

A RITE FOR A LIVING MAN: A STUDY OF U.R. ANANTHA MURTHY'S NOVEL SAMSKARA

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ABSTRACT

U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara draws a picture of a decaying Brahmin agrahara in the village of Durvasapura in Karnataka. The agrahara is famed after its great ascetic Praneshacharya, who is a much sought after scholar. The conflict in the novel arises when Praneshacharya is unable to find a solution to the samskara of Naranappa, a member of the agrahara. Since Naranappa had no children, a member of the agrahara had to do the last rites. But everyone was hesitant since Naranappa had not lived the life of a Brahmin. The paper traces the different meanings of the word 'samskara' through the life of Praneshacharya. The title is a pointer to the different phases of transformation that Praneshacharya undergoes.

KEYWORDS: *Samskara, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Agrahara*

INTRODUCTION

When literature holds a mirror to the society and reflects reality, it sometimes ruffles the silence that has long been left undisturbed. Some works of fiction are so infused with the color of reality that the reader forgets the writer behind the work and believes it to be his own experience. U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskarais one such novel. The Kannada novel, first published in 1965, translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan, and later made into an award-winning film in 1970, had remained popular with the general reading public and critics alike. Ever since its publication, Samskara has remained at the center of controversy. Ananthamurthy was accused of attacking Brahmanism for the novel is about a decaying Brahmin colony in the south Indian village of Karnataka.

The paper looks at how the novel Samskara unfolds itself through the different meanings of its title Samskara. The title 'Samskara' refers to a concept central to Hinduism. The different meanings of the word are listed in the epigraph:

Sam-s-kara 1. Forming well or thoroughly, making perfect, perfecting; finishing, refining, refinement, accomplishment. 2. Forming in the mind, conception, idea, notion; the power of memory, faculty of recollection, the realizing of past perceptions. . . 3. Preparation, making ready, preparation of food etc., cooking, dressing. 5. Making sacred, hallowing, consecration, dedication; consecration of a king, etc. 6. Making pure, purification, purity. 7. A sanctifying or purificatory rite or essential ceremony (enjoyed on all the first three classes or castes). 8. Any rite or ceremony. 9. Funeral obsequies.

Each of these meanings is explored in the novel. The novel is set in Durvasapura agrahara, a Brahmin colony in Karnataka. The agrahara is famous for Praneshacharya, "the great ascetic, Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning" (17) who is looked

upon by everyone within and out the agrahara with utmost respect and awe. On the other hand, the agrahara is notorious for the scoundrel Naranappa. Both the characters are foils to each other. While Praneshacharya is all that an idealbrahmin ought to be, Naranappa is demonic by the standards of the scholars in agrahara. The novel opens with the death of Naranappa and the subsequent calamities like palague that strike the agrahara. The conflict arises when the question of who, if any, should perform the samskara, here death-rite, of the man who has not lived his life as a Brahmin.

Even in death, Naranappa continued to question the ways of the Brahmins of the agrahara. Everything that was prohibited in the agrahara attracted him- he drank liquor, became friends with Muslims, caught fish from the sacred pond, ate flesh and even lived with a woman from the lower caste. He had ditched his lawfully wedded wife and lived the life of a libertine. He lived among the brahmins with his head held high, often making them jealous of the life that he enjoys. The novel sketches thebrahmins as greedy,materialistic and egoistic. Naranappa constantly exposed their samskara , (here, refinement of spirit) or the lack of it. The moral ones in the agrahara turn to Praneshacharya for advice when met with the dilemma of the proper samskara(last rites) for Naranappa. Thus begins the transformation, a samskara forPraneshacharya.

Praneshacharya and Naranappa are foils to each other. Praneshacharya is everything that Naranappa is not. Sanskrit learning and an ascetic life were Praneshacharya's samskara (way of life). By marrying an invalid, Praneshacharya has even turned his marriage into a penance. But Naranappa questioned everything that was deemed normal by the standards of the agrahara. Naranappa had once lectured Praneshacharya on the hypocrisy exhibited by the so-called scholars of Vedas and Puranas. His words shook Praneshacharya for a moment and made him think that what Naranappa says might be true. Naranappa challenged the very philosophy behind Praneshacharya's life. He asks:

Now, you explicate it, Acharya-re- didn't the Achari himself corrupt the Brahminism of the place? Did he or didn't he? That's why our elders always said: read the Vedas, read the Puranas, but don't try to interpret them. Acharya-re, you are the one who's studied in Kashi- you tell me, who ruinedbrahminism?...You read those lush sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness. But my words, they say what they mean: if I say sleep with a woman, it means to sleep with a woman; if I say eat fish, it means eat fish. Can I give you Brahmins a piece of advice, Acharya-re? Push those sickly wives of yours into the river. Be like the sage 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. (25-26)

Naranappa's words lingered in the Acharya's mind for so long that even when he sat for prayers, he "couldn't still the waves in his mind" (26). So when the question about who should do the samskara, the last rites, for Naranappa, Praneshacharya finds it difficult to find a solution. As A.K.Ramanujan points out in the Afterword,

Ironically, in the very act of seeking the answer in the books, and later, in seeking a sign from Maruti, the chaste Monkey-god, the Acharya abandons and becomes one with the opposite: contrary to all his 'preparation' he sleeps with Chandri, Naranappa's low caste mistress. By what authority now can he judge Naranappa or advise his Brahmin followers?.. His sudden sexual experience with the forbidden Chandri becomes an unorthodox 'rite of initiation' (140)

The initiation leads Praneshacharya into new worlds like that of Putta's. Putta, the stranger who "struck to Prane-shacharya like a sin of the past" (106), guides him to a world of passion and sensation through the temple fair, pawn shop, cockfights, and whorehouse. He gives Praneshacharya "a riddle for every mile" (110) and initiates him into the marvels of the ordinary and crude.

'Let the crowd thin a bit, we will offer our worship later. Let's walk around. Come Acharya,' he suggested. In one corner was the Bombay Box. If you give the man a coin, he dances and drums on a box with jingling anklets tied to it and shows you pictures through a hole. 'Look at Delhi city, look at the Eighteen Courts, look at the Bangalore bazaar, look at the Mysore rajah! Ahaa, take a look at the Bombay concubine, aha, look at the Bombay concubine, look, look!'. 'Aha, look there,' said Putta. An acrobat show was in progress. A shapely serpentine woman, all curves, had spread-eagled her hands and legs, swaying, balancing herself on her bare belly at the end of a bamboo pole. (113-114)

Praneshacharya felt caught between two different worlds. He felt "like a hovering demon, a rootless object" (114) in the midst of festivity and revelry. He was slowly getting allured to the world of Naranappa – the world of ordinary pleasures. When Putta invited him to have a meal at the temple, though he felt a carving to eat a meal, for he had not had any food for days, Praneshacharya stopped himself since the mourning period for his wife's death was not over. But then he thought of Naranappa who defied every Brahmin practice and lived the life he enjoyed. Praneshacharya couldn't resolve the conflict within him- to be or not to be. When he enters to have the temple dinner, Praneshacharya's heart sinks. He is tormented by the thoughts in his mind:

What am I doing? What lowborn misdeed am I committing? I am in the unclean period of mourning and can I, in full knowledge sit with the Brahmins and eat a meal? And pollute them all with my impurity? These people believe that the temple chariot will not move an inch if there is any pollution around. If I seat myself here and eat with them, it is as heinous a sin as Naranappa catching temple fish to destroy Brahmin ways. (128)

Eventually, Praneshacharya commits the sin of having food from the temple when he is in a period of mourning. Naranappa is considered ineligible to receive funeral rites in a brahmin way is because he had not led the life of a brahmin. Now Praneshacharya too commits the sins unbecoming of a brahmin.

The world that Putta has led him to is part of Praneshacharya's new samskara, his passage. Many types of rituals, like the rites of passage especially, has three stages of initiation – separation, transition or seclusion and re-incorporation. Praneshacharya's rite of initiation begins with him moving out of his village. He wanders through paths unknown and mysteries unheard of. His encounter with the riddle man Putta takes him to an unfamiliar world, where he finds himself a misfit. But he also identifies himself with Naranappa, who has conquered this part of the world. Thus, Praneshacharya moves through the different stages in the rite of initiation.

CONCLUSIONS

The novel does not show whether Praneshacharya is successful in incorporating the two worlds- of his old ways and the new experiences. But he has definitely undergone a transformation from an orthodox brahmin towards a new being. His new experiences with worlds hitherto unknown and unexplored have made Praneshacharya a new man. But the questions in his mind remain unsettled. Leaving the reader anxious, the novel ends with so many openings.

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