

PG Fourth Semester (Evening Section): Course No. ENG402A: Literature of the Indian Subcontinent: Fiction and Non-Fiction in English

U.R. Ananthamurthy: Samskara (Unit-03)

1. General Introduction

One way of looking at the development of Indian literatures in the last fifty years is to see it as a series of attempts to grapple with the postcolonial situation. Paradigms are tried and given up, communities are imagined and dissolved traditions are constructed and deconstructed. The principles of unity and difference are alternately tried out. The West's presence is acknowledged and negated. Radical European concepts and models are alternated with return to the indigenous roots. The classical and the folk elements of the heritage, the written and the oral, are explored one after the other and the current scene is agog with the dialectic of decolonization. Our creativity has thus been dialogic and our literary discourse marked by the negotiation of a necessary heterogeneity, by a conception of identity that lives through difference and hybridity, a continuous negotiation between 'the self' and 'the other' using different technologies of the self. In this context, the protagonist of Tagore's Gora, through his structurally dysfunctional acts may not be able to unsettle the whole system, but his rebellion can cause a dislocation for he would rather legitimize himself than legitimize the structure. Gora is a paradigmatic text as it seems to set the agenda for those who wish to fight colonialism. Gora in his anxiety to be authentic to himself, has to abandon not only his urbanism and fanaticism but his self-righteousness also- an anxiety carried on by several later novels in other languages.

2. Introduction to the Author

Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy (21 December 1932 – 22 August 2014) was an indigenous author and critic in Kannada. He was born in Tirthahalli Taluk and is considered as one of the pioneers of the Modernist movement in Kannada literature. He is the sixth writer to receive the prestigious Jnanpith Award for the Kannada language, the highest literary honour conferred in India. In 1998, he received the Padma Bhushan award. He was the Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam during the late 1980s. He also served as the Chairman of Film and Television Institute of India. He remained a fervent critic of nationalistic political parties until his death from kidney failure and cardiac arrest on 22 August 2014.

Most of Ananthamurthy's literary works deal with psychological aspects of people in different situations and circumstances. His writings supposedly analyze aspects ranging from challenges and changes faced by Brahmin families of Karnataka to bureaucrats dealing with politics influencing their work.

Most of his novels are on the reaction of individuals to situations that are unusual and artificial. Results of influences of sociopolitical and economic changes on traditional Hindu societies of India and clashes due to such influences – between a father and a son, husband and wife, father and daughter and finally, the fine love that flows beneath all such clashes are portrayed by Ananthamurthy in his works. The complex interplay of human emotions is evident in his stories- *Sooryana Kudure* (The Grasshopper)", *Mouni* (Silent Man)", "*Karthika*", and "*Ghatashraddha*". It does not mean that the author is just clinging to portraying only such somewhat standard subjects of Bhasha Sahitya of his period. His novelette *Bara* (Drought) portrays the dynamics of a drought-stricken district of Karnataka and the challenges and dilemmas a bureaucrat may face in such situations.

3. Introduction to the Text

U.R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is one such novel where it ruffles the silence embedded in the society and left undisturbed for a long time and holds a mirror to the society. The Kannada novel, first published in 1965, was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan, and later made into an award-winning film in 1970. It had remained popular with the general reading public and critics alike. Ever since its publication, *Samskara* has remained at the center of controversy. In his conversation with A.K Ramanujan, Ananthamurthy reveals that he was inspired by the story of Parashara in *Mahabharata* who falls in love with Matsyagandha. He also reveals that the story was recreation of the same story that he had written at the age of 13.

Being away for nearly two years from my own land and people, the language Kannada with all its richness and the people whom I knew came back to me and I found myself rewriting the story, which I had written at the age of 13- but with a lot more in it than I could grasp in my tender years.

This was how *Samskara* was born in England.

So, the story needs to be read with its intertextual resonances and allegorical references. The novel can also be studied keeping in mind the contemporary scenario and relevance as well.

4. Guidelines for Reading the Text

Reading the text of *Samskara* is a rewarding exercise. The students should acquaint themselves with some episodes of *Mahabharata* before taking up this novel for close reading- the episode of sage Parashara and the fisherwoman Matsyagandhi leading to the birth of Vyasa the author of the great Indian epic. It is also quite imperative to study the history of pre-Independent India- developments in the southern states during 1930s and 1940s- the role of Congress Party in addressing the issue of caste based discrimination. Students are advised to develop familiarity with some relevant ancient and modern European classics- *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *The Plague* by Albert Camus and others. The books recommended in the reading list should be consulted after reading the novel.

II. Areas/Issues for Discussion

08 marks

A. Appropriateness of the Title:

Before looking at the issues and themes embedded in the narrative, one must look at the title of the novel and the meaning of it. A classic of modern Indian literature, *Samskara* is both a novel about ritual and religion and a contemporary reworking of ancient Brahmanical themes and myths. Probing multiple meanings of ‘Samskara’- rite of passage, ritual, preparation, transformation, as well as death rites- this is an engrossing tale of a man whose personal transformation comes not through his learning and practice but through grace. Ramanujan’s quotations from Kittel’s *Kannada-English Dictionary* explain the various senses in which the term is used and also explores its multivalent nature. The word ‘Sam-s-kara’ is defined as:

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.

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 outside 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 ideal brahmin 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 plague 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. The novel deals with various themes like the tradition and change in Indian society, the Brahmanic and Non-Brahmanic society and the quest for identity.

B. Significance of Journey in Praneshacharya’s Quest for Identity:

Another important theme deals with the quest for identity which takes the form of a journey. The journey gives him an opportunity to analyze himself. The self-analysis starts soon after his mating with Chandri. He seeks answers to various questions. Through his self-analysis, he is constantly haunted by the fear of his old identity as the spiritual Brahmin from Durvasapura. There is also a reference of re-birth where “will turn into a new man at midnight” (131). Ramanujan suggested that ‘samskara’ not only means death-rite but also a rite of passage. Naranappa’s death gives an opportunity to the decadent Brahminism to remake itself and its followers. Praneshacharya’s encounter with Padmavati also reveals his fears for the moment of transition and he goes away to the temple. He ponders to take the decision of final confession and seeks freedom from the fears he harbours in his innermost self.

Ananthamurthy projects a picture of decadent Brahminism in a very savage manner. He projects the Brahmins as greedy and leading a parasitic existence. He reveals in an interview that he is against Brahmin orthodoxy. He also opines that tradition must be living and reminds us that the tradition that we are trying to uphold has already been lost.

Eroticism and asceticism are represented allegorically in the novel. The novel projects the idea of going beyond the duality of eroticism and asceticism. The four stages of life according to Hinduism depict eroticism and asceticism belonging to different stages of life. The texts represent the inadequacy of asceticism and the growth of a new awareness. When Praneshacharya has his first experience of mating with Chandri, it becomes a turning point in the novel. The interior monologue continues from this moment and a new awareness is created beyond the ideas of asceticism and eroticism. Thus, the quest for self-identity becomes an important theme of the novel and the self-awareness leads to the questioning of the ways of Brahminism and the idea of change in terms of tradition.

C. Representation of Women:

Representation of women is a major issue of the novel. In *Samskara* caste as both pre-modern and modern is conducted on the site of woman. The debates about Brahmin modernity are most often about woman. They are about woman as immanent site of temptation or as a vulnerable point in caste survival. Woman as temptress exists in binary opposition to woman as sexually unappealing (Brahmin) wife. It is constitutive of the modern male Brahmin's dilemma in the above senses. The woman's historical role- whether the domestic labour of the upper caste wife or the cultural labour of the prostitute- is erased.

Samskara may be read as a moment at which the meaning of woman in orthodox Hindu culture is in transition. They are dislodged from their position as guardians of tradition in colonial India. The construction of the 'modern' subject requires them to represent the stranglehold of ritual on sexual life on the one hand (as upper-caste women) and untrammelled sexuality (as lower-caste women) on the other. Such gendering renders the resolve of the text to modernity, in Praneshacharya's words, "this is me, the new truth I create, the new person I make", inevitably flawed. The women are crucial in the connection between a ritual economy and a money economy in propping up an impoverished Brahmin caste who continued in their priestly duties

while many of their caste brethren had progressed economically through civil service under the British.

04 marks

A. Role of Putta:

Putta is the person who takes Praneshacharya around and introduces him to things he has never done in his life. Now Putta is a 'Malera' by caste. 'Maleras' are a Brahmin-Sudra caste. In fact, even in another novel *Ghatashraddha*, after Yamunakka is cast out of the community, she will perhaps grow her hair, marry someone, and become a 'Malera'. This happens everywhere in Ananthamurthy's fiction. There must have been some Brahmins who flouted the rules and became lower in hierarchy. Putta takes Praneshacharya to a cock-fight, gets him to drink coffee, and arranges for him to visit Padmavati. So, in a way, Putta, a friend of Naranappa, induces Praneshacharya to live Naranappa's life. In doing so, he is performing Naranappa's shraddha and Putta plays the role of his preceptor in the world of luxury and sensuality. He is riddle-master, expert bargainer, pimp without any samskara. He is so completely and thoughtlessly at one with this world that he is a marvel. He is Praneshacharya's initiator into the mysteries of the ordinary and the familiar, the purity of the unregenerate, the wholeness of the crude.

B. Symbol of the Plague:

Samskara is a novel filled with the portents of doom. The vivid description of plague is perhaps the most powerful symbol of doom in this novel. It uses the old imagery of the Kali Yuga, of a time of pestilence and non-believers, to create a new allegory. It was written when Ananthamurthy was still a doctoral student at Birmingham: he was thirty-four. He had accompanied his teacher Malcolm Bradbury to a screening of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. The film had no subtitles, but Ananthamurthy 'experienced' the story, relating to the story of the plague and the indecision faced by the protagonist. It led him to remember a plague that had taken place in his own hometown, where the upper castes had been treated by the doctor, but the lower castes had not. Again and again the vultures returned and sat on the roofs. The Brahmins came out again and again and beat their gongs, blew their conches. The battle was on and the Brahmins were terribly exhausted. In spite of all their humble waiting, Praneshacharya

did not return and the Brahmins lived in a state of perpetual fear. It was like waiting for the Doomsday as a result of the sinful conduct of dead Naranappa.

C. Pranesha- Chandri Sexual Encounter:

Praneshacharya suddenly gives way to instinct and buckles under the sudden onslaught of sexuality because he had always denied himself the libidinal pleasure within the institution of marriage. He seems to traverse from the ascetic to the erotic, but his sexual encounter with Chandri amounts to a radical encounter in a caste-ridden society. If Parashara sleeps with a fisherwoman, Vyasa as offspring comes to write the epic Mahabharata. It is precisely within such a context of myth and opulent nature of the forest (where forest is the site of freedom from social constraints) that Praneshacharya's sexual encounter with Chandri takes place. The problem that Pranesha sets for himself, however, is after the event. How is he able to integrate this experience into his identity?

D. Significance of the Ending:

At the end of the novel a small incident is dramatized. Who, between Putta and Praneshacharya, should avail the only berth available in the bullock cart for the journey back to Durvasapura? The dilemma of deciding who should get the advantage may not apparently deserve any serious consideration except as a commonplace event. However, Praneshacharya's return to the village has become a poignant moment of self-discovery for him. The journey back to the village has not been easy for him. It has been soul-searching and soul-consuming. He is no more the same man who left the village after his wife's death. His journey has been an excruciating experience of what might be read from a Lacanian perspective as a process of misrecognition. In Lacan's understanding knowledge is inextricably bound up with misrecognition of the self. At the end of the novel, Praneshacharya, once confident of his knowledge, of himself, is now uncertain. His return to the village is symbolic of a journey from outside to the inside, a detour; a movement backward, that is forward. As A.K.Ramanujan maintains in the Afterword: "The novel ends, but does not conclude." Retracing the path back home is filled with anxiety, and expectations are wrapped up in uncertainties. Praneshacharya's transformation and his new knowledge emerging out of his misrecognition of himself in Lacanian consideration is a return to the Imaginary world, for he is not returning to the same village he left behind, as he is no more the same man.

02 marks

- A. Who was Ahmad Bari? What was his role in the novel?
- B. What is an 'agrahara'? What were the major sects of Brahmins?
- C. What was the name of Praneshacharya's wife? How did he treat his wife?
- D. Who was Padmavati? How did she influence Praneshacharya?

III. A Reading List

Ananthamurthy, U.R. *Samskara*, trans. A.K. Ramanujan. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978.

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