



Subverting Patriarchal Scripts: A Gendered and Queer Reading of Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*

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Abstract

Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008) has generally been received as domestic fiction concerned with marital estrangement. This article contends that the novel performs a sustained critique of the patriarchal and heteronormative structures that govern middle-class Indian conjugality in the late twentieth century. Employing a qualitative, interpretive close reading informed by gender theory, particularly Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, and by queer theory's critique of compulsory heterosexuality, the study examines the trajectory of Shrimati, a gifted student of history who relinquishes her scholarly ambitions to sustain her husband Shrikant's corporate ascent. The analysis identifies three interlocking patterns: the extraction of Shrimati's domestic and intellectual labour in the service of male achievement; the repeated performance of an idealised femininity (sacrifice, forbearance, silence) that the text exposes as enforced rather than innate; and the disruptive force of her final departure, which unsettles the assumption that marriage constitutes the horizon of a woman's identity. The bakula flower, the novel's governing metaphor, is read as an emblem of a rupture that is quiet rather than spectacular. The article argues that Murty locates resistance not in confrontation but in self-recognition and withdrawal, and that this mode of resistance renders the text available to a queer reading even in the absence of non-normative desire. In doing so, the study extends the critical conversation on Murty beyond thematic surveys of marital conflict and proposes a framework applicable to other Indian English narratives of female self-emancipation.

Keywords:- Sudha Murty, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Gender Performativity, Queer Theory, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Indian English Fiction

Introduction

Sudha Murty occupies a distinctive position in Indian English literature as a writer persistently drawn to the ordinary textures of middle-class life. Her fiction foregrounds social concerns, such as education, ambition, caste consciousness, the economics of marriage, and the pull of familial obligation, rendered in an unadorned realist idiom that has earned her a wide popular readership but comparatively limited theoretical attention. *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008), among her most widely read novels, traces the courtship and marriage of two brilliant

students, Shrimati and Shrikant, in the small-town milieu of Hubli, Karnataka, and follows their relocation to Bombay, where Shrikant's professional success is built upon Shrimati's silent withdrawal from her own intellectual life. The novel closes with Shrimati's decision to leave the marriage and pursue doctoral research in history in the United States.

Much of the existing commentary on the novel treats it as a study of marital breakdown, or as a moral fable about the costs of ambition. Such readings, while not inaccurate, leave unexamined the structural logic that produces the breakdown in the first place. Shrimati's marriage does not fail because of individual failings alone; it fails because it is organised around a set of gendered expectations that require one partner to be diminished so that the other may be enlarged. The novel's achievement lies in making this arrangement visible precisely because it is so unremarkable: there is no villainy in Shrikant, only the unexamined entitlement of a man for whom a wife's support is a natural resource rather than a gift.

This article proposes that *Gently Falls the Bakula* rewards a reading through two allied theoretical lenses. Gender theory, and specifically Judith Butler's account of gender as performative, allows us to see how the "good wife" Shrimati becomes is not an expression of an inner feminine nature but the product of a disciplined repetition of acts. Queer theory, understood broadly as a critique of normativity rather than a discourse restricted to sexual identity, allows us to read her eventual departure not simply as a feminist awakening but as a rupture in the heteronormative order that positions marriage as the terminus of a woman's life. The novel contains no queer characters in the conventional sense; its "queerness," as this study argues, lies in its refusal to let the marital plot resolve in the way the culture expects.

The study addresses three research questions. First, how does the novel represent the gendered division of labour and power within the Shrimati–Shrikant marriage? Second, in what ways does Shrimati's conduct as a wife illustrate the performative construction of femininity? Third, how does her final act of departure destabilise the heteronormative assumptions that structure the narrative, and what model of female agency emerges from it? The article proceeds by reviewing relevant scholarship, setting out its theoretical framework and method, offering a brief synopsis of the novel, and then developing a section-by-section analysis before presenting findings, limitations, and conclusions.

Review of Literature

The representation of domestic space and marital constraint has long been a central preoccupation of Indian English women's fiction. Critics have extensively examined how writers such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Kamala Markandaya render the interior lives of women confined within the family, and how the home functions in their work simultaneously as sanctuary and prison. Within this tradition, the recurring figure is the educated woman whose capacities exceed the roles available to her, a figure to whom Shrimati clearly belongs. Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), in particular, offers a close antecedent to Murty's novel in its portrait of a wife whose self-suppression is so habitual that it has become invisible to her.

Scholarship devoted specifically to Sudha Murty has grown steadily over the last decade, much of it appearing in Indian journals of English studies. This body of work has tended to be thematic and descriptive in orientation. Recurrent concerns include Murty's advocacy of education and self-reliance, her portrayal of the sacrificing woman, the ethical simplicity of her narrative voice, and her documentation of the changing values of a modernising Indian middle class. *Gently Falls the Bakula* has frequently been discussed under the rubric of "marital discord" or "the crisis of the modern Indian woman," with attention paid to Shrimati's sacrifice and eventual self-assertion. Such studies have been valuable in establishing the novel's feminist credentials.

What has been largely absent, however, is a theoretically grounded account of the mechanisms through which the novel constructs and then dismantles its gender order. Existing discussions generally take “patriarchy” as a given backdrop rather than as a system whose operations the text lays bare. Moreover, queer-theoretical approaches, which have been productively applied to a range of Indian English texts in recent years, have not, to the best of this author’s knowledge, been brought to bear on Murty’s fiction, presumably because her novels do not depict non-heterosexual desire. This study contends that queer theory’s broader critique of normativity is nonetheless highly relevant to a text whose central drama is a woman’s exit from the marital script. The present article therefore seeks to fill a twofold gap: it supplies a Butlerian reading of femininity in the novel, and it extends queer critique to a text hitherto regarded as unambiguously heteronormative.

Theoretical Framework

Gender Theory and the Critique of Patriarchy

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in the tradition of feminist thought that distinguishes between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational claim in *The Second Sex* that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (283) inaugurated the analysis of femininity as a cultural achievement rather than a natural fact. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) extended this analysis to the domestic sphere, arguing that the family is the primary institution through which patriarchal power is reproduced, and that the relationship between husband and wife is itself a political relationship in which one party exercises structural dominance over the other (Millett). Millett’s insistence that patriarchy operates most effectively through consent, that is, through the internalisation by women of their own subordination, is directly pertinent to a character like Shrimati, whose compliance is voluntary in the narrow sense but coerced in every meaningful one.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) radicalised the sex/gender distinction by arguing that gender has no ontological status apart from the acts that constitute it. For Butler, gender is not something one is but something one does, a stylised repetition of acts that, through their very repetition, produce the illusion of a stable, interior gendered self (Butler 140). The categories “woman” and “wife” are thus effects of practice rather than descriptions of essence. Crucially, Butler locates the possibility of resistance within the same structure of repetition: because gender must be continually re-enacted to appear natural, any interruption of that re-enactment, that is, any refusal to perform the expected acts, exposes the contingency of the norm. This study draws on Butler to read Shrimati’s domestic conduct as performance, and her final withdrawal as a performative failure that reveals the constructedness of the “ideal wife.”

Queer Theory and Compulsory Heterosexuality

Queer theory, as it developed through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and others, is frequently misunderstood as a discourse exclusively concerned with lesbian and gay identity. Its more fundamental contribution is a critique of normativity as such: of the ways in which certain forms of life are rendered natural, compulsory, and invisible while others are marked as deviant. Adrienne Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” is central here. Rich argued that heterosexuality functions not as a spontaneous preference but as an institution enforced through economic dependence, cultural idealisation of marriage, and the systematic erasure of alternatives (Rich). Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) similarly interrogates the cultural privileging of marriage as the sole legitimate form of intimacy and belonging (Warner). Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), meanwhile,

demonstrates how binary structures, including but not limited to the homosexual/heterosexual binary, organise modern knowledge and identity (Sedgwick).

On this understanding, to “queer” a text is not necessarily to locate hidden homosexual desire within it, but to read it against the normative assumptions it appears to uphold, and to ask what the text reveals about the coercive machinery of the normal. *Gently Falls the Bakula* contains no non-heterosexual characters. Yet its protagonist is a woman who discovers that the institution presented to her as the fulfilment of her life is in fact the mechanism of her erasure, and who chooses an alternative form of belonging (scholarly vocation, intellectual mentorship, solitude) over conjugal devotion. That choice, this study argues, is a queer gesture in Warner’s sense: it declines the trouble with normal.

Materials and Methods

The primary text for this study is the Penguin edition of Sudha Murty’s *Gently Falls the Bakula* (2008). Secondary materials comprise the foundational theoretical texts identified above (Beauvoir, Millett, Butler, Rich, Sedgwick, and Warner), together with critical commentary on Indian English women’s fiction.

The method is qualitative textual analysis. The novel was read closely and coded thematically for three categories of representation:

- The division of labour and authority within the marriage
- The behaviours, gestures, and speech through which shrimati enacts the role of wife
- Moments of friction, refusal, or exit in which the marital order is questioned or breached

Passages falling under each category were then interpreted through the theoretical framework, with Butler’s account of performativity applied principally to the second category and queer-theoretical critique of normativity to the third. Attention was also paid to the novel’s governing metaphor, the bakula flower, as a device that mediates between the text’s surface romance and its structural critique. Because the study is interpretive, no quantitative or statistical procedures were employed, and the findings are presented as argued readings rather than measured outcomes.

The Novel: A Brief Synopsis

Gently Falls the Bakula opens in Hubli in the 1970s. Shrikant Deshpande and Shrimati are neighbours whose families have nursed a long-standing hostility, sharpened by differences of caste and economic standing. The two children, both academically exceptional, nonetheless form a bond that deepens into love during their school years. The bakula tree in Shrimati’s courtyard becomes the site and symbol of their courtship: Shrimati gathers its fragrant flowers for her hair, and Shrikant is drawn by their scent. In the board examinations Shrimati secures the first rank and Shrikant the second, a detail whose significance the novel returns to with quiet insistence.

Shrikant proceeds to the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, to study engineering; Shrimati, whose passion is history, enrolls for a Bachelor of Arts. Despite opposition from both families, they marry and settle in Bombay. There Shrikant rises rapidly through the ranks of a software company, and Shrimati’s life contracts to the management of his household, his social obligations, and his mother Gangakka, who treats her daughter-in-law with contempt grounded in caste and money. When Shrimati’s former teacher, Professor Collins, secures her a scholarship for doctoral study in the United States, she declines it in deference to her husband’s needs. Childless, increasingly isolated in an opulent apartment, and treated by Shrikant as something between a hostess and a personal secretary, she gradually recognises the hollowness of her position. Her attempts to reclaim his attention, pleading for a few days together, are brushed aside. Reopening contact with Professor Collins, she arranges her own admission to a

doctoral programme and leaves. The novel ends not with recrimination but with an open door: she tells Shrikant that her house will always be open to him (Murty 198), a gesture that preserves her dignity while refusing to be recalled to servitude.

Analysis and Discussion

The Architecture of Marital Power: Gendered Labour and Male Advancement

The novel's critique of patriarchy begins with a fact it establishes early and never allows the reader to forget: Shrimati is the more brilliant of the two. Her first rank in the board examination, her instinctive love of history, and the esteem in which her teachers hold her are all set out before the marriage. The subsequent narrative is, in structural terms, an account of how that brilliance is redirected into the service of a man whose talent is real but lesser. Millett's insight that patriarchal power operates through the family finds a precise illustration here. Shrimati's labour, which includes running the household, entertaining Shrikant's colleagues, absorbing Gangakka's hostility, and managing her husband's schedule, is the invisible infrastructure of his visible success. The text's quiet irony is that Shrikant regards himself as self-made.

The division of space in the novel encodes this division of labour. Shrikant moves outward, through offices, boardrooms, and international travel; Shrimati's world shrinks to the apartment. Even within that apartment her presence is functional rather than authorial: it is Shrikant's home, furnished to project his status, and her role is to keep it running. The refusal of the American scholarship crystallises the arrangement. Nothing in the text suggests that Shrikant explicitly forbids her to go; the prohibition is internal, an expression of what she understands a wife to owe. This is precisely the mechanism Millett describes: domination secured not by force but by the colonisation of the dominated party's sense of obligation.

Caste, Money, and the Mother-in-Law: Patriarchy Reproduced by Women

A gendered reading of the novel must account for Gangakka, whose treatment of Shrimati is among its cruellest strands. Gangakka is not a patriarch but a matriarch, and her hostility is animated by caste pride and financial resentment rather than by any abstract belief in male supremacy. Yet her function within the household is to enforce the very order that subordinates her daughter-in-law and, in a different register, has subordinated Gangakka herself. Feminist theory has long recognised that patriarchy is not maintained solely by men; it is a system that recruits women as its agents, rewarding those who police other women's conformity. Gangakka's ambitions for her son are inseparable from her contempt for his wife, because in the logic she inhabits a son's advancement is the only form of achievement available to a woman of her generation. The novel thus refuses a simple men-against-women schema and instead depicts patriarchy as a self-replicating culture in which the oppressed are trained to become oppressors.

Performing the Good Wife: A Butlerian Reading

Butler's account of gender performativity illuminates the process by which Shrimati becomes the wife she becomes. The qualities that define her within the marriage (modesty, patience, self-effacement, and an attentiveness to others' needs that borders on self-erasure) are presented in the novel as things she does rather than things she is. She performs deference at social gatherings; she performs contentment when Shrikant cancels their plans; she performs gratitude for a life that is slowly hollowing her out. Each of these acts, repeated over years, consolidates into what looks like a character. Butler's crucial point is that the appearance of a stable feminine self is produced by exactly this repetition, and that the repetition is not free but compelled by a regulatory framework that punishes deviation.

The text provides that regulatory framework in ample detail: the expectations of Gangakka, the assumptions of Shrikant's colleagues, the cultural script of the ideal Indian wife that Shrimati has absorbed since childhood. What makes the novel more than a portrait of victimhood is that it also shows the performance beginning to fail. The evenings alone, the unanswered pleas, the growing sense of being a fixture in someone else's life: these are moments in which the repetition falters and Shrimati becomes conscious of the acts as acts. In Butler's terms, the performative citation of the norm has begun to misfire. Once the wife recognises that her wifeliness is a performance, the performance can no longer be sustained in good faith. The novel's narrative arc is therefore, at its core, the arc of a performative unravelling.

The Bakula: Metaphor and Structure

The bakula flower is the novel's governing image and merits sustained attention. It is a flower of small size and great fragrance, associated in South Indian culture with devotion, adornment, and the sacred. Early in the novel it functions conventionally as an emblem of romance: it draws Shrikant to Shrimati and stands witness to their courtship. But the title directs attention not to the flower's beauty but to its falling and, specifically, to the gentleness of the fall. The bakula does not shatter; it drifts down and, remarkably, retains its scent after it has fallen. This dual movement of descent and persistence structures the novel's account of its heroine.

Shrimati's separation from Shrikant is a fall in the sense that it ends the romance the novel began with. It is gentle because it is accomplished without violence, spectacle, or public confrontation; she leaves, but she does not slam the door. And she retains her fragrance (her integrity, her capacity for generosity) in the open invitation she extends to him as she goes. The metaphor thus does considerable ideological work. It refuses the reading of Shrimati as a woman crushed by patriarchy, insisting instead that what has fallen away is the marriage, not the woman, and that the woman remains whole. It also refuses the alternative reading of her as a rebel in the mould of confrontational feminist heroines: her resistance is quiet, self-possessed, and un-theatrical. The novel's title is, in this sense, its thesis.

Queering Marriage: Departure as Rupture

The most productive move this study makes is to read Shrimati's departure through the lens of queer theory's critique of normativity. Within the cultural order the novel depicts, marriage is not one option among many for a woman; it is compulsory in Rich's sense, the institution to which all other possibilities are subordinated and outside of which female life is scarcely intelligible. Shrimati's trajectory from first-rank student to corporate wife is the trajectory the culture prescribes, and the novel makes plain that no one around her regards it as a loss. To the extent that the loss is invisible, it is because compulsory heterosexuality has rendered the alternative unthinkable.

Shrimati's exit makes the alternative thinkable. She does not leave Shrikant for another man, which would merely relocate her within the heterosexual economy; she leaves him for history, for a vocation, an intellectual passion, a mode of self-realisation that has no place in the marital script. In Warner's terms, she declines the privilege of being normal (Warner). Her choice destabilises the binaries on which the marital order rests: male/female, active/passive, public/private, provider/dependent. The woman who was the passive, private, dependent half of the couple becomes active, public, and self-sufficient, and she does so by refusing the couple form altogether rather than by renegotiating her place within it. This is what the present study means by a queer rupture. The rupture is not sexual; it is structural. It exposes the marital norm as a norm, as something that could have been otherwise, and in doing so it accomplishes what Butler identifies as the subversive potential latent in all performative repetition.

Mentorship as Alternative Affiliation: Professor Collins

The figure of Professor Collins, though minor in terms of narrative presence, is significant in this reading. Collins is the only character in the novel who values Shrimati for her mind, and the only one who offers her a future not defined by her relation to a man as wife or daughter-in-law. The relationship between them is one of mentorship and mutual intellectual respect, untouched by the erotic and free of the obligations that structure every other bond in Shrimati's life. Queer theory has been attentive to such alternative forms of affiliation, such as friendships, chosen communities, and teacher–student bonds, that fall outside the sanctioned dyad of marriage and offer models of belonging that the heteronormative order cannot accommodate. Collins represents precisely such a model. That the decisive help in Shrimati's emancipation comes from this direction, rather than from a lover or a family member, reinforces the novel's implicit argument that fulfilment need not be sought within the conjugal frame.

The Open Door: Agency Without Revenge

The novel's closing gesture, Shrimati's assurance to Shrikant that her house will always be open to him (Murty 198), has occasionally been read as a weakness, a lingering attachment that compromises her emancipation. This study proposes a different interpretation. The invitation is issued from a position of ownership: it is her house, and she is its author. The direction of hospitality has reversed. For the whole of the marriage Shrimati has lived in a house that was Shrikant's in every meaningful sense; now it is Shrikant who may, if he chooses, seek admission to hers. The gesture asserts autonomy without cruelty and independence without repudiation. It embodies the model of agency the novel endorses throughout: not rebellion, which would remain defined by the thing it rebels against, but self-authorship, which simply moves beyond it.

Findings

The analysis yields three principal findings. First, the novel represents the Shrimati–Shrikant marriage as a hierarchy of labour and power in which the wife's intellectual and domestic work is systematically extracted to enable the husband's advancement, and it exposes this arrangement as structural rather than accidental by establishing Shrimati's superior ability before the marriage begins. The enforcement of the hierarchy is shown to be distributed across men and women alike, with Gangakka functioning as an agent of the patriarchal order.

Second, Shrimati's conduct as a wife exemplifies Butler's thesis that femininity is performatively constituted. Her sacrifice, forbearance, and self-effacement are dramatised as repeated acts compelled by a regulatory framework, and the narrative traces the gradual failure of that repetition as she becomes conscious of her performance as performance.

Third, Shrimati's departure constitutes a rupture in the heteronormative order that positions marriage as the horizon of female identity. By leaving her husband for a vocation rather than for another man, and by drawing her decisive support from a non-conjugal relationship of mentorship, she declines the compulsory character of marriage and renders an alternative form of life intelligible. The bakula metaphor frames this rupture as gentle, non-violent, and preservative of the self, and the closing image of the open door reconfigures Shrimati as the author of her own space. Taken together, these findings establish *Gently Falls the Bakula* as a text whose critique of patriarchy is deeper and more systematic than its reputation as domestic fiction suggests, and as a text hospitable to queer reading despite the absence of non-normative desire.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

This study is subject to several limitations. It is confined to textual analysis and does not incorporate reader-response data, reception history, or the wider sociocultural context of the novel's production and circulation. The queer-theoretical reading, while argued on the basis of established theory, necessarily extends the concept of "queering" beyond its original association with non-heterosexual identity, and some readers may regard that extension as contestable. The study also engages a single novel and cannot by itself support generalisations about Murty's oeuvre.

Several directions for further research follow. A comparative study of Murty's novels, including *Mahashweta* and *Dollar Bahu*, through the framework proposed here would test whether the pattern of quiet rupture identified in *Gently Falls the Bakula* is characteristic of her fiction more broadly. Comparative work placing Murty alongside Shashi Deshpande or Anita Nair would situate her within the tradition of Indian English women's writing on marriage. Reception studies examining how Murty's largely female readership interprets Shrimati's departure would add an empirical dimension. Finally, attention to the novel's Kannada cultural context and to the regional specificity of the bakula symbol would enrich the metaphorical reading offered here.

Conclusion

Gently Falls the Bakula moves well beyond its surface narrative of marital discord to deliver a pointed critique of the patriarchal and heteronormative structures that shape middle-class Indian conjugality. Read through gender theory, the novel exposes the mechanisms (economic dependence, internalised obligation, the policing of women by women) through which a brilliant woman is reduced to the supporting apparatus of her husband's career. Read through Butler, it dramatises the performative construction of the good wife and the moment at which that performance ceases to be sustainable. Read through queer theory, it reveals the marital norm as a norm and imagines, in Shrimati's departure for a life of the mind, a form of female existence that the norm cannot contain.

Murty's distinctive contribution is to conceive of resistance not as confrontation but as self-recognition and withdrawal. The bakula falls gently, and in falling it keeps its fragrance. Shrimati leaves without bitterness and without renouncing her capacity for generosity, and in doing so she models an agency that is neither victimhood nor rebellion but self-authorship. This article has argued that such agency is best understood through the combined resources of gender and queer theory, and that Murty's fiction, so often dismissed as merely popular, opens a space for new readings of selfhood and autonomy in contemporary Indian English literature.

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