



Portrayal of Women in U.R.ananthamurthy's Samskara

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the portrayal of women characters in U.R.Ananthamurthy's Samskara. Women characters can be observed portrayed in two main spheres – the upper caste brahmin women like the wives of brahmins like Anasuya, Sita, Bhagirathi and lower caste characters like Chandri, Belli etc. As depicted in the novel, the upper caste women, though they are upper caste, are devoid of any sexual quality or they are sexless objects, providing no sexual comfort. On the other hand, the lower caste women are described full of sexuality, they are presented as temptresses and no one can escape from their lure.

KEYWORDS : Brahmins, Portrayal of women, Samskara, U.R.Ananthamurthy.

U.R.Ananthamurthy, a renowned novelist, short-story writer and poet of Kannada language, is popular for his mostly acclaimed novel *Samskara*. Born in 1932, Ananthamurthy has been a Jnanpith and Padma Bhushan Award winner. He depicted contemporary society in his writings and the unreal situation encountered by individuals.

His much popular novel *Samskara*, which has been translated into many languages and has also been adapted into a movie, is the story of the protagonist Praneshacharya and the like in a brahmin colony named Durvasapura, situated in the south of India in the state of Karnataka. In this novel the novelist has described the decadence of Brahmins and their orthodoxy. The novel actually is a journey of the protagonist towards a search for his own self.

The Indian society has been divided into many sections long ago. Even today the impression of that division can be seen. As Gladin Rose (2015) observes, "The Hindu society has been classified into four different sections on the basis of caste—Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and sudras (p.190)". There has been prominence of caste, a person is considered upper caste or lower caste. Sudras were the lower caste people, who are provided the degrading tasks of the society. According to Dr Rajneesh Pandey (2014), "Indian caste system is predominantly based on *Manu Smriti* which has granted supremacy and various privileges to Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas (p.613)". In this novel also, the brahmins are considered the most pious people, whereas the Sudras or the lowcaste people, yet the novel is a satire of the hypocrisy of the pious people, and the noble qualities of low caste people are highlighted.

The women characters are primarily shown on two grounds – the high caste sexless brahmin women and the low caste women full of sexuality. The brahmin women include Bhagirathi, who is an invalid wife of Praneshacharya. She is incapable to provide any sexual comfort to her husband. By marrying her, Praneshacharya is living a life of penance and great renunciation.

Another characters are Anasuya and Sita. Anasuya is Lakshmana's wife and Sita is Garuda's wife. Both of them are described as greedy for gold and are shown as the cause of their husbands' degradation. Lakshmana's wife Anasuya "looked at the four-strand gold chain round Chandri's neck and the thick gold bracelet on her wrist, and could not bear think of it. She wept loudly" (Ananthamurthy, 2010, pp. 7-8). When Chandri put all her jewellery before Praneshacharya for the cremation of Naranappa, the eyes of the brahmin women remain wide open. It was the hypocrisy of the brahmins that earlier nobody was ready to cremate Naranappa and now when there is gold before them, they are ready to cremate him. The women are shown as the cause of their degradation:

The women calculated swiftly; that heap of gold was worth at least two thousand rupees. One after another, the wives scanned their husbands' faces. The brahmins bowed their heads: they were afraid, fearful that the lust for gold might destroy brahmin purity. But in the heart of everyone of them flashed the question: if some other brahmin should perform the final rite for Naranappa, he might keep his brahminhood and yet put all that gold on his wife's neck. (Anantha-

murthy, 2010, p. 10)

When the men folk have left the decision on Praneshacharya, the women feel themselves disheartened, "The women kept staring at the heap of gold and they were disappointed by their husbands' words (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 12)". Garuda's wife Sitadevi and Lakshmana's wife Anasuya persuade their husbands to their husbands to visit Praneshacharya to plead their cases. (pp. 28-33)

Brahmins perform the rituals whereas the women are not shown performing any rituals. Ritual purity in this novel has been assigned to men and no emphasis has been laid on female labor. In fact, they are not even called as Brahmins, but as wives of Brahmins. Brahmin in the text suggests only men not women which suggest erasure of women as subjects performing labour. They are portrayed occupying the periphery after having surrendered the centre stage to their men. They are also denied the acknowledgement of their daily labour in performing the household chores. Wherever these activities are mentioned, specific reference to women has not been made. Although there is reference of "decorating the threshold", "sprinkling of cowdung water in the courtyard" (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p.51), "they used cucumber for everything, curry, mash, or soup made with the seeds" (p.16), "ritually wash saris" (p.14), "she drove her kids inside and shut them up" (p.52) for avoiding them from overwhelming stench, "the rice you've wolfed down" (p.52), clearly they prepare food. Yet they are not illustrated as active agents. Their presence is peripheral, though the life of *agarhara* depends on their labour for smooth functioning.

The low caste character Chandri is shown as belonging to a family of prostitutes. The main purpose of her life is to provide comfort to others:

Born to a family of prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin defile a running river? It's good for a drink when a man's thirsty, it's good for a wash when a man's filthy, and it's good for bathing the god's images with; it says Yes to everything, never a No. Like her. Doesn't dry up, doesn't tire. Tunga, river that doesn't dry, doesn't tire. (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 44)

She is described a complete beauty, which has impressed Naranappa of her beauty that he rejects brahminhood and does all he can do for degradation of brahminhood. Her beauty and noble thinking has been shown in comparison to the ugly, greedy and dry nature of brahmin women, "the novelist has shown that Chandri's beauty had great attraction for Naranappa.

Therefore the novelist has proved that beauty of Chandri was much better than the weak and ugly Brahmin woman" (Bidari, 2015, p. 11). She presents all her jewellery to Praneshacharya to meet the expenses of Naranappa's cremation:

Suddenly Chandri did something that stunned the brahmins. She moved forward to stand in the front courtyard. They couldn't believe their own eyes: Chandri loosened her four-strand gold chain, her thick bracelet, her bangles, and placed them all in a heap before Prane-

shacharya. (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 10)

Praneshacharya feels impressed by Chandri's generosity, "Praneshacharya asked Chandri to sit down, came into the dining-room where his wife lay, and proceeded to tell her how pure Chandri's heart was, how she'd laid down all her gold and what new complications arose from that generous act" (p. 20). Naranappa also feels attracted by Chandri and rejects brahminhood for her. He says to Praneshacharya, "O Acharya, who in the world can live with a girl who gives no pleasure – except of course some barren brahmins!" (p. 21) and suggests to him to also have the same experience, "Acharya-re? Push those sickly wives of yours into the river. Be like the sages of your holy legends – get hold of a fish-scented fisherwoman who can cook you fish-soup, and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don't experience god when you wake up, my name isn't Naranappa" (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 26).

A comparison and contrast has been shown in the novel between high caste brahmin women and low caste sudra women. Ritually how pure the brahmin women are, sexually they are shown insignificant in comparison to the sudra women. Shripati thinks:

Which brahmin girl, – cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking with lentil soup, – which brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her thighs are full. When she's with him she twists like a snake coupling with another, writhing in the sands; she'd have drunk her father's sour toddy, she'd be warm and ready – like a tuned-up drum. Not utterly black-skinned, nor pale white, her body is the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun. (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 37)

They are portrayed full of beauty, fleshy and shown capable to lose the quench of any person. Chandri herself thinks to be a fulfilled person, "But these brahmin women, before they bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall – not hers. Perennial Tunga, river that doesn't dry up, doesn't tire (Ananthamurthy, 2010, pp. 44-45)". Regarding the noble qualities, Chandri is shown generous, whereas the brahmin women are avaricious, and they also tend to degrade their husbands. She also cremates Naranappa's dead body which starts rotting. Aditi Dev rightly opines:

... the so-called low caste prostitute Chandri is more sensible and morally superior compared to the avaricious Brahmins and their wives ... It is Chandri, a low-caste, uneducated woman who solves the problem that Praneshacharya, the great Vedic scholar is unable to solve. After returning from the forest, she, with the assistance of her Muslim friend cremates Naranappa's fast rotting body. (2013, p. 6)

Nevertheless, the low caste women are depicted as full of beauty, sexuality, they are treated as mere sex objects, which can be used while there is need of it. They are not considered worthy to talk with, as Shripati does not like to talk to Belli as he thinks, "Belli was all right for sleeping with, she was no good for talk. If she opens her mouth, she talks only ghosts and demons" (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 41).

Some superstitions are also highlighted in *Samskara*, which are associated with bodily functions of women. Praneshacharya does not go with the rest of the Brahmins as he cannot leave his bedridden wife "who had started her period" (p. 80), later when he wants to check whether the fever has risen by touching her forehead, he says to himself in self-disgust, "How can I touch a woman polluted by her menstrual blood? Che!" (p. 84) In one more incident this superstition about women is illustrated. Remembering the stories from scriptures Praneshacharya used to narrate, Shripati vividly remembers a description, "Like the thighs of a blossoming woman, pure after her monthly baths" (Ananthamurthy, 2010, p. 38). These superstitious beliefs about the functioning of a woman's body cherish the perception of women's inferior status as against men in a patriarchal society. Praneshacharya and other Brahmins who have grown up in traditional brahminic society, accept these values without questioning them.

In short, it can be said that the novelist has portrayed the secondary status of women in his novel. They are treated as mere sex-objects, or they are conditioned to the traditional life in society. The low caste women are free from the societal taboos, yet their autonomous position enhances their exploitation. The brahmin women are entrapped in the traditional values, they are not free to act independently. In

both the cases, they have inferior position in society.

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