

Journey Towards Rediscovering the Sense of Self: A Comparative Study of *Gently Falls the Bakula* by Sudha Murty and *Thappad*

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ABSTRACT

The realisation of a strong sense of self in women can empower them to define themselves, instead of engaging in relentless efforts to fit into the stereotypes of their contemporary society. The effort of appeasing everyone at the cost of sacrificing one's self at the altar may have annihilating repercussions on the psyche of an individual. The journey of self-discovery has never been effortless for women, who, sometimes, in the process of playing the role of a supporter and backing up the family in highs and lows, end up losing their identities. This paper intends to study the journey of rediscovering of the sense of self in the characters of Shrimati and Amrita from the novel *Gently Falls the Bakula* and the movie *Thappad*, respectively, whose lives had been guided either by their husbands, family members, or circumstances, as a result, they ended up drifting away from realising their actual worth. The feelings of emptiness and purposelessness jolt them from within and lead them on their journeys of rediscovering their own selves. However, in the process, they witness the dismantling of their families and risk their marriages. The respective incentives for these two women to understand the need of their sense of self, owing to the ill treatment in their house, may be different, but their lives arrive at the same standstill, and thereafter, they have to decide the course of their lives and undertake journeys to discover their identities. Both works considered in this study introduce us to the modern woman, who not only restrains her dreams to support her family but also wishes to live with dignity. These characters represent a paradigm shift in the age-old perspective that favoured the idea of sacrificing everything at the altar for the family and promoted living their lives as subservient women and being mere shadows. As they realises their menial importance in their respective households, they dared to raise their voices and even left the thresholds. In the case of Shrimati, her internal voice obstructs her from taking the decision of deserting her husband and transgressing the conditioned role of women, whereas society and her family members advice Amrita to move on in the marriage even with her dignity at stake.

Index Terms: Stereotypical, Emptiness, Identity, Self.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of the sense of self helps a person recognise their worth, which helps them quickly identify traits that they either need to work on or that they can be proud of. It is quite disheartening that most women do not even realise the obliteration of their sense of self, while some consider themselves incapable of mustering the courage to venture on the journey of self-discovery owing to their circumstances; however, few others dare to undertake the journey even at high costs, which may be in the form of opposition from family. Mehta opines, "A sense of self may be defined as the ability to distinguish one's own values from those of any outside persuasions, and to do so well enough to be able to protect those ideals from unwanted external influences" (1). Since times immemorial, a strong sense of self, emotional stability, and discretion to have a direction in life have been essential for the foundation of a progressive society. We may not spend much time thinking about our sense of self, but it undoubtedly affects our life on the subconscious level. Moreover, knowing who we are and our expectations from life allows us to develop a strong bond with our peers, which leads to better emotional health in the long run. Erica Myers opines, "Having a well-developed sense of self is highly beneficial in helping us make choices in life. From something as small as favourite food to larger concerns like personal values, knowing what comes from our own self versus what comes from other allows us to live authentically."

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

S. Infant Joshi Sudha highlighted the clash between emotionalism and rationalism in the novel *Gently Falls the Bakula* in the paper, 'Culture: A Clash between Emotionalism and Rationalism in Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*'. S. Mathumathy and Saraswati S. wrote a paper titled 'Extending Circumscription: The Metamorphosis of Female Protagonists in the Indian Movies "The Great Indian Kitchen" and "Thappad"', where they captured the tribulations and frustrations of married women in a rather realistic manner. M. Revathi, in the paper, 'Over-Ambition and Self-Interest Leads to Alienation in Marriage (With Special Reference to Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*)', shows how most married women are constrained to fulfil the needs of their husbands and kith and kin. Abhishek Kosta, in his review of the film *Thappad*, depicts it as a powerful parable of women's empowerment.

DISCUSSION

Gently Falls the Bakula brings forth the differences in the conjugal life of Shrikant and Shrimati. Shrimati is representative of the Indian woman, who remains subservient to her husband throughout her life, and thus, she becomes oblivious to her predicament and value in her own house. Women are being empowered in every way in modern India; however, if we take closer looks at the households, the scenario seems to be far away from this utopian vision. This can be the lopsided interpretation of a marriage, wherein, a woman is expected to play the secondary role despite discharging household responsibilities and rearing children. Consequently, she relegates her position and engrosses herself towards taking care of her family, brushing aside the thought of her own individual happiness and satisfaction. Shrimati is a well-educated, witty, and intelligent woman, but she confines her life to her husband's companionship instead of pursuing a career and her dream of researching on history. By contrast, Shrikant, her husband, is always concerned with ascending the corporate ladder and does not value her presence in his life. Many instances in the novel prove that he always takes her for granted and that her role in his life is not more than that of a personal secretary who takes care of his schedule, belongings, and of course, his home. She puts up with his reluctant attitude and utter negligence in the hope that one day he will realise her worth and treat her the way she deserves.

The teenage love of Shrikant and Shrimati blossoms under the aroma of the *Bakula* flower. With time, they part ways as Shrikant becomes an Engineer graduate from IIT and Shrimati prefers to pursue postgraduation in History, following her ardent fascination for historical personalities and places; however, their love does not wither because of them parting ways. Even after strong opposition from their families, they get married, and in the process, Shrimati forgoes the research fellowship offered by Prof. Mike Collins. Her rejection of a foreign fellowship, which was her dream, and instead opting the life of a housewife, may seem peculiar to foreign readers, but it is not alien to Indian readers, because here, a woman's career often takes backseat for supporting her family. The novel makes the readers contemplate the ingrained traditional mentality that normalises Shrimati opting to be her husband's shadow instead of pursuing a bright career. Like every Indian daughter-in-law, she tries hard to adjust in her new environment, but from time to time, she has to face utter rejection at the hands of Ganagakka, her mother-in-law. However, she never knits her eyebrows and hopes to win Ganagakka's heart one day, but the day never arrives.

This novel revolves around the journey of a middle-class educated woman, who eventually decides to give up the role of a backstage supporter and voices her concern on the front stage of life. The rosy start of Shrikant and Shrimati's life takes a different turn with time. We witness the gradual transformation of Shrikant's character from being a lover to a heedless husband, with simultaneous growth in his graph of material success. He rises up to the position of a director of a multinational company, but in the process, becomes oblivious towards his duties as a husband. Through his character, the author also drives attention towards the rearing serpent of liberalisation and urbanisation in India that has crushed the healthy atmosphere of the family and increased loneliness in individuals. However, it should not be inferred that the author is against modernisation; she is trying to caution her readers against the deadly effects of riches on personal and domestic relations, which sometimes end up making an individual self-centred and dismantle families. Shrikant is representative of this egocentric and self-centred mentality as he does not realise that his mundane success is engulfing his tender feelings, which finally rattles his domestic life beyond the point of retrieval. Even a letter from Ravi, his friend, where he talks about Shrimati, "She has been unassuming, undemanding, and totally submissive to your needs and to your achievements. Shrikant, without her you would not have been what you are today" (*Gently Falls the Bakula* 102), does not melt his heart and make him realise her importance, which is quite evident in the way he reacts after reading letter. He asks Shrimati, "Please enter the contact details in my personal diary and our system" (*GFB* 103). Despite having been a bright student, Shrimati ends up playing the role of Shrikant's secretary, so much so that she ends up questioning her capabilities. Nonetheless, she continues to put up with her sad lot and shadows him, until one day, when she realises the futility of her life. Eventually, when things become unbearable to her, she decides to leave Shrikant and overcomes the traditional belief that a woman should stay with her husband irrespective of the way he treats her; she undertakes a journey of her self-discovery and lives life on her own terms rather than being subservient to anyone.

The novel considers various issues and family conflicts that make the life of an individual troublesome. The story of the novel develops on two planes; on one hand, over the course of time, Shrikant reaches glorious heights in his career and gains more material possessions, and on the other hand, Shrimati gets lonelier and develops an ardent desire to become a mother, to which Shrikant always has an evasive reply. This makes Shrimati realise, as stated in the book, that ". . . all the children she had dreamt of would remain only dreams" (*GFB* 98). Gradually, Shrikant's continuous negligence becomes unbearable for her, she feels ". . . a vacuum within herself, that the work she was doing was against her wishes, that she wasn't enjoying it" (*GFB* 116). Despite the void in her life, she never hurdles in Shrikant's life, and rather, continues to be a steadfast pillar to him.

Shrimati never budes from her responsibilities as a wife and a daughter-in-law. When her mother-in-law bluffs about having taken a hefty loan from their neighbours for Shrikant's education, she helps repay the loan by putting aside her dream of higher studies. On being asked by Shrikant, she replies, "When you are mine, your loan is also mine. It comes as a package. I cannot say I want only my husband. His joys and sorrows are also acceptable to me" (*GFB* 77). Despite being swamped with responsibilities, she never gets irritated as evidenced from the line "she believed that Shrikant was doing a great job and it was her duty to help him" (*GFB* 100). Many instances in the novel show that for Shrimati, her career, dreams, and aspirations have always taken the backseat in the face of her husband's progress. Later in the story, she ponders, "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" (*GFB* 117). When Shrimati is on the verge of registering for her PhD, Shrikant decides to go to Delhi and says that he may not get the promotion if he turns down the transfer. Although he is fine with Shrimati staying alone in Bombay to continue her studies, Shrimati, being a devoted wife, says, "No Shri, neither option is acceptable. I do not want to forgo your promotion by rejecting the offer nor do I want to stay alone. We will stay in Delhi for one year and I will take up my studies next year" (84). When she realises that all her sacrifices are unacknowledged, it jolts her from within. During an altercation, Shrikant says things that hurt her self-respect and individual freedom, "Enough of your lecture Shrimati. Don't talk about your worthless subject. The world of business is so different from yours" (*GFB* 124).

This is true in the case of Shrimati, that money, luxury, and comforts of life can never replace the love, warmth, and concern of loved ones. Even after all the materialistic comforts, Shrimati has no respite from the agitation and vacuum in her life. She recalls that during her college life, she spent not even a single day being unhappy. The plethora of material possessions and having to wear an artificial mask to please everyone during public appearances were getting unbearable for her. She broods over the hollowness of the modern society where everything seems a farce, being buried under layers of hypocrisy and sham. She wonders, "Were all these ambitious men are unconcerned about their wives' feelings? Who knows . . . Most husbands and wives put on the appearance of being perfectly matched" (*GFB* 132). The constant loneliness and desolation make her feel like ". . . a planet which shines with reflected light rather than of a star which radiates its own light" (150). Eventually, she decides to discard the tag of an ideal wife and decides to live life on her own terms. However, during her journey towards self-discovery, she overcomes various hurdles and faces various mental as well as emotional dilemmas. At various instances in the novel, we find her contemplating her predicament and trying to determine her value in her own house. Shrimati's life takes a real turn after her conversation with Prof. Mike Collins from the USA, who ends up being a saviour in Shrimati's tumultuous life as he is able to perceive the vacuum in her life and inspires her to fulfil her dream of being a researcher in history. This interaction rekindles the fire of studying further and pursuing her PhD.

Shrimati's decision to discard the traditional tag of an ideal wife does not mean that her love for her husband changes in any way; rather, it denotes that she has learnt to prioritise her happiness and thereby has discovered her sense of self. Her departing words reverberate in readers' hearts, "Shri, I loved History and I loved you. In fact, once upon a time I loved you more than History. But when you lost your finer sentiments, chasing the success in the world of business, I was left alone with nothing other than History . . . you knew your goal. Now, I am also clear about my goal and I want to achieve it" (*GFB* 162). The novel ends in such a way that readers can only stand by Shrimati's decision. The writer says, "She was going away not to earn money, but to find her own individuality" (*GFB* 156). After her departure, Shrikant realises that she was the foundation of his happiness and thinks about the gentle Bakula flowing away from his life, leaving him dry within. The writer comments, "The Bakula tree, whose flowers symbolized the love between them had fallen suddenly" (*GFB* 180). Her departure changes both their lives in many ways. Shrikant realises that Shrimati is not weak in any way as she has the strength to withstand the social stigma; Shrimati realises that a whole world lies beyond being subservient to her husband. In the end, Shrimati emerges a strong woman who is not bothered about the presumed mentality of the patriarchal society that despises her decision of deserting her husband and can never see her side of the story. She even says to Shrikant, "I know that if I leave now, it is very natural for society to talk about me. But let me not worry about that" (*GFB* 162). This decision symbolises her new venture in life, which may be a series of unknown troubles, but at least it will be her sole decision and the only way to rediscover her sense of self.

Thappad

Over time, the way female characters are depicted in Indian cinema has changed drastically from being portrayed as either helpless victims or cunning villains. Anubhav Sinha's movie *Thappad* (translated as slap) raises some burning issues regarding the predefined role of a man and a woman in an Indian household. It intends to capture the tribulations in the life of a married woman and advocates the need to have mutual respect and equal rights, irrespective of whether the woman is financially dependent. The movie unveils the colossal number of duties carried out by the lady of the house, which do not lessen her struggles towards gaining the respect she deserves. In the preliminary part of the movie, we find Amrita, the central character, as a content housewife, who serves the family round the clock without any complaints and considers her life perfect. The extent of Amrita's devotion towards her husband is seen when she even forgets her favourite colour and considers her husband's favourite colour as hers. She says, "I was so busy keeping Vikram happy, I even forget blue was not my favourite colour" (*Thappad* 2:02:28). Amrita's life is turned upside down by a slap from her husband during a party hosted in their house. For Vikram and the society, it may be "*Ek thappad hi to tha*" (it was only a single slap), but it tears up Amrita's dignity and self-respect. For her, the slap was not just a physical manifestation of physical violence, but an infringement of her dignity and self-respect, and it eventually makes her ponder over the precariousness of her sense of self in the long race of backing up her husband during all ups and downs in his life and career. To worsen the situation, when she looks around in the hope of getting mental support, she finds everybody consoling her by saying that it was merely a slap; moreover, her husband is not even sorry about it. She realises that even her mother-in-law's love towards her was about she being a wife to her son and not towards her as an individual. Amrita complains to her: "But on the night of the party, I realised you loved Vikram's wife not me" (*Thappad* 2:01:28). As an upshot, she begins to realise her menial importance in her husband's life and thus begins her journey of self-discovery. The movie also unfolds the lives of other female characters as some of them realise the treatment they receive in a patriarchal society, whereas, others are so engrossed in sacrificing everything for the sake of the family and the husband that they are not even conscious of the injustice they are confronting.

The real agony for Amrita lies in the fact that even after slapping her, Vikram does not even realise that he has obliterated her self-respect, and thus, never truly apologises. Instead, he seems to be bothered about the prospective reaction of society and the defame that would trail behind Amrita's decision of leaving the house. He says, "You know how bad I feel. You know what I am going through" (*Thappad* 53:3). The story showcases the lopsided mentality of the society, which has different value systems for men and women. Vikram decides to leave the organisation where his efforts are not valued; this leads Amrita to decide to dust off the relationship where even after having invested years of effort and dedication, she is not valued. Amrita does not demand any compensation, even when the legal fights turn ugly. This movie unleashes the partial face of a society that validates and even appreciates the sacrifices done by women even at the cost of their predicament and true selves. It also raises a voice against the wrong notion of marriage that tends to normalise marital violence towards women.

CONCLUSION

The movie as well as the novel presents the perspectives of women who chose not to be financially independent as they chose to care and provide for their family and husband. Shrimati and Amrita willingly abandon their prospective careers to support their families. Amrita says, "I don't remember saying I wanted to be a housewife. Then I thought, I may not be the best dancer but I can become the world's best housewife" (*Thappad* 2:01:38). Both works show the nullification of nuptial vows in the absence of equality, self-esteem, and veneration between a husband and a wife.

Generally, in the traditional Indian society, women have always been assessed on the yardstick of being productive, responsible, and duty-bound. In the words of Krishna Bipin Mehta ‘. . . woman generally is seen as either household worker or as a child bearing machine’ (2). However, being part of a progressive society, we must think that being respected should also be given equal consideration. Our society, at large, is conditioned to think in the predefined way of putting women in a designated box, which has no compartment for respect. We must consider questions like ‘Who shall safeguard the dignity of women’? Is it the responsibility of the law, the society, or the woman herself? As we all know, no piece of paper or any support can do anything unless women learn their worth. Both women, Shrimati and Amrita, in some way or the other, devoted their lives towards making their husbands’ lives easy and comfortable. However, the husbands rarely acknowledged their dedication. Despite this treatment, Shrimati and Amrita learned to be happy till their self-respect was trampled. The echo of the slap continues to haunt Amrita for days. Although Shrimati does not have to face any violence, the continuous reluctance and the heated discussions are enough for her to realise the need to discover her identity.

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