

HYPOCRISY AND DISCRIMINATION IN U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S "SAMSKARA"

Kshiti Hegde

English Literature
Mumbai University
INDIA

kshitishegde@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the intersections of caste and gender in U.R. Ananthamurthy's "Samkara". It analyses how the novel puts forth the hypocrisy of Brahminical society. It presents a dissection of the characters of Praneshacharya and Shripati, members of Brahmin society, their actions, and the moral contradictions they embody. The paper critiques the social and religious codes that regulate women's bodies while also showcasing how marginalised female characters, such as Chandri, resist these norms and assert their agency. Drawing on feminist and caste-critical perspectives from thinkers like Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Kelly Oliver, and Bell Hooks, the paper examines how "Samkara" seeks to expose the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Brahmin patriarchy and reveals the deeply ingrained hypocrisy within the caste system.

Keywords: caste, gender, desire, hypocrisy, hegemony, patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

The Indian caste system has shaped the lives of countless individuals since its conception by enforcing rigid divisions in the name of purity. A structure that originates from the varna system and is rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, it systemically marginalises those born into "lower castes". This paper is an exploration of U.R. Ananthamurthy's text and how it seeks to expose the caste system and how it is often legitimised through religious texts and societal customs.

The themes of gendered discrimination and social stratification are showcased with effect in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965), a novel that presents the hypocrisy of a Brahminical society. Set in a fictional town, Swasthipura, the narrative is centred around Praneshacharya, an esteemed Brahmin leader and Chandri, a woman who belongs to a lower caste, who is put through a set of challenges to get her lover, a Brahmin man's rites performed. The paper highlights how, through the novel, Ananthamurthy critiques Brahmin orthodoxy, the performative morality of Brahmin men, while shedding light on the regulation of women's bodies, the fetishisation and control exercised over lower-caste women.

Samskara implores readers to question the oppressive norms that have historically governed social and gender hierarchies, revealing how marginalised female characters subvert and resist these norms. While analysing these themes of the novel, the paper draws on thinkers such as Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Kelly Oliver, and Bell Hooks to better understand the intersections of caste, gender, and power.

THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

The caste system is a social structure that has influenced many aspects of life in India. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines caste as “one of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restricts the occupation of their members and their association with the members of other castes”.

The presence of caste is also reflected in the hegemon's treatment of women. Although female and class-based subjugation is not unique to India, patriarchal structures are historically pervasive worldwide. In India, the communities that follow the “*Sanatan Dharma*”¹ have practised social stratification through the *varna* system. The traditional divisions—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—rank individuals according to a hierarchy in which Brahmins are often regarded as the highest, holding power

and control over the “lower castes”, often dictating the code of conduct for them. This hierarchical structure and the brahmins have historically governed social and familial relationships, particularly limiting the freedoms of people born into the “lower caste” and women.

The caste system is often presented and popularised by people in power as a sacred system within revered religious Hindu texts; these texts endorse caste as a means to preserve familial honour and maintain social propriety. They speak directly about the intersection of caste and gender, and there would be corruption of domestic as well as societal honour through sexual propriety if the women stray, or men interact with lower caste women, implying that regulating women’s sexuality is essential to preserving caste purity.

The women of the family become corrupted, and when women are corrupted, confusion of castes arises. And to hell does this confusion bring the family itself as well as those who have destroyed it. (Bayly 1999, 13-14)

This connection between caste order and purity through tradition and ritual permeated Indian consciousness, shaping beliefs about honour, in turn leading to the popularisation of maintaining rigid social codes. Over time, there have been persistent objections and protests throughout the nation against caste-based discrimination. Individuals who challenge the notion of caste as a natural or divinely sanctioned order have voiced how the system is not only unjust but also laden with malice and prejudice; such resistance has taken place at both local and national levels.

One of the most outspoken critics of the caste system was Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891- 1956), an intellectual and social reformer who was born *Dalit* and devoted his life to confronting caste-based oppression. Throughout his life, he argued that caste was more than just a social convention; it was a deeply ingrained “principle of graded inequality” that influenced the moral, spiritual, and legal structures of Indian society (Ambedkar 2002, 84). According to him, the problem lies not with individuals but with the religious doctrines that justify caste hierarchy.

One text that explores the injustice and prejudices that religion perpetuates is U.R. Ananthamurthy's (Indian writer and critic) *Samskara*. Through this paper, I hope to present how *Samskara* holds a mirror to Indian society by showcasing female characters who resist, subvert and reject ideas of femininity, laws and limitations imposed upon them in a patriarchal setup in the name of ritual, purity and caste. Under Brahmin patriarchy, women face intensified control, with Brahmin men often enforcing rules regarding marriage as well as regulating female sexuality. Women's bodies in Brahminical societies often symbolise impurity, rendering them primary targets of caste-based codes of purity and morality. I hope to explore how women become a tool to critique the hypocrisy of the *Brahmin* society and what it means to be a liberated woman in a society that looks to control women and maintain a binary.

SAMSKARA: A RITE FOR A DEAD MAN

U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) is often regarded as a landmark in Indian literature. It was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan in 1976. The novel explores the societal standings and relationships of people residing in a Brahmin community in the fictional village, Saraswathipura, located in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. The narrative revolves around Praneshacharya (a well-revered Brahmin man who often acts as judge of morality for the town), who, throughout the novel, undergoes a journey of self-discovery that shatters his belief systems and teaches him about the society he lives in. Through the experiences of Praneshacharya, *Samskara* offers a critique of Brahmin orthodoxy, its hypocrisy and examines the costs of rigid and blind adherence to ritual and caste-based purity. The novel portrays a society, on the cusp of transition but still holding on to restrictive ideologies, without considering the impact of social hierarchies on marginalised identities.

Through this paper, I explore how, in this society, women, despite being marginalised and cast aside in society, play a role in changing society and become a means for the audience to question their values. Brahmin women in *Samskara* are depicted as asexual, and they are mostly stripped of individual subjectivity; their purpose is limited to maintaining the household's ritual and upholding the homosocial Brahminical order. I believe they are subjected to a lifestyle of ritualised labour, where their own bodily "impurities" are perceived as threats to their husbands' reputations and livelihoods. Here, Praneshacharya's wife, Bagirathi, often exemplifies this austerity and self-neglect; she is a symbol of Brahmin women, her existence is devoid of any personal agency or will, and her value is defined solely by her function in the patriarchal economy of purity, which is more ritualistic than a practice. I hope to explore this ritualised erasure of women's identities through Ananthamurthy's critique of Brahminical patriarchy, where dominance is maintained by men through exercising control over women's bodies and sexuality.

Ananthamurthy presents a contrast of this image of ascetic Brahmin women with libidinal lower-caste women in the narrative, particularly the character of Chandri, often described as a beautiful and sensual woman with whom Praneshacharya has a sexual encounter; this encounter is one of the main focuses of the paper.

GENDER AND HYPOCRISY OF THE BRAHMIN SOCIETY IN THE NOVEL

Through the character of Praneshacharya, a highly revered and well-educated Brahmin, Ananthamurthy exposes the deeply ingrained and disturbing practice of untouchability. Praneshacharya's hesitation to even speak with *Chandri*, the low-caste lover of the recently deceased Naranappa, because she is of a lower caste and he would have to take a bath again, reveals the strength of social stigma surrounding caste. His reaction when Chandri approaches him, needing help for Naranappa's funeral rites, epitomises the paradox

within his character. While being viewed and presented as highly learned and revered as a great man in society, he harbours hatred and critiques the women, especially Chandri, for their mere existence.

Additionally, the villagers' responses to Naranappa's death reveal the double standards and prejudices in their community; the peaceful nature that is called by religion is revealed to be a sham, a pretence. Naranappa, though excommunicated due to his lifestyle choices like his companionship with Chandri and having Muslim friendships, remains a Brahmin in their eyes until his passing, after which they doubt his caste altogether.

The real question is: Is he a Brahmin at all? What do you say? He slept regularly with a low-caste woman. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 5).

How could that be, Garuda? He threatened to become a Muslim. On the eleventh day of the moon, when every brahmin was fasting, he brought in Muslims to the *agrabara* and feasted them. He said, 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 Brahminism is into the mud. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 11).

Their words display the rigid rules of the community; they harshly condemn him in life, yet struggle to reconcile their conflicting responsibilities upon his death. This vacillation points to the social hypocrisy that permeates the Brahminical community, demonstrating their habit of moulding tradition around convenience rather than principle.

The text also sheds light on the injustice that lower caste women face. Chandri's marginalised position, solely due to her caste and gender, places her in the paradoxical role of both an outsider and a self-sacrificial figure. Tamil Dalit writer Bama Faustina explains the plight of a Dalit woman as double oppression:

All women in the world are second-class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered

dignified human beings... Dalit women have to put up with triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. (Limbale 2010, 116).

Despite the hatred directed at her, she exhibits greater compassion and responsibility than the Brahmin men by offering to sell her jewellery to fund Naranappa's funeral. Her actions highlight both her loyalty and her selflessness; however, her presence is neither valued nor is she ever treated with respect within the Brahmin society. This contradiction echoes the novel's overarching critique of caste and gender dynamics. In one scene, Praneshacharya, feeling helpless in the face of the community's indecisiveness, finds himself captivated by Chandri's beauty, which leads to a sexual encounter. Later, filled with remorse, he says,

Chandri, get up. Let us go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 68)

Throughout the text, Ananthamurthy also explores the destabilisation of caste and gender hierarchies through the actions of marginalised lower-caste female characters; their characters are more likely to transgress, and Chandri's sexual agency further unsettles established power structures. She transforms herself from an object of upper-caste male desire to a subject exerting her desires. By initiating a sexual encounter with Praneshacharya, Chandri disrupts traditional dynamics, positioning herself as a powerful figure within a system designed to suppress her. Praneshacharya's subsequent distress, according to me, reflects his internal struggle with losing his power to a marginalised woman.

Kelly Oliver (American philosopher) in *Subjectivity without Subject*, suggests that "women can resist constituted social practices" This questions the idea that people's roles and identities are naturally fixed. According to Oliver, there is "immanent resistance" within the constantly changing and unpredictable flow of power in any dominant system. This creates opportunities for marginalised women to assert their agency and influence (Oliver 1998, 114).

U.R. Ananthamurthy's depiction of Brahminical patriarchy's double standards is further exemplified through the character Shripati and his interactions with Beli, a lower-caste woman. I viewed Shripati's attraction to Beli as an interplay of desire, objectification, and social prejudice. His remarks comparing Beli's beauty to that of Brahmin women reveal a resentment and a stark dichotomy: while he outwardly upholds the values of ritual purity and caste hierarchy, he privately fetishises lower-caste women as objects of forbidden desire. This dynamic exposes not only Shripati's hypocrisy but also the broader moral inconsistency within Brahminical society observed in the case of Praneshacharya.

Shripati's treatment of Beli reflects how these norms are selectively upheld and easily circumvented by men seeking to exercise control over marginalised women. While he seeks her physical affection, he does not grant her any worth or respect beyond their intimate encounters. This reduction of Beli's existence to a mere object of desire underscores the Brahminical society's pervasive dehumanisation of lower-caste women, framing them as simultaneously alluring and unworthy of a "respectable" place in society. This ties into Bell Hooks' (1952- 2021) critique of the fetishisation of the "other" in dominant hegemonic cultures². She writes:

Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (Hooks 1992, 21)

In this context, lower-caste women like Beli are fetishised as exotic and exciting diversions within a restrictive, hypocritical social structure that conceals its exploitative tendencies beneath a façade of purity and restraint.

The text informs the audience of Naranappa's life despite his passing away, and the reader learns that his life choices serve as a direct challenge to these Brahminical norms. His transgression of traditional boundaries, especially his relationships with people of other castes, works as a way to undermine the exclusivity and rigidity upheld by Brahminical norms. Naranappa's association with

Chandri, a non-Brahmin, is a rebellion against a social order that prescribes strict codes of purity and hierarchy. His rejection of Brahmin values, however, contrasts sharply with the community's need for structure and looking down on women of other castes, as the same Brahmin men who condemn him secretly harbour desires for lower-caste women, thereby exposing a morally corrupt double standard.

Through these characters and relationships, *Samskara* offers an unflinching critique of Brahmin hypocrisy. The supposed moral and spiritual superiority that Brahmin men claim over the flower caste women crumbles when tested by moral choices, exposing a community that uses tradition to mask its failings. I believe that the text's exploration of Brahmins' caste-based discrimination reveals an entrenched system of insecurity that exploits lower-caste individuals while hypocritically preserving an image of purity and piety.

CONCLUSION

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man depicts the deep-rooted hypocrisy of Brahminical society. Through characters like Praneshacharya and Shripati, Ananthamurthy highlights the contradictions inherent in the Brahminical order, and the ideals of purity and self-restraint are often violated by the people who claim to uphold them. The treatment of women, especially lower-caste women like Chandri and Beli, exposes the prejudices and fetishised objectification that persist within this system. These women, despite being marginalised and oppressed, assert their agency in ways that challenge the rigid social structures.

Ananthamurthy presents the text as a vehicle to question the validity of caste-based hierarchies and to call attention to the moral and spiritual decay that accompanies blind adherence to tradition. The novel encourages readers to reflect on the consequences of

such systems, urging them to confront the oppressive dynamics that continue to shape Indian society.

END NOTES

1. Popularly recognised as Hinduism today.
2. Similar to hooks' observation of white hegemony, I have presented the quote in the context of how Brahmin society in *Samskara* acts as the hegemonic force, setting societal norms. Shripati's desire to "liven up" by expressing disinterest in women of his caste and seeking out lower-caste women reflects his defiance, but in doing so, he also fetishises the lower caste-women.

REFERENCES

Ananthamurthy, U.R. 1986. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. Translated by A. K. Ramanujan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merriam-Webster. "Caste, n. (1)." Accessed April 24, 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caste>.

Ambedkar, B.R. 2002. "Caste in India." In *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, edited by Ghanashyam Shah. Permanent Black.

Bayly, Susan. 1999. *The New Cambridge History of India*, IV, 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Limbale S. 2010. *Towards an aesthetics of dalit literature: history, controversies, and considerations*. Trans. A. Mukherjee. Orient Black Swan.

Hooks, Bell. 1992. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 21. Boston: South End Press.

Oliver, Kelly. 1998. *Subjectivity without Subjects*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.