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Urban Life and Rural Ethics in the Works of Sudha Murthy: A Comparative Study of Ethical Values, Ambition, and Human Relationships

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Abstract

This study explores the tension between rural values and urban modernity in the works of Sudha Murthy. Her works present two contrasting value systems through characters and settings. Over the years, life in India has gradually moved away from the slower rhythm of villages toward the restless pace of cities. With this movement have come new opportunities for work, education, and personal growth. These changes affect how people understand human relationships and values. In many rural communities, the way of life has always been simple, based on mutual trust and the feeling of being part of a whole. When these two ways of living meet, a subtle tension appears between older ethical beliefs and newer aspirations. In many parts of rural India, values are not something people talk about in abstract terms - they are simply part of daily life. One learns them by watching others: how neighbours step in during difficulty, how elders are listened to, how relationships are maintained over time. There is a certain weight given to human connections, often more than to personal gain. This shifting terrain is reflected in the characters of Sudha Murthy's works, who frequently traverse the subtleties of traditional norms and the allure of modern goals. Her stories often show characters who stand between these two ways of living. In many cases, her women characters represent a gradual shift in the role of women in society. They are thoughtful, educated, and aware of their choices, yet they continue to value emotional bonds and moral responsibility. Through such characters, Murthy presents a picture of women who are adapting to change without completely losing the ethical foundations that shaped them.

Keywords: Ethics, Values, Relationship, Urban, Rural, Simplicity, Ambition, Sacrifice, Patience

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban ambition and rural ethics are not only ideas, but ways of living that quietly shape how people think and act. Life in the city often pulls a person forward - it asks them to move faster, aim higher, and keep chasing something bigger. Success becomes a kind of measure, and in that rush, decisions are sometimes made more with the mind than the heart. However, rural life retains a particular type of vigour rooted in simplicity, community, and a deep sense of moral responsibility.

The gap between aspirations and ideals is not something we only read about; it is a frequent occurrence in real life. People leave their local surroundings behind and move to cities with high ambitions of making a name for themselves. But in that haste, it often becomes difficult to distinguish between what is good and what is necessary. This tension rarely announces itself loudly. Instead, it shows up in the decisions and thoughts of individuals - in the way priorities shift, in the way relationships quietly change, and in the way a person's sense of self begins to evolve.

When placed beside the writing of Sudha Murty, this contrast becomes clearer. In *Gently Falls the Bakula*, ambition slowly creates distance between people who once shared a close bond, almost without them realizing it. In *Mahashweta*, ideas of dignity and compassion are handled with quiet strength, even when circumstances are harsh. In *House of Cards*, values seem flexible, often pushed aside in the pursuit of power, while characters like Mridula hold on to the idea that integrity, even if tested, does not have to disappear.

Her stories do not suggest that ambition is wrong, but they do remind us that something valuable can slip away when success becomes the only focus. What stays with the reader is how her characters try to hold on to their sense of right and wrong, even when it is not easy - something that feels both simple and deeply human.

This paper, therefore, looks beyond a simple comparison of urban and rural life. It tries to understand whether the loss of ethical grounding is something that naturally comes with ambition, or whether it is still possible to move forward without losing the sense of self that keeps a person grounded. Through a close reading of Sudha Murty's selected works, this study examines how the collision of two value systems - one rooted in rural simplicity and the other driven by urban aspiration - shapes characters, relationships, and ultimately, the human condition.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent scholarship on Sudha Murty's fiction has increasingly focused on the intersection of social values, gender, and modernity in the Indian context. Several studies have examined how her narratives reflect the tension between traditional ethics and contemporary aspirations, particularly as experienced by characters navigating the transition from rural to urban environments.

A paper titled "Devaluation of Family and Human Behaviour in House of Cards" explores how urban life affects relationships in the novel. It demonstrates that when people move from rural areas to cities, their lifestyle and thinking begin to change, which can disturb family balance. The study shows how characters like Sanjay change with success and how this impacts family life. However, these studies do not fully explore the shaping of characters like Mridula, who give more value to rural ethics. There is less attention given to how traditional values continue to exist and respond within the urban framework.

A 2024 study published in the *International Journal of English Literature and Social Science* examines *House of Cards* alongside other works, highlighting the conflict between materialism and humanitarian values. It suggests that the growing desire for wealth and social position can gradually weaken both moral values and personal relationships. Many such

studies focus on how ambition and financial goals begin to outweigh emotional connections, leading to a decline in care, understanding, and closeness within the family.

Another paper studies Sudha Murty's novels and focuses on how they reflect Indian values versus materialism. It argues that people who stay rooted in values live meaningful lives, while those who chase money often lose emotional depth. The paper shows that Sudha Murty's characters are divided into two worlds - one value-driven, caring, and emotionally rich; the other materialistic, egoistic, and disconnected. Through this contrast, the writer suggests that life becomes difficult and empty when human values are ignored. The paper also presents materialistic figures like Gouramma, Jamuna, and Lakshmi, who represent ego, greed, and obsession for luxury.

Despite this growing body of work, a clear gap remains in understanding how rural ethical views and urban aspirations interact in the same space. This study attempts to fill that gap by looking at both aspects together, rather than separately, and by examining how this contrast affects not only individual characters but also their relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based approach grounded in close reading and comparative literary analysis. The primary texts under examination are Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, *Mahashweta*, and *House of Cards*. The analysis focuses on character behaviour, narrative structure, and thematic patterns to trace how rural ethics and urban ambition are represented and negotiated within each text.

The search strategy for the literature review employed key terms such as 'rural values', 'urban grounding', 'simplicity', 'ambition', 'ethics in Indian fiction', and 'Sudha Murty'. Secondary sources include journal articles, book chapters, and critical essays that engage with themes of modernity, gender, and

value systems in contemporary Indian English literature. The study draws on these sources to situate its analysis within the broader scholarly conversation while identifying the specific gap it seeks to address.

3.1 Rustic Ethics and Urban Ambition in *Gently Falls the Bakula*

Gently Falls the Bakula subtly, almost imperceptibly, introduces the idea of rustic ethics and urban ambition through the lives of Shrimati and Shrikant. At the beginning of their journey together, they share a clear knowledge of one another - a quiet, easy companionship that feels unforced and genuine. Their relationship develops around discussions of literature and history, and in these moments, Shrimati's values become apparent. She values depth over display, reflection over noise. Even in simple scenes - sitting with a book, thinking about the past - there is a sense that she finds meaning in things that do not seek attention.

After marriage, when they move to Mumbai, this ease does not disappear all at once; it slowly begins to fade. Shrikant enters the corporate world, and with every step forward in his career, something shifts in their everyday life. The change is not loud, but it is steady. They used to talk without keeping track of time. Gradually, Shrikant arrives home exhausted, preoccupied, and already thinking about meetings and deadlines, while Shrimati waits, hoping to share something about her day. The stillness that develops between them speaks louder than any disagreement, even though there are no clashes or hurtful words.

Perhaps the most revealing thing about this change is Shrimati's decision to abandon her own academic aspirations. She is perfectly capable of continuing her studies in history, and perfectly willing to do so, but she quietly resolves to devote her energies instead to Shrikant's ascending career. At first, this does not feel like a sacrifice to her - it is simply the way things are done. But as time goes on, the decision begins to weigh on her. What was once

a small adjustment becomes, slowly, a permanent absence. While Shrikant's world continues to open up with new opportunities, recognition, and movement, Shrimati's world becomes more limited, shaped by routine and long stretches of waiting.

Shrikant, however, is not shown as deliberately neglectful. His transformation feels slow, almost accidental. He does not set out to become someone different - the city simply asks more of him, and he gives it. The contrast between rustic ethics and urban ambition appears not in speeches, but in the way two people slowly begin to live different kinds of lives under the same roof. Murty does not argue her ideas loudly; she lets them grow through ordinary moments.

What the novel ultimately captures is how ambition, when left unchecked, can quietly erode the emotional fabric of a relationship. The distance between Shrimati and Shrikant is not born of conflict but of divergence - two people moving in different directions without fully realising it. In this sense, *Gently Falls the Bakula* offers one of Murty's most nuanced explorations of what is lost when the pursuit of success becomes the primary measure of a life well lived.

4. Dignity, Compassion, and Social Attitudes in *Mahashweta*

In *Mahashweta*, the difference between urban ambition and rural values comes out gently through Anupama's life. She begins as someone who believes in simple things - self-respect, honesty, and quiet strength. Even after stepping into a more modern, city-based life through her marriage, she does not leave these values behind. But the world around her operates on a different set of rules. In the city, people often become too concerned about how things look from the outside - their status, their reputation, and the opinions of others.

The conflict in *Mahashweta* is not between village and city in a direct sense, but between a

person's inherent dignity and the rigid social attitudes that begin to shape life in more "modern" and status-conscious spaces. At the beginning, Anupama's life carries a quiet richness. She is intelligent, graceful, and deeply connected to literature and theatre. Her world, though not luxurious, feels complete in its own way.

When Anupama is afflicted with leukoderma - a skin condition that carries no medical danger but enormous social stigma - the response of those around her reveals the true nature of the urban social world she has entered. Her husband and in-laws, driven by concerns of social image and reputation, abandon her. The cruelty is not born of malice alone, but of a deeply ingrained social calculus in which a woman's worth is measured by her appearance and her ability to maintain the family's standing in the community.

What makes Anupama's character so compelling is her refusal to be defined by this rejection. She does not collapse under the weight of social judgment. Instead, she draws on the same quiet strength that has always been part of her - a strength rooted not in urban ambition but in a rural ethical sensibility that places human dignity above social performance. She continues to educate herself, to work, and to find meaning in her relationships and her craft.

Through Anupama, Murty suggests that the values most worth holding on to are not those that the city rewards - status, appearance, professional achievement - but those that sustain a person from within: compassion, self-respect, and the courage to live honestly. *Mahashweta* thus becomes a meditation on what it means to preserve one's humanity in a world that increasingly measures people by external standards.

5. Roots of Simplicity: Rural Values and Urban Grounding in *House of Cards*

5.1 Mridula as the Embodiment of Rural Ethics

In *House of Cards*, Mridula's simplicity comes out in the way she lives her everyday life. Even after her marriage, when things become more comfortable for her, she does not really change herself. She continues to live in the same simple way and does not feel the need to impress anyone. Expensive things or showing off do not interest her much, and that is what quietly sets her apart from others around her.

Her job as a teacher is another clear example. She continues teaching not for money or position, but because she genuinely cares about it. She finds satisfaction in her work, which shows how she values purpose over profit. Her connection to her family and village also remains strong. This becomes more noticeable when compared to Sanjay, whose priorities slowly start changing.

What also stands out is the way she responds to Sanjay as he becomes more focused on money and success. She does not get into arguments or try to copy him. Instead, she stays as she is and follows what she feels is right. There is a quiet strength in her nature - you do not hear it in big words, but you can see it clearly in what she does.

5.2 The Rise of Urban Aspirations: Sanjay's Transformation

The theme in *House of Cards* feels so real because of how closely it connects with life today. In many cities, success is often measured in terms of income, position, and public image. People are working harder than ever, but they are also under constant pressure to succeed, earn more, and be seen as successful. As a result, priorities shift - often without one even realising it.

Sanjay's trajectory mirrors this phenomenon. In the beginning, he appears calm, sincere, and focused on his work as a doctor. There is a sense of balance in his life. But

as his career flourishes and he becomes more involved in the urban world, his priorities begin to change. With this change comes a constant push to achieve more - more success, more money, a better position. As he gets more involved in his work, there is less room for emotional connection or even time to reflect.

His relationship with Mridula begins to feel distant. Their life, which was once easy-going and slow, becomes restless due to the constant need to achieve more. This kind of change does not happen suddenly - it builds up through small choices and shifting priorities. He does not set out to hurt the relationship, but in the process, he misses a crucial point: a relationship requires more than good intentions; it also requires time and care.

5.3 Between Two Worlds: Conflict, Distance, and the Changing Nature of Relationships

In *House of Cards*, the idea of being caught between two worlds comes out clearly in the relationship between Mridula and Sanjay. They begin their life together with a sense of understanding, but as time passes, their ways of thinking slowly start to differ. What begins between them is not loud conflict but something quieter - almost harder to notice at first. Their disagreements do not turn into sharp arguments; instead, they settle into a kind of uneasy silence.

Over time, this difference grows. It does not explode into open fights - it lingers as a quiet distance. They continue living together, but their thoughts, values, and priorities slowly drift apart. This emotional gap becomes more visible in their behaviour. It is not something they can clearly point to, but it is there in pauses, in tone, in the way they avoid certain conversations. Mridula, in particular, begins to feel a kind of loneliness even within her own home, while Sanjay seems increasingly wrapped up in his own ambitions.

What the novel captures so well is how relationships can change without any single defining moment. People do not always notice

when they start heading in different directions, but the effect shows up gradually - in distance, in silence, in the loss of shared understanding. Through this, the story reflects a larger truth about modern life: when ambition and simplicity pull in opposite directions, holding on to emotional closeness becomes difficult.

6. Women as Emotional Anchors in Sudha Murty's Works

Sudha Murty's women do not usually stand at the front of dramatic action, yet they quietly hold everything together. Their presence is steady rather than striking, but without them, the emotional balance of her stories would collapse. In this sense, they function as emotional anchors - figures who absorb strain, preserve relationships, and keep a sense of humanity alive in changing social conditions.

In many of her works, women are placed in ordinary domestic spaces, but their roles go far beyond routine duties. Women often serve as the balancing influence within familial structures. When disagreements surface - stemming from financial strain, personal pride, or evolving objectives - it is frequently the woman who exhibits patience rather than immediate reactivity. This patience should not be misconstrued as a deficiency; rather, it constitutes a manifestation of emotional intelligence. They remember what others forget, hold on to what others let go of, and quietly make sense of everything that is changing around them.

6.1 Mridula in *House of Cards*

The idea of a woman as an emotional anchor comes through most naturally in Mridula's character. She is not loud, not demanding, and not trying to control anything - yet her presence quietly keeps everything in place. The emotional balance of the family, in many ways, rests on her ability to understand, adjust, and hold things together.

At the beginning, Mridula's life feels simple and grounded. She finds importance in

the little everyday moments that are frequently overlooked and prioritises genuine warmth over status or external accomplishment. She naturally becomes the one others turn to. She listens with patience, takes in tension without letting it grow into conflict, and quietly keeps things steady even when circumstances begin to change.

As Sanjay's ambitions begin to expand, however, a subtle shift enters their relationship. His attention gradually moves toward achievement, recognition, and financial security. Along the way, something quieter begins to slip away - the ease they once shared, the comfort of understanding, the sense of closeness that held them together. The distance does not appear all at once - it grows slowly, almost invisibly, until it becomes difficult to ignore.

In the midst of this change, Mridula does not react with anger or sudden confrontation. Instead, she tries to understand him, adjusting herself in ways that might preserve what remains between them. The more she tries to keep everything from falling apart, the more she ends up handling it all on her own. No one really notices how much she is doing, and slowly her own needs begin to slip away. Murty does not romanticise this sacrifice; instead, she presents it with a kind of honesty that makes it feel real and, at times, heavy.

6.2 Shrimati in *Gently Falls the Bakula*

The idea of a woman as an emotional anchor comes out in a very quiet but powerful way through Shrimati's character. She never asks to be noticed, and perhaps that is why her presence is felt the most. In her quiet way, she becomes the emotional centre of her relationship with Shrikant - the one who steadies things without ever claiming that role.

At the beginning of *Gently Falls the Bakula*, Shrimati's world feels simple and whole. With Shrikant, there are easy dreams, silent acceptance, and a friendship that does not have

to be justified. Love, for her, is not a question of comparison with success. It is enough to be together, to grow together. She supports him not because she has to, but because she believes in him and in what they have.

As his career begins to rise, however, the rhythm of their life changes. Slowly, almost without warning, ambition begins to take up more space. Meetings replace conversations, achievements replace shared moments, and Shrikant's attention turns outward - to the world, to success, to recognition. Shrimati feels it, though she does not immediately name it. She adjusts, as she always has. She waits a little longer, speaks a little less, and convinces herself that this is only a phase. She continues to support him, to hold on to what they once had, as if care alone can bridge the growing distance.

Through both Mridula and Shrimati, Murty shows that being the emotional support in a relationship is not only about being strong. It also means being vulnerable. These women keep relationships intact, often without acknowledgment, yet they are not immune to strain. If anything, their strength makes their silence more noticeable. And within that silence lies an important reminder - that even those who support everyone else need, in their own way, to be understood and cared for.

7. The Impact of Economic Thinking on Human Relationships

The impact of economic thinking on personal relationships is one of the most quietly devastating themes in Sudha Murty's fiction. As characters become more embedded in urban, market-driven environments, their way of evaluating the world - and the people in it - begins to shift. Success, income, and social position become the primary metrics by which life is measured, and in this recalibration, the emotional dimensions of human connection are gradually deprioritised.

In *House of Cards*, this process is most visible in Sanjay's trajectory. As his career begins to take off, he becomes increasingly preoccupied

with work, success, and advancement. From the outside, it seems to be progress. But somewhere along the line, his relationship with Mridula begins to slide - not because he makes a conscious decision to ignore it, but because his mind is elsewhere. He simply gets caught up in moving ahead, thinking he is doing the right thing. When life becomes all about achievement, it leaves little room for connection.

Mridula, on the other hand, holds on to what the relationship used to be. She still believes in being present, in sharing, in understanding. She does not change in the same way he does, and that is where the distance quietly grows. One person keeps trying to stay close, while the other slowly drifts, without fully realising it. There is no big fight, no clear breaking point - just a growing silence. And in that silence, the person who continues to care begins to feel alone, even while being in the relationship.

What fades is not just time, but the ease they once had. The little things - sitting together, chatting without hurry, laughing over nothing - gradually begin to go. Life becomes more about getting things done, meeting expectations, moving ahead. And somewhere in all that, the closeness that once felt so easy begins to slip away.

A similar dynamic is at work in *Gently Falls the Bakula*. Shrikant's growing professional success does not make him a bad person - it simply makes him a less present one. The economic logic of the city, with its emphasis on productivity and advancement, gradually colonises his inner life. He begins to see time as a resource to be managed rather than a gift to be shared. And in doing so, he loses something that cannot be recovered through professional achievement alone.

Murty's treatment of this theme is notable for its restraint. She does not condemn ambition or economic aspiration outright. Rather, she asks a quieter question: what is the cost of success when it is pursued without attention to

the relationships that give life its meaning? Her answer, offered through the lived experiences of her characters, is that the cost is often invisible until it is too late - felt not in dramatic ruptures but in the slow erosion of warmth, presence, and shared understanding.

8. CONCLUSION

When we look at these works together, what stands out is not a clear divide between village life and city life, but the quiet way in which people begin to change as their surroundings change. Sudha Murty does not try to prove that one way of living is better than the other. She does not place one way of life above the other. Instead, she quietly shows that both rural and urban worlds come with their own pressures, and living between them is not always easy. Holding on to one's values while trying to move forward often becomes a struggle that people do not even notice at first.

In her stories, change is never sudden. It slips in slowly through everyday habits, small choices, and the way priorities begin to shift over time. As ambition grows, life becomes busier, attention gets divided, and relationships are no longer given the same care. It does not happen because people stop caring. More often, it happens because other things start taking up more space, leaving less room for connection.

Characters like Mridula, Shrimati, and Anupama reflect a quiet kind of strength. They do not argue loudly or resist change in obvious ways, but they stay rooted in what matters to them - self-respect, understanding, and emotional closeness. In contrast, Sanjay and Shrikant show how easily a person can get drawn into the pursuit of success. Their focus shifts little by little, and without realising it, their way of looking at life begins to change. This difference does not create sudden conflict, but it slowly creates a distance that becomes hard to ignore.

The stillness that develops between people is more enduring than any dramatic

occasion. Conversations become fewer, shared moments fade, and there is a quiet feeling that something is no longer the same. Murty presents all of this in a simple and honest way, which is what makes it feel so real.

Across all three texts examined in this study, a consistent pattern emerges: the ethical values associated with rural life - simplicity, patience, emotional presence, and relational loyalty - are not presented as obstacles to progress, but as anchors that prevent individuals from losing themselves in the pursuit of external success. When these anchors are abandoned, the result is not liberation but a kind of quiet impoverishment - a life that may be materially richer but emotionally hollow.

In the end, Murty's stories leave behind a gentle reminder. Moving ahead in life is important, but not at the cost of losing what once made life meaningful. Success can be reassuring and affirming, but without closeness and understanding, it often feels inadequate. The most enduring message of her fiction is perhaps this: that the measure of a life well lived is not what a person achieves, but what they are able to hold on to while moving forward.

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