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## Prakriti Unbound: Contemporary Indian Women’s Fiction: A Feminist and Spiritual Analysis

**Dr. Anuradha**

Lecturer in English

Govt. Sr. Sec. School, Badarpur

Email ID: dhimana454@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This paper looks at how two modern Indian novels challenge the idea that old Indian philosophy is bad for women. Many people think traditional Indian thought is naturally patriarchal. However, this paper argues that the unfair treatment of women came later because of social changes, not because of the original philosophy. By looking at Sudha Murty’s *Gently Falls the Bakula* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, we see how the characters Shrimati and Panchaali match the old Samkhya philosophy of *Prakriti* the active, independent female force and *Purusha* the male observer. Both authors show that female independence and spiritual strength are deeply rooted in Indian tradition. In the end, when these women break free, they are not just copying Western feminist ideas. Instead, they are returning to the true, equal roots of their own Indian culture.

**Keywords:** Prakriti, Purusha, Traditional Feminism, History, and Independence.

**Introduction:** A big mistake in literary studies is saying that classical Indian philosophy automatically treats women as secondary. This mistake happens because people confuse high spiritual philosophy (*Darshana*) with later, rigid social rules (*Smritis*), or with old British colonial ideas meant to show Indian women as helpless victims who needed saving (Sharma 92). In reality, during the ancient Vedic times when India lived by its high philosophy, women had a lot of freedom. There were famous female thinkers like Gargi and Maitreyi, and strong female rulers. The bad treatment of women started much later because of war, political instability, and colonial rules.

Modern Indian stories written by women help fix this misunderstanding. Sudha Murty’s *Gently Falls the Bakula* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* both show highly intelligent and strong female characters. Shrimati, a modern academic woman, and Panchaali, a queen from the old epics, are not weak people who are discovering their power for the very first time. Instead, they are fighting against small-minded households and unfair rules that try to lock up the power they already have. By using the old Indian philosophy of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, this paper shows that when these women stand up for themselves, they are actually returning to real Indian roots. In old Samkhya philosophy, *Prakriti* means nature or the feminine power, and her

main quality is that she is completely independent (Svatantra). She creates and changes the universe using her own energy and intelligence. She does not need a male force to tell her she is useful or valuable; her power belongs entirely to her (Radhakrishnan 2: 256).

Both Shrimati and Panchaali show this natural independence before society tries to change them. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati is naturally brilliant at school. She gets better grades than her boyfriend, Shrikant, and has a real passion for history and research. She does not need a husband to make her life meaningful (Mishra 204). Shrimati's intelligence is clear right from the start. When the school board exam results come out, she gets the first rank in the whole region, which shocks Shrikant, who gets second place. According to the book, "over the years, she had sometimes scored more marks than Shrikant," demonstrating that she was always intelligent by nature and did not take pride in it (Murty 14).

Similarly, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Panchaali is born from a holy fire, which shows she is not a normal, submissive girl. She refuses to behave like a quiet princess. Instead, she demands to learn politics and later designs a magical palace, proving that her creative mind has no limits (Devi and Sangeetha 115). Panchaali fights against the rules placed on girls during her childhood. She convinces her father to let her sit in on her brother's private lessons about government and ruling—something that was completely banned for girls at the time. She mentions that these tough political studies "weren't very common" for a girl, but she learns them easily anyway (Divakaruni 24).

The trouble starts in both books because the social systems around them try to crush this natural female power. Shrimati is forced to leave her studies to do household chores, while Panchaali is treated like an object that men can gamble away (Kumari 48). After marriage, Shrimati's bright mind is trapped in boring daily tasks. She spends her time packing Shrikant's work bags, listening to an angry mother-in-law complain about money, and serving food at corporate parties (Murty 78). In the same way, Panchaali's rights are completely ignored when her husband, Yudhishtira, uses her as a literal financial bet in a game of dice, treating his own wife like property he can trade away (Divakaruni 142). Their struggles do not happen because they are weak, but because society forgot the philosophy that the feminine power (*Prakriti*) is free.

The Distortion of the Witnessing Consciousness In the true philosophy of Samkhya, *Purusha* represents pure male consciousness. Its job is just to sit back and observe *Prakriti* with total clarity and respect (Larson 164). But when human society becomes unfair, men distort this idea. They become emotionally cold and lazy, enjoying the hard work and sacrifices of women while hiding behind their jobs or legal rules.

This failure of men to be good partners is clear in both novels. In Murty's book, Shrikant becomes completely obsessed with his corporate job and making money. He treats Shrimati's quiet cooking and cleaning as a basic tool to keep his life easy, while totally ignoring the fact that her mind is rotting at home. He consumes her energy but gives nothing back to the relationship (Mishra 210). As Shrikant climbs the corporate ladder, his marriage becomes totally empty. When Shrimati

tries to tell him how lonely she is and how much she wants to go back to her history research, Shrikant brushes her off. He brings up an old religious story about a wife named Bhamati who gave up her whole life to sit in her husband's shadow, telling Shrimati that “in today's society it is very difficult to find women like Bhamati.” He uses this old story to romanticize her loneliness just so he can keep focusing on his own career (Murty 112).

A similar breakdown happens in *The Palace of Illusions*. Panchaali's husbands care more about their pride, duties, and rules than her feelings. During her worst nightmare—when enemies try to pull off her clothes in front of a whole court room—they just look down at the floor and do nothing to help her (Akhtar and Chelliah 66). They claim they own her, but they fail to protect her. During that terrible scene in the court of Hastinapur, Panchaali looks to her five warrior husbands for help, but they are completely frozen by legal technicalities. She watches in horror as they lower their eyes and stay quiet because of their pride and the rules of a rigged dice game. They completely fail as protectors, becoming useless bystanders while she is humiliated in public (Divakaruni 148). On the other hand, Krishna behaves like a true, good guide because he does not try to own or control her; instead, he helps her see past the temporary illusions of the world.

The big turning point in both books happens when the women realize that trying to please an unfair society has starved their inner souls. This realization connects modern stories with old spiritual truths. The characters reject their suffocating roles to reclaim their original, philosophical freedom. For Shrimati, an honest talk with her old teacher makes her see that her personal growth has stopped completely because she is just living as a supportive wife (Kumari 52). The spell breaks for Shrimati during a random meeting with her old college professor. When he asks about her history research, she realizes she has done nothing for ten years except watch Shrikant get promotions. Looking at her big, lonely house, she is forced to face the truth that her life is empty, and that she has deleted her own identity to live as an unappreciated shadow (Murty 150).

For Panchaali, the loss of her family in the war and her final walk up the cold mountains strip away her royal titles. During the final, painful walk up the frozen peaks of the Himalayas, Panchaali watches her royal life disappear. As she slips and lies dying in the snow, she realizes that not one of her five husbands has stopped to help her or save her. This total isolation strips away her identity as a queen and a wife, forcing her to face her own soul completely separate from the men who defined her (Divakaruni 340).

Both authors reject the old patriarchal idea that a woman can only find happiness by serving a husband or a house. They refuse to be a secondary ‘Other’ and choose to be the main ‘Subject’ of their own lives (Beauvoir 63). Shrimati takes control by walking out of her marriage to go back to university. In a quiet but strong move, Shrimati refuses to be a passive corporate wife anymore. She packs her bags, leaves Shrikant's house, and walks out of his life to get her Ph.D. in history. Her leaving is not done out of ugly anger, but out of a calm decision to make her own choices, leaving the marriage behind gently like a falling Bakula flower (Murty 163).

Panchaali, during her final moments on the mountain, stops relying on her husbands and realizes her spirit is huge, divine, and separate from all the pain she suffered. By stepping away from the men who failed to value them, both women stop acting for an audience that does not care and return to the raw power of free *Prakriti* (Akhtar and Chelliah 68). As her physical life ends in the snow, Panchaali's mind expands. She drops her old anger, her need for revenge, and her reliance on her husbands' weapons. She realizes her spirit is bright, immortal, and independent of being a daughter, a wife, or a queen. She joins with the divine universe in a way that no human court could ever block or control (Divakaruni 354).

### **Conclusion:**

The books by Sudha Murty and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni show that when Indian women fight for their freedom, they do not need to borrow modern Western ideas. By looking at *Gently Falls the Bakula* and *The Palace of Illusions* through the ideas of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, the choices made by Shrimati and Panchaali are free from social guilt. Their choices to walk away from bad environments are not failures. Instead, they are a correct return to an ancient philosophy that says the feminine force is naturally free and independent. In the end, both novels show that the unfair rules found in modern society are just historical corruptions of an originally balanced culture. By breaking out of their cages, these women are not rebelling against Indian tradition; they are throwing away its bad habits to reclaim their true, ancestral birthright of total freedom.

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