

**THEORIZING TRANSGRESSION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
U. R. ANANTHA MURTHY'S *SAMSKARA***

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The term 'transgression' signifies an action beyond the limit of what is morally/legally acceptable. It is an act of crossing limits, breaking code of moral discipline which is so as per our socio-cultural considerations life. The reigning in of human behavior, at times, is construed as moral imperative that stems from societal conscience. Nevertheless, any limit on human conduct posits an intrinsic urge to cross/transgress it as Georges Bataille observes in his book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1986): "The transgression does not deny the taboo, but transcends and completes it". He also observes that transgression, in fact, "confirms" as well as "regulates" the "forbidden". According to Bataille, every prohibition can be transgressed and at times, it is not only permitted but even "prescribed". Likewise, Julian Wolfreys too in his book *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (2008), points toward the limitless capacity of the subject to break her/his own limits and still remain herself/ himself. This paper theorizes the notion of transgression (à la Bataille, Wolfreys, Chris Jenks and Foucault) and then briefly problematizes it in the context of U. R. Anantha Murthi's novel, *Samskara*.

Any limit/boundary erected by society has been perceived as restriction/impediment in one's individual growth. As such, one perennially seeks freedom from constraints by way of transgressing. Let us not assume that transgressive behavior simply spurns limits; it rather lends it a sense of completion via

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crossing them a la Bataille who underscores the fact that every boundary/ rule has an inherent possibility as well as necessity of its own fracture. This possibility/ necessity may be equated with an impulse to disobey, question, and challenge prevalent in us all. Viewed thus, transgression constitutes an intrinsic component of the rule/ limit/ boundary. Chris Jenks equates transgression with a "dynamic force" that "prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and also ensures stability by re-affirming it" (Jenks 7). As such, transgression enlivens the interstitial space between civilizational constraints/ socio-culturally prescriptive code and our instinctual demands. Likewise, Bataille observes one has strong urge to challenge anxiety and boredom of existence which may result in chaos as the danger is that human attempt to assert her/ his actual, instinctual self may destroy life itself.

Julian Wolfreys has defined transgression as "the act of breaking a law, committing a crime or sin, doing something illegal, or otherwise acting in some manner proscribed by the various forms or institutions of law in societies, whether secular or religious, all of which have histories and which themselves are mutable" (3). He further observes that we understand the term 'transgression' as indicative of breaking a law, doing something illicit and disrupting order and rebelling against societal norms. Nevertheless, if/ when we think we transgress; we do nothing except conforming to expectations of "acceptable deviance," according to Wolfreys. We just act in a manner already in some socio-historical sense prescribed and conform to the way that is more or less tolerated, even when denounced. Wolfreys views transgression as stepping over/ beyond a limit or boundary "to cross a threshold, to move beyond the commonly determined bounds of law, decency, or whatever (3).

Freud addresses the notion of transgression in *Totem and Taboo* as he observes that "Taboos are mainly expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. Our combination of holy dread would often express the meaning of taboo" (Freud 41). More authoritative a society, the more is the force of organized repression to impel man to interiorize transgressive yearnings. Foucault observes that that "transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses:"

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The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (Foucault: 'Preface to Transgression')

The "crossing" of the line and its immediate closing up and returning to the horizon of the "uncrossable" spells out the possibility of transgression as its context remains "uncertain", but so is the certainty of limit. Foucault further observes that "The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. But can the limit have a life of its own outside of the act that gloriously passes through it and negates it?" ("Preface to Transgression")

As such, whatever form it may take, transgression challenges reinforcement of rules thereby eventually breaking them. The relationship between rule and transgression may seem arbitrary, whimsical, individualistic, accidental or silly; it signifies the very purpose of being. Transgression ever remains fluid/ unstable which in no way makes it 'good' or 'bad'. For Bataille the assertion of life force leads to transgressive acts as he observes: "The limits are abstract, socially and historically constructed and subject to both trial and resistance. The urge to drive through the limits derives from the life force or, to put it another way, the desire to 'complete life'. The constant inability to 'complete life,' however, and the recognition of that inability generates a perpetual state of urgency and anxiety, which is part of human condition" (Bataille 89).

Literature has been the site of contestation of the notion of transgression as the latter seeks to challenge the ethical edifice of the socio-cultural as well as

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inter-personal behavioural norms. *Samskara* by U. R. Anantha Murthy unfolds in a brahmanical context portraying Brahmins from Durvasapura who have absolute faith in the authority of God and infallibility of the Vedas and other scriptures. They are supposed to be well-versed in the scriptures and expected to uphold the highest principles of morally upright conduct alongside of course possessing the qualities of control of mind and senses, austerity, forbearance and the knowledge of the scriptures that enable them to eventually become one with God. The protagonist of *Samskara*, Praneshacharya is a profound scholar from Kashi and is well-versed in the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. He is the "crest jewel of Vedic learning" and occupies the topmost position among the Brahmins of Durvasapura. He gains deep knowledge of scriptures through his meticulous study at Varanasi and commands great mastery over them. The people of Durvasapura are very religious and ardent followers of their social norms and traditions.

Naranappa, the adversary of Praneshacharya represents hedonistic ways of life. The novel describes the conflict between ascetic ways of life, represented by Praneshacharya and hedonistic way of life, represented by Naranappa. Religion and morality are the most powerful forces of social control. The Hindu caste system is looked upon as divine institution. People who violate it are looked upon as sinners and it is believed that God will punish them. Due to this internal fear, people do not have the courage to violate the laws of the caste system. Naranappa, being a rebel, does everything which is against society, humanity and most importantly against religion. Naranappa flouted every social norm/ taboo. He eats the sacred fish from the pond near Ganpati temple, abandoned his lawfully wedded wife for the sake of Chandri, a low caste prostitute. He freely lived with Chandri and ate food prepared by her. Naranappa not only deserted his lawfully wedded wife but did not even come to attend her funeral rites. His offence of non-observance of the death anniversaries of his parents is absolutely unpardonable.

Praneshacharya also transgresses societal norms. Though married, he has sexual encounter with Chandri, which is a transgressive act. Since his

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transgression does not come to the fore, society remains unaware of his sexual act with the outcaste woman. His disgust for himself can be viewed in terms of his disgust for the society at large as he represents it. The introspection of his own inner nature through his monologues and his self-inquiry symbolizes the quest for liberation of the tradition-bound Brahmin society. The Brahmin community of the agrahara remains in bondage to the unexamined traditions and the prescriptive force of its practices and values as interpreted by its religious leader. Steeped in the orthodoxies of his creed, Praneshacharya accepts the conventional judgment that through his act he has lost his virtue: "I've lost it; if I don't have the courage to speak tomorrow" (*Samskara* 68).

Praneshacharya has profound sense of compunction in his heart. He is not in a position to face the Brahmins of agrahara: "I never experienced such dread before. A fear of being discovered, of being caught ... I lost my original fearlessness. How, why? I could not return to the agrahara because of fear, the fear of not being able to live in full view, in front of those Brahmins" (*Samskara* 96). At the same time, however, he has an irresistible sense of having attained through his experience not only physical and emotional fulfillment, but also an increased moral awareness as well as broadening and refining of his human perceptions. There is a great transformation in Praneshacharya from perfect and static innocence to full and dynamic knowledge through initiation into experience.

The transgressive behavior of Naranappa causes hindrance in the performance of his last rites. Nobody wants to perform the last rites of Naranappa because he had been involved in anti-brahminic activities, besides keeping a low caste woman in his house. Praneshacharya is also helpless and unable to find any solution to the problem. Despite offering of gold ornaments by Chandri as expense for the cremation of Naranappa, there is nobody who could come forward to cremate his dead body. Eventually it is Chandri who cremates Naranappa's dead body with the help of his Muslim friends, as the Brahmins could not find any solution to the problem in their religious scriptures/texts or anywhere else—a scathing comment on the decadent



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brahmin orthodox mindset utterly bereft of humaneness. In other words, it may also be viewed as repercussion of transgression which is intrinsically subversive.

On the other hand, Praneshacharya's encounter with Chandri in the forest opens a new world of naturalness and wholeness to Acharya. His vision suddenly becomes clear, as if a veil which has for all these years separated him from the throbbing, pulsating world, has dropped. The symbolic intent of the forest scene is that man-woman may find fulfillment in their relationship outside the socio-cultural set-up; however, it has its repercussions. Praneshacharya's conscience tells him that he has lost authority over other Brahmins. He begins to search for some way out of his agonizing situation as he feels deep mental and spiritual anguish. The narrative now gets enacted in the inner psyche of the Acharya. His self-introspection is symptomatic of his movement on the path of spiritual evolution. Turning inwards, he explores the inner recesses of the mind and faces excruciating dilemma culminating in his surrendering everything to God (*Samskara* 132).

The novel ends inconclusively with Praneshacharya waiting "anxious, expectant." Indubitably, his transition, consequent upon transgressive sexual act may seem unfortunate from an orthodox standpoint; it has nevertheless been fortunate from a humane perspective. Praneshacharya's anxiety and expectation has a Foucauldian ring as we have in him a baffled scholar for whom life has hitherto been more or less procrustean with pre-determined curves and curvatures and well-defined frame. By breaking the frame, both Praneshacharya and Naranappa, in their distinctively unique ways, stretch the limit of their respective choices to the edge thereby making it disappear rather transiently to make it see what it lacks and then returning into the socio-cultural behavioural domain simply because that is the arena where repercussions become known—they may be bad/good, negative/positive, etc., however, literary interpretation can never fall into the vicious loop of 'binarism' as the notion of transgression (as discussed above) destabilizes it to the extent that one is impelled to see the third, fourth, fifth (ad infinitum) possibility of interpretations. As Foucault observes:

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Transgression . . . is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity. Since this existence is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations. ("Preface to transgression")

Viewed in the above light, Praneshachrya's act may seem to be overtly/ explicitly "scandalous", unlike Naranappa's which is "subversive", the ethics of literary interpretation shall have to steer clear of prescriptive norms as there lies a greater danger as the entire field of discourse, Derridean 'freeplay' may get choked. In the like fashion, if one were to funnel one's vision across the prevalent pedagogical practices of literary studies across India, we need to envision the ethics of the praxis of literary studies afresh to ensure that authoritative/prescriptive 'shoulding-musting' syndrome (which seems to be the hallmark even today) is completely done away with and newer ways of interpreting literature are devised remaining aware of our immediate/contingent reality alongside the current global practices.

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