

THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Literary Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

Publication details and instructions for authors:
www.thecontext.in

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A Call for 'Samskara' of Unclean Rituals and Traditions in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

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ABSTRACT

Samskara (1965) by U.R. Ananthamurthy is a story of an orthodox Brahmin agrahara named Durvasapura. When Naranappa, a rebel who broke the caste rules, dies, the village is plunged into a crisis of who should conduct his last rites. The paper will explore the emptiness of ritual purity and the novel's orthodoxy and casteism. It also illustrates how Praneshacharya's unsuccessful attempt to find a scriptural solution leads to his own samskara, or transformation. The paper also examines the marginalization of subalterns and women (both the low-caste and the Brahmin), such as Chandri, Bhagirathi, and Lakshmidevamma. It maintains that the novel demands a 'samskara' of unclean rituals and traditions in themselves.

Keywords: *Caste, Ritual purity, Subaltern, Marginalization of women*

FULL PAPER

Introduction

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, written in Kannada in 1965, is both a religious novel and a contemporary poetic reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths. *Samskara* is set in Durvasapura, an agrahara, where a closed-off Brahmin community lives according to tightly circumscribed rules and norms. Religion and caste are the two most important aspects of Indian social and cultural life. *Samskara* depicts how orthodoxy can hamper a community's social and economic development and how casteism and orthodoxy can affect people. This is shown through the differences between the two Brahmin sub-castes, the Madhvas and the Smartas, and between Brahmin females and untouchable females. Ananthamurthy raises questions about very sensitive issues such as rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, and community feeling in his novel. He scans human weakness such as greed, lust and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community.

The novel deals with the dilemma of performing the last rites for Naranappa, a rebellious Brahmin who could not be excommunicated by the rest of the Brahmins. The novel also judges the quality of an entire way of life through two major characters, Praneshacharya and Naranappa, who are presented as foil and counterfoil to each other. *Samskara* juxtaposes the two extremes: the virtuous embodiment of the perfect Brahmin, Praneshacharya, also known as the Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning, and the other extreme being Naranappa, the Brahmin who renounced his faith and took up his personal will to avoid everything Brahmin around him, by living with a prostitute and eating with the Muslims. This paper reads that dilemma as the novel's call for a 'samskara', a cleansing, of the rituals and traditions that the agrahara holds sacred.

Research Questions

The following question guides the study: How does *Samskara* expose the gap between the ritual purity professed by Brahminism and the actual conduct in the agrahara? How does caste shape the self-perception of the novel's lower-caste and subaltern characters? In what ways are women, both low-caste and Brahmin, marginalized by the intersecting forces of caste and patriarchy? Does Praneshacharya's crisis constitute a rejection of Brahminism, or does the novel leave this question unresolved?

Literature Review

Criticism of *Samskara* in English begins with A. K. Ramanujan, whose translation and Afterword brought the novel to readers beyond Karnataka. Ramanujan draws attention to the many senses of the title word, which include a rite of passage, a funeral rite, and the refinement or perfecting of the self, and he reads the novel as one in which a rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living (Ramanujan). His account places Praneshacharya's spiritual crisis at the center of the novel.

The sociology and critique of caste offer a second frame. Louis Dumont argues that the caste system rests on a fundamental principle, the opposition of the

pure and the impure, from which hierarchy and separation between castes follow (Dumont). M. N. Srinivas showed that this hierarchy is not static, as groups seek higher ritual standing by adopting the customs of those above them, a process he called Sanskritisation (Srinivas). B. R. Ambedkar, writing as a critic rather than an observer, insisted that caste is a division not merely of labor but of laborers, and that it endures because the shastras that sanction it are held sacred; its annihilation, therefore, requires destroying faith in that sanction (Ambedkar).

Subaltern studies supply a third frame. Antonio Gramsci described subaltern groups as fragmented and unable to act as a single entity (Gramsci 52–55). Ranajit Guha took up the term for South Asia as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (vii). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak added that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287).

Feminist scholarship connects these frames. Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other, defined in relation to man, who "is the Subject; he is the Absolute" (6), and Uma Chakravarti's analysis of brahmanical patriarchy, in which the purity of caste is secured through control over women's sexuality (Chakravarti), make it possible to read the women of Durvasapura as carrying the weight of caste as well as of gender. Where Ramanujan's reading centers on Praneshacharya's passage, this paper brings the women and lower-caste figures of the agrahara to the foreground.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive. It undertakes a close textual analysis of *Samskara* in A. K. Ramanujan's English translation; page numbers given in parentheses after quotations from the novel refer to that edition. The reading draws on the three bodies of theory reviewed above: the sociology and critique of caste (Dumont; Srinivas; Ambedkar), subaltern studies (Gramsci; Guha; Spivak) and feminist criticism (Beauvoir; Chakravarti). The analysis proceeds through the principal characters, Naranappa, Praneshacharya, the Brahmins of Durvasapura and Parijatapura, Putta and the women of the novel, and relates what each says and does to the rules of purity and pollution that govern the agrahara. Because the study works from a translation, it makes no claims about the diction of the Kannada original; its observations concern the narrative, characters and themes that the translation carries.

Death, Ritual and the Dilemma of the Agrahara

The novel opens with Chandri, Naranappa's mistress, informing the Acharya of the Agrahara, Praneshacharya, of Naranappa's death. The death of Naranappa has put the entire Agrahara into a web of chaos and tension. Every Brahmin is afraid to volunteer for the last rites of Naranappa as they feared that their Brahminhood would get polluted by doing so. Still, they cannot let a non-Brahmin cremate Naranappa because theoretically he was a Brahmin until his death. Even after going through all the religious texts, Praneshacharya couldn't find an answer. He goes away to the jungle to seek guidance from the monkey god Maruti. On his way back, Praneshacharya encounters Chandri in the forest, breaks the laws prescribed by Brahminhood, and enters into a sexual meeting with the low-caste Chandri. When Chandri returns home

and sees that the dead body of her former lover has started to rot, she seeks the help of Ahmed Bari, a Muslim, and cremates the dead Naranappa.

Haunted by Chandri's touch and beauty, Praneshacharya flees the Agrahara and embarks on a spiritual quest to examine the ancient values and culture passed down to him. He begins to reflect on the meaning of a righteous life during his journey, as he meets a commoner named Putta. The novel ends as Praneshacharya decides to return to Durvasapura and to own up to his fall. But Ananthamurthy does not answer the other important question: what the Brahmins should do when confronted with Praneshacharya's confessions. Thus, the novel ends but does not conclude.

The opening event in the novel is a death, an anti-Brahminical Brahmin's death, and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answers, old answers that do not fit the new questions. As Ramanujan observes, in trying to resolve the dilemma of who, if any, should perform the heretic's death rite, a samskara, the Acharya begins a samskara, a transformation for himself, and a rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living (Ramanujan). In life as in death, Naranappa questioned the Brahmins of the village. He lived the life of a libertine in the heart of an exclusive orthodox colony, broke every taboo, drank liquor, ate flesh, caught fish with his Muslim friends in the holy temple tank, and lived with a low-caste woman. Protected fully by modern secular laws and even more fully by the Brahmins' own bad conscience, he lived defiantly in their midst. Naranappa was the mocking anti-self of the Brahmins. By breaking the great Brahminical rules and norms, Naranappa becomes an upper-caste untouchable in the novel.

Caste, Purity and Pollution

A society that has accepted caste discrimination as a custom unquestioningly accepted Brahminism and pushed the lower caste people to a corner. Brahmins are supposed to be the spiritual and temporal guides, teachers and exponents of law, whereas the low caste people perform menial services only. Their living areas are situated a distance away from the Brahmin Agrahara. They beg for something to eat, standing at a distance from the Brahmin woman. Betel leaf, betel nut, and tobacco are thrown at them from some distance. This distance is the spatial form of what Dumont calls the opposition of the pure and the impure (Dumont). Thus, caste emerges as an independent character in *Samskara*. It informs the action, molds the characters' responses, and provides their sociological background.

Samskara studies not only the spiritual aspects of Hinduism and the caste system but also ritual orthodoxy. Any contact with lower-class people is considered hazardous. The Madhva Brahmins of Durvasapura feared becoming polluted by any relationship with lower-class people. Thus, the tension of being self-polluted makes them turn against Naranappa's cremation. They believed that by cremating Naranappa, they would do something wrong and the guru might excommunicate them. It is clear here how religion paves the way for the growth of superstitious beliefs, thereby affecting the peaceful harmony within a community. The first meeting between Praneshacharya and Chandri opens on such rigid rules and norms: "If

Acharya talked to her he would be polluted, he would have to bathe again before his meal" (2).

Naranappa is described as an "outcaste scoundrel" (11) and a "casteless scoundrel" (11) for not following Brahminical rules. Naranappa's relationship with Chandri is the first act that makes him an outcaste. Another great claim against Naranappa is that "he even ate what Chandri had cooked, and he drank too" (6). Naranappa went to the holy river in full view of all the Brahmins and took the holy stone that they worshipped for generations. He threw that stone and spat on it. They believed that anyone who caught the sacred fish from the temple pond would vomit blood and die. But Naranappa got together his Muslim gang, dynamited the tank and killed off God's own fish. On the eleventh day of the moon, when every Brahmin was fasting, he brought in Muslims to the Agrahara and feasted them. In a way, he was trying to break the shackles that bound him to Brahminism, and his words echo a man's longing for freedom from the bondage of the religion into which he was born: "Try and excommunicate me now." I'll become a Muslim; I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred brahminism is ground into the mud. (11) Naranappa attacks what Ambedkar identified as the foundation of caste, the sanctity of its religious sanction (Ambedkar), yet the agrahara's inability to excommunicate him shows how that sanction outlasts even open defiance.

The Subaltern and Internalized Inferiority

Samskara explores the impact of casteism on people at different strata of society. As a result of the series of subjugations they have come across, the lower-class people looked upon themselves as inferior. While the Madhva Brahmins of Durvasapura are highly orthodox, the Smarta Brahmins of Parijatapura are considered to have a mixed lineage and were excommunicated by the guru at Shringeri. Therefore, they considered it a privilege to take up a task that the Durvasapura Brahmins considered unclean: "The Parijatapura folks were unhappy over their friend's death, but quite happy they were getting a chance to cremate a high caste Brahmin" (19). Their eagerness reflects the hunger for ritual standing that Srinivas traced in his account of Sanskritisation (Srinivas).

Chandri's act of pulling her sari over her head when she meets Praneshacharya also hints at age-old concepts of how a lower-born person is supposed to behave before a superior. Putta, whom Praneshacharya meets later at Melige, introduces himself: "I'm a low-class fellow" (112). Putta invites Praneshacharya for tea, and his words at the restaurant also reflect the feelings of a low-caste fellow: "This is a Brahmin restaurant. It won't pollute you. There's a special place inside for orthodox Brahmins like you" (115). When Praneshacharya asks Putta to have the food served in the temple along with him, Putta is afraid and says, "What are you talking about? Did you forget I'm no Brahmin, but a Malera. What are you joking?" (127). Thus the feeling of inferior status got registered in the minds of these low-caste folks.

The subalterns are subordinated by history and possess no organized position to make their ideas effective. Gramsci's observation that "The subaltern classes, by

definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they can become a 'State"' (52) holds in the novel, because the subalterns fail to rally behind Chandri or others whenever they are pitted against the Brahmins. In Guha's terms, their subordination is expressed at once through caste, gender and office (vii). Chandri's initiative in Naranappa's cremation is important because it is an enabling step for other subalterns and it is revolutionary because it points towards contesting the Brahmins against their inhuman treatment of the lower sections of society.

Women at the Margins

Ananthamurthy depicts the women in the novel in a way that explores how the caste and class system defines their identity and the manifold pressures they face. Chandri, Naranappa's concubine and a low-caste woman, symbolizes all women of her caste and class. Brahmins believed that a look at her would pollute them. Everyone in the Agrahara looks down on her, but behind the veil everyone is mad for her beauty and wants to possess her. Because she belongs to the lower caste, her understanding is permanently under question. Still, throughout the novel, she is the one who presents herself with a more mature vision than anyone in the whole Agrahara, even than the authority, Acharya. Though they often refer to Chandri as a "filthy whore" (8) and describe her as "provocative" (15), she is in many ways freer than the Brahmin women, because the duties of the Brahmin wives do not apply to her. A sharp contrast is drawn between their appearances, objectifying women on both sides: "these Brahmin women, before they bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall – not hers" (45).

It is her caste, social status, and profession that make Chandri a whore and an outcaste. She is also known as Mari, the dark goddess of death and plague, and is blamed for ruining Naranappa's marital life. Being a harlot by class and caste, she is the 'other' among the community of upper-caste Brahmins, in Beauvoir's sense of a woman defined only in relation to the man who is "the Subject" (6). Naranappa defended his living with her and deserting his wife, asking who would live with a woman who can't give pleasure. Thus, women are treated only as objects that could satisfy sexual interests in men. The same is the case with Praneshacharya, who later gets into a sexual union with Chandri, as his wife too could not satisfy him.

In the novel, Chandri is blamed for having spoilt Naranappa and ruined the entire Madhva community. The destruction of traditions is thus blamed on the corrupt lower castes and the ignorant subalterns. It is not so much the fall of high-caste Brahmins from the expectations that their religion has from them but their failure to observe basic human obligations like disposing of a rotting dead body that is shocking. They eye the gold that his low-born mistress was willing to sacrifice to pay for the funeral expenses. Gold in whosoever's hand it may go remains unpolluted for them, but the owner's dead body is unworthy of even being disposed of.

Another female character in the novel is Putta's wife. Putta is from the untouchable sect, but his wife is a Brahmin. Still, male domination works between them. "My wife hasn't learned the lesson, despite the beating," he tells Praneshacharya, seeking advice (108). The only problem with him is that his wife wants to visit her

parents and Putta does not want to bear the expenses of her journey. In Putta's wife, the domination is exerted by physical force.

Lakshmidevamma, a child widow who has now become an old, lonely woman, is also part of *Samskara*. The passage describing her ill fate, "married at eight, widowed at ten. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law had died when she was fifteen. The Agrahara had sneered at her" (42), implies that the people of the Agrahara believed that she was responsible for the deaths around her. Even though she belongs to the Brahmin community, she is pushed aside for her gender status. Garudacharya, who inherited Lakshmidevamma's belongings, never treated her as a human being. Her curse on the Brahmins of the Agrahara, "Where has your Brahminism gone, you rascals!" (55), is a mark of the extent of suppression she was undergoing.

The most critical of all the women characters in the novel is Praneshacharya's wife Bhagirathi, a symbol of Praneshacharya's tapas or penance. Praneshacharya continues to nurse his wife as a routine, but he does not do it purely out of love. Instead, he hopes that by caring for his wife he will attain liberation or moksha. He proudly swells a little at his lot, thinking, "By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready" (2). When she is blushing with fever, he hesitates before checking her temperature: "How can I touch a woman polluted by her menstrual blood" (21). Thus, Bhagirathi becomes a symbol of a woman who, despite her infertility and physical deformity, is used to reach heaven. Bhagirathi represents a bodiless woman.

Characters such as Anasuya and Sitadevi represent the Brahmin women. Though Chandri's presence is believed to cause pollution, the gold she wears doesn't cause any tension between them, and they fight over it. Conscious of their difference from lower-caste women, the Brahmin women usually directed their anger at Chandri. But the actual plight of these Brahmin women is worse than that of the low-caste women. A subcaste's lines are considered mixed if any disrepute attaches to its women. A group is valued more ritually if it executes the bodily repressions on its women. The ritually lower groups are those whose widows do not cut their hair or do not obey diet restrictions. This is the working of what Uma Chakravarti calls brahmanical patriarchy, in which the purity of the caste is guarded through control over its women (Chakravarti). While women are constantly blamed in conversation, no such clarity exists in the case of Naranappa: "he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him. No one ever excommunicated him officially" (66). Different plight for different culprits in the same case.

The women characters have been victimized by patriarchy to such an extent that the language of patriarchy is ruling them. Chandri and Belli resort to a politics of survival in which their sexuality is perhaps the finest weapon. They share the beliefs of the Madhva community because they have been raised in a manner that stamps out the assertion against the Brahmins, and yet are the ones who pose the most serious threat to Brahminism by merely coming into intimate contact with the supposedly pious and noble males. The doctrines of dharma and karma run counter to the subalterns, yet they do not challenge them. Chandri does not hang around in the Agrahara but disappears without leaving a clue as to her whereabouts. Her act is decisive, yet once the cremation is done, she passes out of the story, thereby

resembling the subaltern woman whom Spivak finds "even more deeply in shadow" (287).

Key Findings

The crisis in the agrahara demonstrates that ritual purity is governed by rules rather than conscience: the Brahmins refuse the basic human duty of disposing of a decaying body while coveting the gold of the woman they deem polluting. Naranappa's rebellion further reveals that caste cannot be escaped through conduct alone. Although he becomes an upper-caste untouchable, no one excommunicates him, because caste's religious sanction persists despite open defiance. Caste is also internalized by those it subordinates. Putta's self-description and the Parijatapura Smartas' eagerness illustrate the acceptance of inferiority from within; as Gramsci's account suggests, the subalterns do not unite behind Chandri. Women bear the intersecting burdens of caste and patriarchy. Chandri, Bhagirathi, Lakshmidevamma, Putta's wife, and the Brahmin wives experience marginalization in different ways, while the community's purity is policed through their bodies. Chandri's initiative in arranging the cremation constitutes the novel's sole effective challenge to orthodoxy, and it comes from the margins. Praneshacharya's samskara, however, remains incomplete: he questions Brahminism but cannot relinquish it, and the open ending leaves the reform of the agrahara unresolved.

Conclusion

Caste occupies the central position in the novel. The caste system is, by common agreement, the world's longest-surviving hierarchy and is based on the principles of purity and superiority, qualities that one is supposed to inherit at birth. If the caste system had been done away with, Naranappa would have been given a decent funeral, and Praneshacharya would not have had as close an encounter with Chandri as he had. Not one character in the entire novel can think beyond caste, nor can they, being intellectually and emotionally ill-equipped, attempt to destroy it.

The solution to the orthodoxy of Brahminism and its consequential casteism mainly involves abandoning all rituals and practices traditionally associated with Brahminism. Praneshacharya, after a disappointment with Brahminism, does what Naranappa did for years: wanders through forests and lonely roads, sleeps with the prostitute Chandri, thinks of sleeping with another, visits fairs and cockfights, and eats in a temple in an unclean condition. Despite all this, a sad realization haunts him: he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him. The basic purpose of Ananthamurthy's novel is to show that a highly learned Brahmin, such as Praneshacharya, fails to understand the reality of the world by adhering to theoretical, bookish, outdated, and even decadent traditions and rituals. The novel thus calls for a samskara not of the dead man alone but of the unclean rituals and traditions themselves, a reform that, as Ambedkar argued, can come only when the sanction behind them loses its hold (Ambedkar).

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