

The Quest after Divinity and Shades of Caste Class and the Woman in Samaskara

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Novel writing is a tough craft to do. As no formula is given for writing fiction. A novelist himself prepares a flow chart or a map, mentally or strategically. Samaskara, an important kannad novel of sixties written by a kannad writer U.R. Ananthha Murthy. Samaskara is translated in English by a renowned writer A.K. Ramanujan. In his words, “I have tried to make the translation self-contained, faithful yet readable. But the best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them”. The word ‘Samaskara’ means ritual in the kannad language. It is published in 1965 and made into a film in 1970. It was the first kannada film to receive a ban because of its strong anti-caste message but it was released later and win so many national and international awards.

Samaskara is set in Durvasapura, an agrahara, a closed - off Brahmin community that lives according to tightly and ultimately suffocating -circumscribed rules and norms. The novel dramatizes a conflict between two extreme ways of life, the ascetic and the hedonistic; the former is represented by the orthodox Brahmins led by Pranesacharya, the latter by their defiant & contemptuous opponent, the pleasure loving & anti brahminical Brahmin Naranappa. Here, the author makes the reader see how individuals blindly perform rituals laid down by ancient texts in order to attain salvation. He also portrays the human weakness such as greed, lust and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community. The novel opens with the protagonist i.e. Acharya’s unending daily routine, which began with the bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, medicines for his wife and crossing the stream again to the Marutitemple, for worship. Pranesacharya married an invalid woman. In spite of 20 years of married life, he could not enjoy the pleasure of sex. But he was not disappointed at that because he had a hope that lord Krishna wanted to test him on his way to salvation. In his words, “By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready.’ Didn’t Lord Krishna say: Do what’s to be done with no thought of fruit? His quest after divinity began in the mainstream Brahmin scholarly pattern but he arrived at any acceptable results only after meeting the lower caste character Putta.

Putta introduced only towards the end of the novel. But even then this character is critical to the development of the central theme. The total pages in the novel are 138 and he appears only from page 101 onwards. Compared to the Acharya, Putta had a stronger and more pragmatic kind of personality. In spite of all his limitations, he had the capacity to perform like a perfect human being. Acharya searched the divinity all his life, but when God himself appeared before him in disguise of Putta, his only desire was to get rid of him because he could not recognize Putta. All the spirituality of Acharya became useless when the problem of Naranappa’s burial popped up. He spend all his life in intellectual and spiritual pursuits. He also tortured himself by marrying an invalid women.

Samaskara attempts to delve deep into the multiple themes such as rites, ritual, preparation and transformation. But the central theme of the novel is the death of Naranappa and the complications connected with the issue of his burial. But the focus of the novel, in the course of time, shifts from the issue of last rites of a dead man to the transformation that dawn up on Acharya. A rite for a dead man is also a given sub title to the novel where Naranappa became a matter of dilemma for everyone. Pranesacharya said almost in soliloquy: “what’s the way out now? Can we just fold our arms and stare at a dead body laid out in the Agrahara? According to ancient custom, until the body is properly removed there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing. And, because he was not excommunicated no one but a Brahmin can touch his body.” p.12. Acharya crossed the four stages of life where he lives as one arrested in the first stage as Celibate student, with his invalid wife Bhagirathi he is in the second stage a married house holder, as having progressed to the third as Forest dweller, or even the fourth as ascetic renounces. Acharya was afraid of admitting that the Book of dharma had no solution to the present dilemma of Burial of Naranappa, whereas Naranappa in life as in death, questioned the brahmins of the village and exposed their samskara or lack of it.

Naranappa lived the life of a libertine the heart of an exclusive orthodox colony (agrahara), broke every known taboo : drank liquor, ate flesh, caught fish with his muslim friends in the holy temple tank, and lived with a low caste woman

he had abandoned his lawfully wedded Brahman wife. Here arises a question that was he Brahmin enough in life to be treated as one in death? Did he has the necessary 'preparation' (Samskara) to deserve a proper ceremony (Samaskaara), 'once a brahmin, always a brahmin.' Which became age-old questions. In this novel AnanthhaMurthy presents caste system as well as class system through these characters. And Naranapa though a Brahmin was introduced in the novel just to oppose and challenge Praneshacharya and his principles. By Saying, "All right, let's see who was, Acharya, you or me? Let's see how long all this Brahmin business will last. All your brahm respectability. I'll role it up of throw it always for a life but of pleasure with one female". On the other hand we have Putta who is the product of an inter-Caste marriage-part Brahmin and part lower caste, belongs to Malera community. Although he helped Acharya in many ways but then also he was not allowed to enter in the temple and have dinner with Acharya. So philosophy of dominations and internal psycho-hierarchy can be seen throughout the novel. As noone dares to take a risk of cremation of Naranappa but lust of gold motivates everyone and all are interested in doing the same. Every woman character is the symbol not only of past or present but also of future. The most important character is Chandri, who in many ways symbolize dominations.

Chandri is a very humane woman. Apart from Praneshacharya it is only she who is really worried about Naranappa's funeral rites. She also respects Acharya deeply and is compassionate towards him as she evidences his struggle. She also remember her mother's words that a prostitute should bear children from such men. Filled with compassion for Acharya she falls at his feet in order to seek forgiveness Everyone in the Agrahara looks down on her beauty and wants to possess her. In words of Durgabhatta, "look at those breasts. In sex she's the type who sucks the male dry." Although all the brahmin women considered her as 'filthy whore' and 'provocative'. But she never cares of anyone and give her all gold of 2000 rupees for Naranappa's sake her gold becomes the metaphor for man's materialistic and dark intentions.

Other important female is wife of Puttu who according to manusmriti 'Inter-caste relationship will naturally put the offenders in untouchable sect.' Being a female she has to lose every relationship and make himself only related to husband. He will decide her feelings and desires even though they are just and respectable. Though Puttu is happy with his wife but then also he makes fun of her because she always try to go to her maternal house once in a month. And Puttu do not wants to go to avoid the expenses. He make fun of her by saying, "Understanding the way of woman is just like tracing the track of a fish darting in the water. That's what the elders say. They know" he continues, "she's so neat, so good in every thing else but for this one trouble whether she cooks a dish, or washes a pot, she's neat. Just this one trouble, but my wife hasn't learned the lesson, despite the beating. What do you say to this" so we can see that Puttu can't adjust with just one thing and he wants his wife to do everything for her husband's sake.

Lakshimdeva was a child widow, and her name is symbol of ill-omen, married at eight, widowed at ten. There is clearly a prejudice against her in that town and this may be because she is widow or because she is woman living alone, or both. Here we can see male form of hierarchy where woman of Brahmin caste is not even free to share in the village community. She lives all alone and all her property was seized by Garudacharya. bhagirathi, the other one is symbol of women, who despite her fertility and physical deformity is used as a way to reach heaven. In the words of Acharya, "I am born with one such 'good nature'. This invalid wife is the sacrificial altar for my sacrifice! At last we have Brahmin wives Anasuya and Sita Devi who are slaves of domination. Although they are Brahmin woman.

Beside characters death is pervasive, too and that is evident throughout Samaskara. Beyond just the moral rot, with the decompose and the rats and cockroaches. Death spreads over the area as the plague sweeps through and Naranappa is not the only one to die. But Dasacharya, Bhagirathi and Padmabhacharya also became the victims of epidemic. Here only the title 'Samskara' reveals itself with so many deaths. The novel ends inconclusively, with Acharya waiting "Anxious, expectant" to go back to his village. In a bitter way, that's appropriate. Just as Acharya fails to formulate a new worldview after losing faith Murthy the writer fails to find a new form after demolishing Brahminism. His novel like his protagonist, grows formless and confused after encountering the wider world.

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