modernity and change have ushered into their lives.”⁴

Being extremely humble she takes all the bitterness in her stride and silently supports Shrikant in his journey to climb the ladder of corporate success. Her sacrifices and selflessness are similar to that of Bhamati, a character from one of the Indian legends about a sage named Dharmashastra and his wife Bhamati. Before marriage she had narrated the legend to Shrikant about Bhamati’s sacrifices. Dharmashastra married the young Bhamati but never bothered about her and remained buried in books and writing. After finishing a book that he had long been writing he noticed Bhamati who had grown old and he did not recognize her. Bhamati explains to him that she had been living with him since last forty years. He was astounded and as a mark of respect to her, he had given the title “Bhamati” to his book. She tells Shrikant,

“Bhamati signifies all those women who sacrifice their youth for the betterment of their husbands. Nobody remembers that sage’s name but Bhamati stands out.”⁵

And Shrikant’s reply to Shrimati was,
“Oh Shrimati in today’s society it is very difficult to find women like Bhamati. They have changed so much.”⁶

Unfortunately, Shrikant does not realize that Shrimati’s sacrifice and devotion for him are no less than that of Bhamati. This conflict between the two shows the vast difference between the old and the new value system.

Shrikant criticizes Indian history and Shrimati does not like the artificial gestures of friendship and hospitality of Shrikant with his American clients, the lavish parties and his business maneuvers. She represents the ancient Indian culture that values honesty. Shrikant has succumbed to the growing tide of commercialism. The love for money, status and business overpowers him and he fails to realise the worth of human beings, most of his entire wife who has made so many compromises for him,

“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

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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.”⁷

He now starts believing more in the American idea of life and progress and expresses his disgust for Indian culture and history, the subject that Shrimati likes most, which had shaped her perceptions and given her the vision of life. She had loved only two things in life- one is Shrikant and the other is history. He tells Shrimati,

“Don’t talk about your worthless subject. The world of business is so different from yours. History cannot feed you... we have a rigid caste system, superstitions abound and to top it all, a highly corrupt society. Look at the West. They are scientific, systematic and progressive.”⁸

Thus it becomes clear that Shrikant and Shrimati have drifted apart into two different mental zones. Shrimati into the one that is human while Shrikant into the one that is mechanical, devoid of warmth and compassion,

“Every dinner, every conversation, every relationship was based on profit and loss. What a way to live, she (Shrimati) had thought!”⁹

And Shrimati could not live like this. She found it difficult to be a part of Shrikant’s world and his life. Even the friends of Shrikant appreciated her sacrifices for him, but it did not have any effect on Shrikant. He had neither gratitude nor concern for his wife who managed his life and important things related to business so well,

“Shrikant had taken her for granted. He had a rare diamond in his hand but he was searching for a worthless glass of achievement.”¹⁰

She realizes that what she had lost during the years she had been with Shrikant. She had given up an important part of herself to support Shrikant- her love for history. She had

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rejected the opportunity to go abroad for a doctorate in history. She could have carved a successful career but she viewed Shrikant’s career above hers. In return she got nothing but Shrikant’s lack of love and concern for her and the never-ending bitterness of her in-laws. Though it is very hard but finally she decides to leave Shrikant and go abroad to pursue doctorate. In the words of Sudha Murty,

“In the end, the protagonist of my novel, the wife rebels. Many people disagreed with the conclusion and suggested that she should have compromised with the situation. But I had this strong feeling that she deserved an identity. At no point does she make any noise about the treatment meted out to her. But there is a silent introspection happening, which ultimately leads to her emergence as a stronger being.”¹¹

Each moment for Shrimati is an elimination of her pure and benign self but the end of the novel shows the hope of regaining and retrieving the life that would connect her with a purposeful and meaningful existence.

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