



Intersecting Captivities: A Carceral Humanities Reading of Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula*

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Abstract

This article explores the double confinements in Sudha Murthy's Gently Falls the Bakula, which revolves around the young couple Shrikant and Shrimathi through the lens of Carceral Humanities. It analyses how the domestic and corporate space function as carceral institutions that discipline and confine individual agency. The narrative foregrounds intersecting captivity as Shrimati gets emotionally incarcerated within patriarchal domesticity, whereas Shrikant gets entrapped by neoliberal logic of corporate ambition. By mapping these entrapments the paper argues for a broader understanding of the novel which is reinterpreted not only as a tale of marital disillusionment but as a narrative of layered incarceration where situating Sudha Murthy's work within a neoliberal paradigm revealing how everyday environments like home and office can function as carceral spaces.

Keywords: incarceration, humanities, confinement, neoliberalism, carceral spaces, individual agency

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Introduction

Sudha Murthy a renowned educator and a philanthropic worker is the wife of N.R. Narayana Murthy, co-founder of Infosys. Her literary voice is marked by simplicity and emotional depth and resonates with readers across generations. Her celebrated works are *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, *Dollar Bahu*, *Rana* and *Other Stories*, and *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Murthy explores the emotional and psychological journey of Shrimati Deshpande, whose life is shaped by the constraints of societal expectations. The novel traces her relationship with Shrikant Deshpande, her childhood rival turned husband, and the gradual unraveling of their marriage as Shrikant ascends the corporate ladder while Shrimati's aspirations are sidelined.

Murthy uses Shrimati's story to show the emotional confinements of a woman in a patriarchal society. It also highlights the clash between traditional Indian values and modern materialism. Shrimathi reclaims her identity and autonomy after years of self-effacement challenging the stereotype of the submissive Indian wife and underscores the importance of mutual respect in marriage.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have explored Sudha Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* through feminist lenses exploring the psychological insight into women's inner lives, especially the tension between personal fulfillment and societal roles, women liberation, fragile marital relations and nuanced depiction of female agency. Despite these extensive research, a



notable gap remains in apply humanitarian approach grounded in carceral studies to the novel. This carceral framework might offer new insights into the characters' experience and societal structures depicted in the novel.

Theoretical Framework

This paper analyses Gently Falls the Bakula through a framework that sees confinement not just in prison walls, but in the everyday spaces like homes and workplaces. Drawing from Carceral Humanities, it explores how these familiar environments quietly shape and restrict personal freedom. Inspired by Michel Foucault's ideas on discipline and surveillance, the framework shows how both Shrimati and Shrikant are subtly molded by the societal expectations around them: she by the emotional weight of domestic life and its gendered demands, and he by the relentless drive of corporate ambition under neoliberal ideals. Feminist theory helps us understand how Shrimati's silence is a product of cultural conditioning that rewards sacrifice and discourages personal voice and expressions. Meanwhile, Shrikant's success story is infused with self-cantered pursuits, as his identity becomes consumed by performance and status. Overall, their lives reveal how love, ambition, and duty can become cages when shaped by forces beyond our control. This reading invites us to see Murthy's novel not just as a story of a strained marriage, but as a powerful reflection on how ordinary spaces can quietly imprison us.

Research Question

How do domestic and corporate spaces act as carceral institutions that confine individual agency?

Discussion

Building on Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish, Carceral Humanities expands the notion of imprisonment beyond physical incarceration. It highlights how schools, homes, offices, and other institutions operate as disciplinary environments that regulate behavior, normalize compliance, and restrict agency. In Murthy's novel, the domestic and corporate spheres are not neutral backdrops but active carceral sites where Shrimati and Shrikant are

molded into compliant subjects.

From the very beginning, Shrimati's entry into marriage is shadowed by disapproval, hostility, and dowry-based expectations. Her mother-in-law, Gangakka, and sister-in-law, Rama, weaponize customs and family honor to discipline her into silence and self-sacrifice. What appears to be a nurturing home gradually emerges as a site of carceral control, where Shrimati's agency is curtailed by emotional surveillance and repeated taunts. Her sacrifices, postponing her Ph.D, taking up employment to repay a fabricated "loan," and later suppressing her longing for children, mirror Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, where obedience is not enforced through physical coercion but through cultural conditioning and internalized guilt. Feminist readings reveal how her silence, far from passive, is produced by systemic patriarchal expectations that reward endurance while erasing personal desire. Thus, the home becomes a gendered prison without bars—its power lying in how it shapes Shrimati's subjectivity into one of quiet resignation.

In contrast, Shrikant appears empowered in the corporate world, rising from a modest background to become managing director of a multinational software company. Yet this trajectory is equally marked by confinement. Performance metrics, promotions, and global business targets act as neoliberal forms of surveillance, disciplining him into relentless productivity. While Shrimati's captivity is visible in her denied voice, Shrikant's is masked as success. He internalizes corporate demands so thoroughly that he becomes his own jailor, incapable of prioritizing relationships, leisure, or emotional intimacy. In this sense, neoliberal capitalism functions as a carceral system: offering mobility and wealth while restricting selfhood to narrow definitions of ambition and achievement.

The novel's brilliance lies in juxtaposing these dual captivities. Shrimati, confined by domestic patriarchy, and Shrikant, entrapped by corporate neoliberalism, embody two sides of carceral modernity. Their marriage once nourished by love symbolized in the fragrant bakula flowers erodes as both partners become subjects of disciplinary systems beyond their control. Shrimati's eventual rebellion refusing to attend business dinners, speaking



assertively at social gatherings, and finally leaving to pursue her Ph.D, marks the breaking of her carceral silence. Shrikant, on the other hand, recognizes too late that his success is built on her unacknowledged sacrifices. He was unable to escape the prison of corporate ambition even when confronted with loss.

Through Shrimati and Shrikant, *Gently Falls the Bakula* reveals how ordinary environments like home and office function as carceral spaces. Foucault's insights into discipline and surveillance, extended through Carceral Humanities, illuminate how individuals are molded by expectations rather than force.

Conclusion

More than a story as marital disillusionment, this novel is layered in incarceration. Murthy's *Gently Falls the Bakula* is more than a story of marital disillusionment; it is a study in layered incarceration. Viewing under the prism of carceral lens, we see how domestic and corporate spaces act as carceral institutions, disciplining both women and men in gendered and neoliberal ways. Shrimati's silence and Shrikant's ambition, though opposite in form, emerge from the same logic of control. This perspective

expands our understanding of Murthy's work beyond feminist critique alone, situating it within a broader discourse of confinement in everyday life. It becomes evident that love, duty, and ambition when mediated by patriarchal and neoliberal structures transform into cages, and that liberation requires both recognition and resistance.

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