

Regeneration in U. R Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*: A Journey towards a Self in a Class and Caste Ridden Society

Poulami Ganguly

Research Scholar (UGC NET - JRF, West Bengal SET)

Bankura, West Bengal, India

poulomiganguly990@gmail.com

Abstract

U. R. Anantha Murthy's novel Samskara or A Rite for a Dead Man is chiefly concerned with the rituals, caste, religion, clan and social exploitation. The writer here presents two major characters who stand foil to each other. While Naranappa spends his entire life to shatter the dogma of a rigid society, Acharya fights a battle against the boisterous conduct of the rebel only to uphold the spirit of brahminism. Finally after Naranappa's death, Acharya comes to realize the vacuity of religious practices which ought to be followed up without any significance. This sort of comprehension is made possible through his physical relationship with Chandri. Thus here all three major characters get transformation with the passage of time- Naranappa dies without his point of view being justified,; Acharya develops a keen interest to human body, mind as well as all to natural beauty; Chandri gets alteration in coming in close contact with a pure soul like Acharya.

Key Words: Hinduism, Culture, Class, Caste, Spiritual Transformation

Samskara or A Rite for a Dead Man, a universally acclaimed novel in the sky of Indian English writing, is a gift from U. R. Anantha Murthy. Later the novel was turned into the award-winning film in 1970 and translated into English from Kannada by the Indian poet and essayist A. K. Ramanujan in 1976. Based on the cultural milieu of a traditional decaying Brahmin society the novel explores social dilemma, exploitation of the working- class women especially the prostitutes, rituals of a dogmatic Brahmin society and most significantly, a journey towards self realization of a man burdened under sham religious

practices of *shastra*. Being autobiographical in nature it represents a bleak dystopian portrayal of Thirthahalli taluk in Shimoga district of Karnataka where Anantha Murthy was born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family. Sura P. Rath precisely depicts the intersection between the theme of the novel and its co-related issues thus:

As a religious novel about a decaying Brahmin colony in the South Indian village of Karnataka, *Samskara* serves as an allegory rich in realistic detail, a contemporary reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths, and a serious, poetic study of a religious man living in a community of priests gone to seed. A death, which stands as the central event in the plot, brings in its wake a plague, many more deaths, live questions with only dead answers, moral chaos, and a rebirth of one man. (4)

The novels written in Kannada show a sharp social reality; *Samskara* is not an exception to this. It explores a community of persons who are bound in a complex web of caste, culture, religion and social taboos. On the surface level, it deals with the cremation of brahmin's body but on a broader aspect it exposes the greed, hypocrisy, social dilemma, exploitation of women and existence of prostitution in South India. Brahmins in the novel have been represented to plunge into several immoral practices. To support their conduct lawful they often refer to religious text which promotes *Chaturvaranadharma*. In the ninetieth hymn of the tenth mandala of the *Rig Veda* there is a reference to *Chaturvarnyavavastha* in Hindu society:

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.

His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sundra was produced. (Griffith 569)

V. S. Naipaul, a polemical writer of recent trends, describes Anantha Murthy's portrayal of Hindu society in his book *India: A Wounded Civilization* as a dark bleak dystopia:

Knowingly or unknowingly, Anantha Murthy has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquicken by intellect or creativity (except to the self in its climb to salvation). (109)

In Hinduism *atma* or individual soul is a part of *Paramatma* or Absolute Being. Every individual should aspire to achieve *moksha* or liberation from *samsar* or the cycle of life and death. There are three paths of salvation- selfless action (*Karma Yoga*), self-transcending knowledge (*Janna Yoga*), and devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*). A man through his selfless activities makes himself free from all sorts of desires, fear and anger to achieve *Nirvana* because it is a state of enlightenment. Lord Krishna defines the nature of an enlightened person to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the following way:

When one is completely free from all desires of the mind and is satisfied with the Supreme Being by the joy of Supreme Being, then one is called an enlightened person, O Arjuna. A person whose mind is unperturbed by sorrow, who does not crave pleasures, and who is completely free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called an enlightened sage of steady intellect. (Srimad Bhagvad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 55-56)

Praneshacharya, the spiritual leader of the brahmin, pursues a life of indifferent householder and self-enforced celibacy only to get rid of *kama*, *lobh* and *artha* which may create hindrance on his path of *dharma* or rightful duties. He marries a crippled wife as he thinks a wife like Bhagirathi is an altar where he can sacrifice his carnal desires; his only desire is to get “ripe and ready” for the ultimate salvation. Even the conventional ideology motivates his wife to implore him to go for second marriage, “A house needs a child to make it home. You’ve had no joy in this marriage” (Ananthamurthy1). The relationship between the husband and wife is not of sexual attachment but of a doctor and a patient; he wants how to renounce the world of *maya* living a sacrificial life of a *sanyasi*. Therefore, to him “all earthly fragrances was like the flowers that go only to adorn the god’s hair. All female beauty was the beauty of Goddess Lakshmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna’s when he stole the bathing cowgirls’ garments, and left them naked in the water” (76-77). His zeal to keep up self purity following the rituals can be traced through the following lines:

Chandri was Naranappa’s concubine. If Acharya talked to her he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal. (2)

He does not want to go against the hegemonic culture which “is a calculated exercise of power meant to shape the will of the people in ways which favour the dominant groups” (Satchidanandan 198). Praneshacharya plunges in a kind of moral dilemma when Chandri breaks the news of Naranappa’s sudden death. His over-adherence to the root of Brahminism prevents him to come to conclusion how to make *samskara* of the dead body of Naranappa who throughout his life left no stone unturned to defile the sacred threads of brahminism. Naranappa in his life was “a reckless and boisterous Brahmin, consorting with Muslims, prostitutes, and low-caste men and women, and thus he throws a challenge to his community and its leader” (Raval 118). Through his death the entire *agrahara* confronts a crisis- the crisis of faith. Even Praneshacharya, who is an archive of Vedantic learning, has to pore over the books to find a solution of the problem. Being frustrated with *jyanmarga* he turns into *bhaktimarga* or the path of devotion by offering flowers to Lord Maruti in quest of a solution in the dark forest. Nothing but orthodox brahminism pervades his entire mind. As Suresh Raval in the essay *Cultural Impasse in Samskara* argues:

Orthodox brahminism is vividly presented in Praneshacharya's fruitless search for an answer from the scriptures, and it is made even more simple-mindedly ritualistic and superstitious by his prayers to Lord Maruti for divine intercession. No such miraculous aid is, of course, forthcoming. (117)

The dreary aspect of religion thwarts Praneshacharya and in the dark he suddenly enters into another domain where he recognizes the untrodden aspect of his mind i.e. 'his body's tigerish lust' (8) through the sexual intercourse with Chandri. The brahminic code associated with Acharya gets saggy and he comes to realize lust has overpowered him like any other common men. Chandri gives him food when he was hungry, provides him solace when he is encumbered to find a solution how to cremate a Brahmin's corpse without any heir, and shows off her breasts to be embraced when he leads a barren life with his crippled wife. He approbates the flowers offered by Chandri knowing that he has lost in the boondocks of digressive thoughts. Chandri takes him to a new world of naturalness and wholeness that ought to be in the forest beyond his well known stratified society. In this dark, joyous land Acharya finds a gratification for his five senses; "He gazed, he listened till his eyes were filled with the sights, his ears with the sounds all around him, a formation of fireflies. 'Chandri', he said touched her belly and sat up" (67). But he does not gather the courage to speak up what he has done in the dark world before all those Madhava Brahmins who entrust him with their absolute faith. He candidly confesses to her about his religious fear, "If I don't have the courage to speak, tomorrow you must speak out. I'm ready to do the funeral rites myself. I've no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that's all" (45). Apart from Hinduism Meenakshi Mukherjee in this context relates Acharya's predicament as "the universal problem of a man who has equated himself with a particular role for so long that the role becomes his self, and without the role he feels lost" (84). He is neither ready to abandon Brahminhood nor to accept un-brahminic world-view. He passes through a moral dilemma to rid himself off from playing the role of a 'Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning'. He loses himself in the maze of diverse thoughts and Chandri in darkness. Being alone with his dying wife in entire agrahara in the midst of overpowering stench, in scorching heat and intolerable hunger he looks back to his past days and contrasts it with the new situation. His old life seems to be ineffectual, evasive and unthriving. After his return from the forest he notices for the first time with terror and disgust his wife's "sunken breast, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid. All these things which were so familiar even a moment before, all suddenly begin to change because of his growing abhorrence to his past life; what he wants now is a relief from all these. Critics like Julian Crandall Hollick and Shebana Coelho describe Praneshacharya's dilemma as "a classical conflict between God and Man, duty and desire, virtue and vice" (240).

After the death of his wife Acharya casts himself aside from all the obligations to the agrahara and achieves freedom from the necessity of concentration. His physical contact with Chandri makes him aware of the difference between beauty and ugliness; he craves for Belli's breasts and Chandri's body and feels disgust for his long ailing wife; out of this sexual encounter a new Praneshacharya is born, redeeming himself from his old life of deprivation. Thus the moment of his sexual union is a sacred moment –“nothing before it, nothing after it. That moment brought into being what never was and then itself went out of being” (97). In search for a meaningful after-life Acharya goes into self imposed exile to find solace from his evasive life. With short passages of time he passes through various stages-fear, indecisiveness, feeling of vulnerability and an utmost desire to obliterate self-consciousness. Now he is able to think with envy, admiration and amazement how fearlessly Naranappa lived with Chandri in the heart of agrahara while in the same consequence he was ceaselessly haunted with the fear of being discovered. K. V. Tirumalesh in the essay “The Context of Samskara” points out why V. S Naipaul in his book *India: An Wounded Civilization* has depicted Acharya and Mahatma Gandhi as the souls of ‘underdeveloped ego’, “Thus both Mahatma Gandhi and The Acharya are so totally self-absorbed that in fear of being perceived they perceive nothing” (78). Acharya remembers how his friend Mahabala gathers the courage to combat against the customs of the brahminism and marries a prostitute. He passes through the wakeful anguish of the soul: “Naranappa, did you go through this agony? Mahabala, did you go through it”? (112). After this transformation when he incessantly searches for the essential and vital importance of personal identity in one's life, he meets Putta, an alter-ego of himself. Being a Brahmin Putta too maintains caste distinction of the community but at the same time his zest for life, naturalness, life-affirming inclusiveness sway a fatherly love in the heart of him. The more he is engendered with doubts, confusions and fear; he decides to return to Durbasapura to cremate a debased dead body and to confess the naked truths before all his devotees. The novel ends but does not conclude: “He will travel, for another four or five hours. Then, after that, what? Praneshacharya waited anxious, expectant” (138). The ambivalence faced by Acharya creating a world of dualism can be summed up in the words of TRS Sharma:

His self is now a void, for he has been disinvested of the layers of culture, as reified through centuries of observance. He has now envisioned truth in the domain of the body, the sensual which has erased his earlier secure identity. ..He is now a “dangling man”. Gaining a new identity, or the one, which he can evolve through going back to a different re/source of his culture, is not easy. (133)

The alter ego of Praneshacharya is Naranappa who poses problems to every Brahmins of agrahara even when he dies. Naranappa's decomposed dead body is going to be rot as the

Brahmins of Durbasapura fail to reach any conclusion how to *Samskara* a boisterous and rebellious Brahmin. When he remains alive, he leads a wayward life which an orthodox Brahmin ought not to do. He is challenged only by moral unwariness of Acharya. Meenakshi Mukherjee draws a watershed between two characters in an explicit manner, “Both Naranappa and the Acharya represent distortions of certain values- restraint, control and denial in one and abandonment to the senses in the other” (88). A lapsed Brahmin by choice, Naranappa eats meats, drinks liquor with his Muslim friend, catches fish from a pond dedicated to the savoir god Ganesh, throws the holy stone (*salagram*) in the river after spitting upon it, divorces his law-fully wedded Hindu wife, takes a prostitute named Chandri as his concubine and threatens to be a Muslim if he is ostracized. He even inspires Garuda’s son Shyama to run away from everything and joins the army, an unbrahminic profession that disgraces his family. The flowers that bloomed in the gardens of Durbasapura village are used only for divinity; only the flowers bloomed at Naranappa’s yards are solely meant for Chandri’s hair and vase in the bedroom. The night-queen bush in Naranappa’s yards induces lust latent in everybody’s mind: “In the darkness of the night the bush was thickly clustered with flowers, invading the night like some raging lust, pouring forth its nocturnal fragrance. The agrahara writhed in its hold as in the grip of a magic serpent-binding spell” (15). Thus the entire phenomenon of Naranappa’s domain is ascertained for “sensuous human enjoyment and not for divine consecration” (Mukherjee 86).

Naranappa once visits Shimoga and returns home with high fever and eventually dies. The conflict starts after his death because of plague and this contagious disease is infecting others in the community. With his death the entire agrahara becomes quite with “no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing” (12) because he has neither son nor money. Everybody is terror stricken how to cremate his body who unabashedly practices unbrahminic customs. Durgabhatta makes a compromising escape from this stifling condition through the comment that Naranappa “may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him” (*Samskara* 9). As the couple has no son, so there is no one who has the right to *Samskara* his body; so the entire agrahara confronts a crisis which ultimately turns out to be a mirror of self-consciousness to everyone including Praneshacharya. The unventilated condition can be summed up with precision through Suresh Raval’s words:

In death, he becomes the source of defiance to the point of plunging the community into crisis. Through this crisis Praneshacharya seems to be moving away from an unreflective relation to his tradition and all its stultifying implications for his society to a greater critical self-consciousness about himself and the way he must think and conduct his life. (118)

The novel begins when Naranappa is already dead; though physically absent he becomes a potential force controlling the goings-on in the village. Knowing well that all the brahmins fall into the victim of avarice, gluttony, lechery and greed, he impugns Acharya:

Push those sickly wives of yours into the river. Be like the sages of your holy legends-get hold of a fish-scented fisherwoman who can cook you fish-soup, and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don't experience god when you wake up, my name isn't Naranappa. (26).

In this world of hypocrisy only Acharya becomes the embodiment of purification who fasts and begs pardon to God on the behalf of entire agrahara. Thus to the savoir of Madhava Brahmins it is the challenge of a secular, pragmatic person, "to keep your brahminhood, you must read the Vedas and holy legends without understanding, without responding to their passion" (82). He comprehends his binary opposition is Acharya; Acharya is everything what he is not, thus he challenges, "Let me see who wins in the end- you or me. I'll destroy Brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there is no Brahminism really left to destroy in this place- except you (53). Ultimately Naranappa wins after his death when Praneshacharya realizes he is not without human instincts. Like all other human beings he is also inflicted through lust, hunger, fear and aspiration.

Not only Praneshacharya and Naranappa but also Chandri undergoes a spiritual transformation in a society where she holds the status of a low-class black witch. Though she belongs to the family of prostitutes, she never becomes exhausted; she is just like river Tunga always flowing and never ending. Physically and emotionally she marks a contrast with other Brahmin wives who become saggy and withered after having two children. But Chandri is always fresh and blooming; She is beautifully clad and adorn her hair with fragrant flowers of the night queen grown in the backyard whereas the poor, sickly wives of the brahmins wore the withered flowers of the temple altar; she is "ever auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood"(36). Critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee equate her as a paragon of beauty in such way, "By virtue of her profession she is both outside structured society as well as recognized by it. Like the river Tunga she is in the village but unshackled by it. "How can sin ever defile a running river? It is good for a drink when a man is thirsty, it is good for a wash when a man is filthy, and it is good for washing god's image with' (44)" (89-90) .She lived with Naranappa for ten years in perfect harmony and unison; like all other Indian woman her only sorrow is that she has no child of her own which compels her to reflect upon this way, "If she had borne a son, he could have become a great musician; if a daughter she could have taught her to dance, classic style" (36). When Naranappa dies, Chandri does everything within her grip to cremate his dead body in accordance with Brahmin rituals; when all other kiths and kins deny to *samskara* his body because of many religious and

personal reasons based on property disputes, there was only Chandri who becomes anxious and worried of Naranappa's salvation. Chandri is not hesitant to give up her golden jewellery for Naranappa's *moksha*: Her only fear is:

If Naranappa's body didn't get the proper rituals; he could become a tormenting ghost. She had enjoyed life with him for ten years. How could she rest till he got a proper funeral... If they didn't give him a death-rite according to the books, he'll surely become an evil spirit. (39)

Finding no other solution she does not see whether it is the dead body of a Brahmin or a suddra; she cremates it with the help of her dead husband's Muslim friend when Acharya is still on his sojourn. Sundari has summed up the quintessential features of her character that ultimately helps to achieve liberation in this following way:

She has a conscience that is lovable. At least, she is not thankless; she wants the funeral rites to be performed for the separated man, with whom she had spent a good many intimate moments. (72)

With Naranappa Chandri also goes on her way of salvation through the sexual union with Acharya. She always remembers her mother's saying that prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy man, and such a holy man is no one but Acharya to her. She appeals to Acharya not as a seductive harlot but as affectionate as a mother upon whose lap Acharya could find a great relief after a strenuous and sterile journey. In a state of dazedness Acharya embraces Chandri's breast and cries out as a tiny child in excruciation "Amma" (64). Critic like Sura P. Rath also argues for the same point, "Indeed, *Samskara* is full of references to feminine breasts as objects of desire, both as seductive flesh beckoning the barren brahmins repressed by their religious vows and social taboos and as the source of nutrient milk inviting the sterile men starved by their severance from the true adult pleasure with a woman" (108). After their sexual union when Acharya is struck by his guilty conscience, Chandri remains ineffable and absolutely untroubled by her present predicament: "she was natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach (68)". Like Naranappa she breaks all the rules imposed by the austere society; being an exception to the entire community she eats in a natural way when all the brahmins of agrahara are supposed to be fasting; even when the crisis of faith appears in Brahmin society she acts with spontaneity and cremates the body unceremoniously. Only after the cremation she weeps for her dead husband and becomes invisible in the twinkling of an eye only to avoid Acharya's humiliation before others. Thus Chandri not only gets transformed but also "gets the better of Praneshacharya; she takes the burden off the Brahmin's hands, but exposes the inhumanity of orthodox Brahminism that permitted itself to be trapped in ritual hairsplitting when faced with life-and-death issues" (195-196).

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