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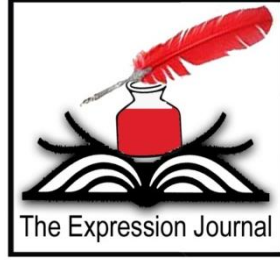
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Hypocrisy and Gender Discourse: A Critical Appraisal of U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English has a long list of writers and among them, U. R. Ananthamurthy's name comes to the forefront. He has written his works on sensitive issues of the society. He was born on 21 December 1932 in Thirthahalli and died on 22 August 2014 in Bengaluru. He was a renowned critic of Kannada language. He belonged to the Brahmin community. Though he studied Sanskrit during his school days, he earned his PhD in English from the University of Birmingham. He wrote his works primarily in Kannada and English. He was a great scholar who has won many prestigious awards including the Padma Bhushan, Jnanpith and Man Booker International Prize. He remained at many prestigious posts such as the President of Sahitya Akademi, the Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University and the Chairman of National Book Trust India. Apart from these jobs, he also remained a visiting professor at many prestigious universities around the world. There are many authors who deal with different aspects Dalit literature in their works. They write about the poor, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized sections of the society. The present paper attempts to analyse thin issues of hypocrisy and gender discrimination in U. R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*.

Keywords

U. R. Ananthamurthy's, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, Brahminism, Hypocrisy, Double Standards, Untouchability, Gender Discourse.

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U. R. Ananthamurthy addressed the issue of gender discrimination, hypocrisy and caste prejudice in his book *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. The novel is set in the small village of Saraswathipura in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. The novel depicts the hypocrisy of a Brahmin community called Madhwas. Apart from that, other themes such as caste and class structure, male domination, physical relationships and hegemony also have been given special attention in this novel. Women's marginalized position is also a dominant theme of this novel. Bijender Singh also writes in this context, "Dalit women are one of the marginalized, discriminated, isolated and humiliated segments in the society" (Singh 14).

The novel describes how there are many evils prevalent in Indian society. There are many people on this earth who are like a burden as they want to earn money by cheating others. Betrayal, dishonesty, double standards, hypocrisy and cunningness are the characteristics of their life. Ananthamurthy has also depicted that even good people like Praneshacharya also get deviated from the path. Praneshacharya is the leading character of this novel. He studied the Vedas, Upanishads and Hindu scriptures at in Kashi Vidyapeeth. Thus, he is a great scholar of Sanskrit and all the people of his village respect him. He makes a big sacrifice by marrying an invalid girl, Bhagirathi with an intention to remain loyal to her and to serve her throughout his life. When the novel opens, he is seen busy doing his routine works. He wants to attain salvation that's why he serves his wife, "He bathed Bhagirathi's body, a dried-up waste pea-pod, and wrapped a fresh sari around it; then he offered food and flowers to the gods as he did every day, put the flowers in her hair, and gave her holy water..." (Ananthamurthy 1). His wife is very grateful to him but she remains sad because she could not give him any issue. That's why she puts pressure on Praneshacharya for the second marriage but Praneshacharya ignores her pleas when she says, "Being married with me is no joy. A house needs a child. Why don't you just get married again?"

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Praneshacharyan would laugh aloud. A wedding for an old man?" (Ananthamurthy 1). Natarajan aptly writes about Praneshacharya's sacrifice in life, "The novella establishes Pranasha's singularity and his merit through the hard work he performs feeding his invalid wife, cooking and cleaning" (Natarajan 160).

The entry of a dalit woman, Chandri disturbs Praneshacharya's schedule. Chandri can be called the main female protagonist of this novel who was in love with another Brahmin, Naranappa who has recently died and Chandri has come to Praneshacharya's house to inform him about Naranappa's death. Naranappa did not follow the rules made by the Brahmins and he started eating meat also. Suniel Kumar and M. Narendra opine about him:

He drinks, smokes, eats meat, does everything that an orthodox Brahmin ought not to do and even cohabiting an outcaste woman, Chandri, for a concubine. Ananthamurthy created this character to question traditional Brahmanism and caste system. (243)

Naranappa was excommunicated by the villagers. Still he finds fault in the conservative and narrow-minded Agrahara Brahmins. He does not get afraid when they try to warn him about the rules of their village he is breaking. He says, "Try and excommunicate me now. I'll become a Muslim, I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred Brahmanism is ground into the mud" (Ananthamurthy 12). He was suffering from fever and could not recover. Chandri informs about it, "He came back from Shivamogga and took to bed in a fever. Four days of fever, that's all. He had a painful lump on his side, the kind they get with fever" (Ananthamurthy 3).

Ananthamurthy has written about the problem of untouchability in this novel. Praneshacharya did not want to talk to a woman belonging to a low caste because he had to take bath again. It shows that a well-educated person like Praneshacharya also believes in untouchability. U. R. Ananthamurthy writes about it, "Chandri was Naranappa's concubine. If Acharya talked to her he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal" (Ananthamurthy 2). The below conversation shows that Chandri was loyal to Naranappa even after his death:

But Praneshacharya has no alternative and that's why he has to listen to her:

'What's the matter?'

'He...He...'

'Chandri shivered; words struck in her mouth. She held on the pillar.'

'What? Naranappa? What happened?'

'Gone...' (2)

She came to inform the villagers so that Naranappa's last rites can be performed. Praneshacharya goes to the village so that other people of the village can be informed about Naranappa's death. He sends the message to everyone not to take the breakfast because according to their rules, Brahmins don't eat food before the cremation of the dead body. That's why Praneshacharya says, "Narayana. Don't. Garuda. Don't eat. I hear Narappa is dead" (Ananthamurthy 3). Garudacharya said to his wife Sitadevi, "It's all right for the children. They can eat. Only we adults shouldn't till the funeral rites done" (Ananthamurthy 3). In fact, Naranappa has

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earned enmity of the whole village due to his strange habits but now it was a common social responsibility to forget about Naranappa's excommunication. Garudacharya says, "Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance" (Ananthamurthy 3). Now they face a problem because nobody wanted to touch Naranappa's dead body. People start doubting about his caste also because they think that a person having relationship with a low caste woman also loses his high caste that's why the village people have doubt about Naranappa's caste now. They say, "The real question is: Is he a Brahmin at all? What do you say? He slept regularly with a low-caste woman..." (Ananthamurthy 5). It can be easily noticed that many dalit writers have depicted such types of themes in their books. Mishra remarks about dalit writers and their themes:

These writers make use of the language of the out caste and underprivileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers has become sharp. (Mishra 2-3)

It was a serious problem and the villagers decided that only Praneshacharya can bring a solution to this problem. Praneshacharya was a scholar and all the village people think highly of him. Garudacharya says, "We don't have to advise great Praneshacharya. He knows all about alliances and misalliances, has studied it all in Kashi and he knows all the scriptures, earned his title Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning" (Ananthamurthy 6). There was a unity in the village that Praneshacharya's decision would be acceptable by everyone. People have different opinions about it. That's why Ananthamurthy writes:

Only another Brahmin has any right to touch his body. If we let someone else to do it, we would be sullyng our Brahmanhood. Yet I can't tell you go ahead with the rites. We all saw how he lived. What shall we do? What do the law books say? (Ananthamurthy 9)

The people of the village were also thinking that the upper caste people should do his last rites and even the women of the village did not want that any person from an low caste touch his body because it will be matter of shame for the entire Brahmin community, "Anasuya nagged him. Wasn't Naranappa my own maternal uncle's son? Sinner he may be. But if any low-caste man is allowed to pick up his dead body, I'll die of shame" (Ananthamurthy 32). The villagers were having different views on his last rites. Some were saying that he was friend of a muslim also and was threatening to become a muslim that's why his funeral rites should be done like a muslim.

When the village people were feeling reluctant to touch Naranappa's body, Chandri comes forward and offers her jewellery so that money may not become a stumbling block in the last rites of her lover. She does all the efforts she could do for it. When Praneshacharya was returning from Hanuman Temple, Chandri falls on his feet and requests him to help her in the cremation of Naranappa's dead body. Praneshacharya's hands touch Chandri's uncovered body when he was trying to move her away. He gets attracted towards her beauty and he enjoys sex with her. He convinces her that she should not worry about Naranappa's last rites. He says, "Chandri, get up. Let us go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself" (Ananthamurthy 68). But he fails to do the last rites of Naranappa. This shows the

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hypocrisy, double standards and selfishness of the society. Jalki writes about it, “Praneshacharya, after a disappointment with Brahminism, does what Naranappa did for years; wanders through forests and lonely roads, sleeps with the prostitute Chandri...” (Jalki 191). Sharon Pillai finds Chandri’s character disappointing, “From a gender perspective, Chandri’s characterisation is especially disappointing because it cannot be argued into a viable materialist subjectivity of empowerment for women” (Pillai 143). Praneshacharya finds that his invalid wife, Bhagirahi has died of plague. Praneshacharya is filled with remorse because he had had a physical relationship with a low caste woman whose touch was enough to pollute him.

Ananthamurthy has depicted that the Brahmins are more attracted towards the low caste women than their own wives. Praneshacharya is its best example. Shripati’s wife does not allow him to enjoy sex because she twines up her thighs following her mother’s advice. They co-bed silently without any pleasure. That’s why Shripathi wants to enjoy sex with another low caste beautiful woman named Beli. He criticizes Brahmin girls in the comparison of her beauty. He ponders over, “Which Brahmin girl,—cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup,—which Brahmin girl was equal to Belli?” (Ananthamurthy 37). Shripati goes to her hut, embraces her and enjoys sex with her. While returning he thinks, “Belli was all right for sleeping with, she was no good for talk” (Ananthamurthy 40-41) which also denotes his hypocrisy. Beli was living a carefree life and she exposes her body parts to attract men. She attracts Praneshacharya also due to her charming look. Shripati praises Chandri’s beauty in the following words, “Chandri was utterly beautiful, beyond compare” (Ananthamurthy 38). He compares her beauty with Menaka “who destroyed the penance of Sage Vishvamitra” (Ananthamurthy 38). Mulk Raj Anand has depicted Sonini very beautiful girl that’s why Pandit Kali Nath molests her in her temple when she was cleaning the toilet and other women like Gulabo feel jealous of her because she is more beautiful than any other woman. Mulk Raj Anand depicts Sohini’s beauty in the following words:

She had a sylph-like form, not thin but full-bodied within the limits of her graceful frame, well rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist from which descended the folds of her trousers and above which were her full, round, globular breasts, jerking slightly, for lack of a bodice, under her transparent muslin shirt. Bakha observed her as she walked along swaying. She was beautiful. He was proud of her with a pride not altogether that of a brother for a sister. (Anand 22)

Putta’s wife is another low-caste woman and Putta is not happy with her. He thinks that beating can be a solution to keep her under his control. He says, “My wife hasn’t learned the lesson, despite the beating” (Ananthamurthy 108). Putta does not allow her to go to her parents and when she goes, he does not give her money. When she rebels, Putta beats her. Thus, the tyranny of the patriarchal society has been depicted through this couple.

Lakshmiddevamma is an ill-fated widow. She is deprived of her property due to which she has to live separately like an untouchable. People think that her face is ominous for other women. She was “married at eight, widowed at ten. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law had died when she was fifteen. The Agrahara had sneered at her” (Ananthamurthy 42). She has to remain alone and nobody wants to take her responsibility in her old age. She is rather considered “all venom” (Ananthamurthy 43).

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Bhagirathi is completely depended on her husband. She is unable to give happiness to her husband Praneshacharya. He has to do everything for her. That's why Naranappa comments about her, "His wife was always ill and he didn't know what it was to have pleasure with a woman" (Ananthamurthy 24). Naranappa while quarrelling with Praneshacharya says that he does not like the Praneshacharya's "lifting his ailing wife with both hands like a baby" (Ananthamurthy 35).

Among all the female characters, Chandri has been depicted as a clever woman. She knows that Praneshacharya can help in the last rites of her lover. But when she notices that Naranappa's cremation is getting delayed, she does not wait for anybody's action. She brings Naranappa's muslim friend, Ahmad Bari who performs Naranappa's last rites. She gives money and jewellery which is the biggest sacrifice of a woman for her lover. Her cleverness is reflected through her actions. Though she lived with Narappa, she got pregnant only by her union with Praneshacharya so that her son also become a scholar like Praneshacharya. It can be called a perfect plan by a low caste woman.

In an overall impression, it can be stated that on one side Ananthamurthy has depicted the hypocrisy of the Brahmins, on the other side, the marginalized status of women has been depicted through this novel. Muneer Ahmad Wani also writes in this context, "In the novel, women and outcastes are obviously the lost folk who are denied the basic rights: equality, expression, public action and the last rites. They are denied right to speak in front of men and public" (Wani 793).

Viplav Kumar Mandal also writes about this text:

"...this novel is a social document in the sense that it draws our attention to the ways and means, customs and conventions of the Hindu society. As usual, one notices the meanness, the professional jealousy, suppressed greed, the protestations among the Brahmins of the community." (Mandal 677)

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