

CULTURAL CONFRONTATION IN SAMSKARA AND HE WHO RIDES A TIGER

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Abstract

U. R. Ananthamurthy is one of the most important representative writers in the literature of Kannada language. The short novel Samskara by U. R. Anantha Murthy, seems an accurate estimate of brahmin society in the sixties or more correctly the Brahmin societies of all times which suffer the serious problems of backwardness despite having intellectuals among them as their energy has been directed by their age-old convictions, beliefs, customs, traditions and superstition. Ananthamurthy raises sensitive issues like rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, communal feeling and human weakness such as avarice, envy, selfishness, and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community. Samskara is a story of south Indian agarhara Brahmin of Durvasapura village in Karnataka where the lives of Brahmins are entirely governed by the stringent conventions of the holy scriptures of Hindu based on caste discrimination. Their Brahminhood consists solely of fulfilling rules, following traditions, which are thousands of years old.

Keywords:- Samskara, Durvasapura, Brahmin

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U. R. Ananthamurthy is one of the most important representative writers in the literature of Kannada language. The short novel *Samskara* by U. R. Anantha Murthy, seems an accurate estimate of brahmin society in the sixties or more correctly the Brahmin societies of all times which suffer the serious problems of backwardness despite having intellectuals among them as their energy has been directed by their age-old convictions, beliefs, customs, traditions and superstition. Ananthamurthy raises sensitive issues like rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, communal feeling and human weakness such as avarice, envy, selfishness, and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community. *Samskara* is a story of south Indian agarhara Brahmin of Durvasapura village in Karnataka where the lives of Brahmins are entirely governed by the stringent conventions of the holy scriptures of Hindu based on caste discrimination. Their Brahminhood consists solely of fulfilling rules, following traditions, which are thousands of years old.

Title of the novel is very suggestive and it means as Maheshwari states:

“Samskara means religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community” (16).

The novel is all about the question whether the Brahmins are really civilized and enlightened enough to understand the meaning of being brahmins. We see the process of samskara or purification in case of Praneshacharya whose shifting from orthodox ritualism to pragmatic realism is really interesting. After completing his study from Varanasi he returned with the title of “Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning”. He has got the reputation of Guru not only in Durvasapura but in all the adjacent villages. He is the follower of the principles of Karma whose aim is to achieve the salvation at any sacrifice. He has intentionally married an invalid and sick woman to lead a celibate life to keep him chaste and dedicated to his creed selflessly. Naranappa is another mottled character in this agrahara. The novel starts with the death of Naranappa who remained an insurgent throughout his life. A controversy arises regarding Naranappa’s death rite because being a Brahmins he was antibrahminical in practice.

“Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance.”

Naranappa like a catalytic agent who wants to bring a complete change in conventional norms to give place to modernism. Being a true rebel he rebuffs and derides brahminhood by bringing his home Chandri, a prostitute from Kundapura a nearby town. Moreover, he consumes wine, invites muslims to eat meat and throws Saligrama, the holy stone representing God Vishnu into the river and spits after it. Such profane acts of Naranappa simply shocked other brahmins who firmly believed, till then, whosoever touches the fish will vomit blood and die. Apart from this he is also responsible for corrupting other youths of the agrahara. The only aspiration of Naranappa is to spoil the so called shackles of brahminhood of the agrahara. He is really regretful to find that Brahmanism is just a burden of simulated pretensions. The traditional hard core Brahmanism does everything to restrain radical anti-brahmin deeds of Naranappa and ultimately he is excommunicated. Naranappa goes to Shivamogge town and returns with high fever which ultimately develops a big lump and he dies within a couple of days. It is with his death that the real action takes place with a complex question full of dilemma “Who should cremate Naranappa?” All Brahmins are frightened to favour the cremation of dead Naranappa for they think that this sinful act would tarnish their brahminhood. Samskara is basically structured around the attempt to solve this dilemma.

Praneshacharya endeavours to solve the problem but he gets no relief from the holy books and Lord Maruti. In his effort to provide an orthodox answer to this thorny problem, Praneshacharya moves from one place to another and during this course of action he is exposed to a variety of experiences including a sexual encounter in the forest with Chandri, the low caste woman who had been Naranappa's mistress. Chandri introduces Praneshacharya to the life of conman man where all the rituals have no meaning. He runs away from home after the death of his wife because of plague but wherever he goes, the fear of discovery and Chandri's contact haunts and troubles him utmost. Ultimately he decides to return to Durvasapura and accept his own fall.

Thus Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* portrays the rural life and activities of different segments of society in an agrahara but major focus is on the Brahmin community. It is a story of human existence with its psychological weaknesses and strengths. The novel shows the shift of ethics due to modernization. Ananthamurthy portrays a realistic picture of the hidden as well revealed facts of brahmin community. It is a nice description of follies and foibles of orthodox Hindu societies.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* is an attack on cruel profiteers on people's misery and caste tyrants during the Bengal Famine of 1983. The novel is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. It is based on an ancient saying, "He who rides a tiger cannot dismount." But Bhabani Bhattacharya through the character of Kalo makes it possible to dismount the tiger if the necessity arises. Kalo, the protagonist of the novel, is a blacksmith living in a small town Jharna with his daughter, Chandra Lekha. Kalo performs a miracle by avenging himself on the wealthy and high caste people and becomes a legend in his own life-time.

Kalo has firm faith in the traditional values of life. The caste hierarchy is deep in his spirit. Though unable to understand the utility of the established social order, Kalo never questions its existence. Honesty, hard work, and faith in law and justice are the core of his being. He is "a man of accepted conventions" and his roots run "deep into age-old habits of mind and belief." (HWRT, p.43)

Kalo joins his daughter in a mission school, in spite of the financial constraints. Kalo has no limit to his joy when Lekha stands first at the annual test and gets double promotion. No one in the Jharna town responds to the incident when Lekha wins Ashoka Memorial medal in an essay competition. He values medal more than his life. But the town remains silent as though nothing has happened. This incident sows the seeds of hatred in Kalo towards high caste people.

The novel '*He who Rides a Tiger*' vividly portrays how the wealthy people are callously indifferent to the hungry millions and are greatly responsible for their miseries. It is a satire on the blind religious faith of ignorant masses who grudge to feed famished destitute but are always ready to fill whole heartedly the alms-bowls of the *Sadhus* dressed in saffron loincloth. This work shows the outburst against the exploitation by the upper caste such as Brahmins as well as a society which does not provide an honest means of livelihood to poor people.

Kalo decides to liberate himself and his daughter from hunger. He leaves Lekha in the care of his old aunt and starts his journey to Calcutta. He hopes "He must find work soon. He must save all he could. When he had a hundred rupees in his waistcloth, he would rush back home- the day of rejoining and take Lekha with him to the city. Never again would Chandra Lekha have to fear hunger." (HWRT, p.21) The irony is the city itself is the source of hunger in addition to many evils.

After a long walk for hours, Kalo had nothing to eat. He has eaten nothing for the past few days. So, he is hungry and loses his sense. In a fit of madness, he has stolen three ripened bananas from the first class compartment and is caught red-handed by the police. For this petty offence, he is handed over to the court for punishment. The cruelty and inhumanity of higher people is clearly depicted in the court scene. Kalo pleads with the Magistrate, "I was hungry sir. Madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat or I would die. Madness came upon me. I had to live." (HWRT, p.31) This indicates people degrade to the lowest position during the time of hunger.

The Magistrate, after hearing Kalo's misery, instead of showing pity, questions harshly, "why did you have to live?" (HWRT, p.31) This question makes Kalo a rebel afterwards. The words of Magistrate completely change the attitude of Kalo towards his fellow beings. He loses his innocence and sows the seed of revenge. He is ordered to undergo three months imprisonment. This turns out to be significant period in his life. Bitten who shares a cell with Kalo, casually mentions how one can relate, to fake a miracle to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullible people, and to make fools of them by making them worship a bogus image. It is Bitten who gives the idea that makes Kalo ride the tiger.

Finally Kalo renounces his caste and becomes a twice-born by wearing the nine-stranded sacred thread across his chest. He feels himself free from spiritual bondage. Kalo's key decision is to pass as a Brahmin holy man, which he only considers after discovering that his daughter has nearly been forced into prostitution. He succeeds in making the miracle happen and a temple is erected on the hallowed spot. Money and materials pour in from all sides; especially from black marketers for whom worship is atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. Kalo assumes a new name, Mangal Adhikari. Among worshippers who come to temple and touch Mangal Adhikari's feet is the magistrate who has sentenced Kalo to hard labor for stealing bananas.

Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith upsets the social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top. Bhattacharya says, "He rode a lie as if it were a tiger which he could not dismount lest the tiger pounce upon him and eat him up." (HWRY, p.85)

Both Ananthamurthy and Bhattacharya portray the selfish and narrow attitude of corrupt Brahmin community where objective approach to life is a mere principle of their teaching. The need of time is cultural reformation as India has been facing cultural crisis. Purgation (samskara) in the flame of Ancient Wisdom is still the need of hour.

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