

Remembering Anantha Murthy : The Doyen of Indian Fiction by Ramlal Agarwal

Abstract

Murthy's *Samskara* is not a novel in the Western sense of the term. There is no art, no design, no point of you, no intellectual hair-splitting. It depicts simple people bound by tradition and circumstance and yet whatever happens to them is so very touching.

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Anantha Murthy's comments on Narendra Modi displeased some and they made an issue of it. Earlier, his classic *Samskara* flared up a controversy along caste-lines and deflected the attention of the readers from its literary merits.

In fact, *Samskara* is a very subtle and open-ended novel which can be read in more ways than one. It is not a novel in the Western sense of the term. There is no art. There is no design. There is no manoeuvring. There is no point of view. It is a story of simple people. Some of them are committed to the rulebook. Some stray away from it and some have no rules at all. All are totally conditioned by tradition and circumstance. However, a minor crisis jolts them out of their complacency and shoves them to face the world anew. A dead body does it all.

The title word *Samskara* is very commonly used in Hindu society. *Samskaras* are a rigid form of rites conducted for the initiation of men from childhood onwards to pursue a particular line of thought or set of principles and the one who has undergone these rites is not supposed to stray from the path he is committed to. There are rites for children, for adults, for old men and the dead too. There are set

rules of performing these rites prescribed by the Hindu Sastras. Any violation of their procedure and purpose results in social boycott and ostracization. Though the whole Hindu society is bound in varying degrees by rites, their hold is vice-like on upper-caste Hindus especially Brahmins. It is in this context the novel is set.

Praneshacharya, head of an *Aqrahara* or a commune. He has undergone/imbibed all the *Samskaras* prescribed for a Brahmin. He wakes up early in the morning, takes cold bath, tends his sapless wife, performs *sandhya* and *hawan*, partakes simple food and reads Shastras. There is nothing beyond Shstras for him. He is invested with title of "The Crest Jewel of Vedanata" However, all is not well at the commune. A Brahmin called Naranappa flouts the rules of the community. He has relationship with an outcast woman called Chandri. He attends orgies, he drinks and eats meat. The Brahmins in the commune are horrified by his wayward behavior and are helpless to rein him in. There was no inquisition and he was not excommunicated. It so happen, that the plague breaks out at the commune and Naranappa is found dead in his room.

Naranappa had no son and hence the question of performing his last rites becomes a major issue. The Brahmins find themselves in a dilemma. Naranappa was a Brahmin and not a Brahmin. He was a Brahmin by birth and not excommunicated. He was not a Brahmin because he did not live by the code. The Brahmins were worried because if they performed his last rites, their rich patrons may boycott them from their feasts. Moreover, they cannot take food as long as the dead body is not disposed of. So, they approach Praneshacharya for guidance. Praneshacharya spends the whole night turning the pages of the rulebooks but finds no answer. Therefore, he decides to leave the matter to the Gods. He places a flower on either side of the statue of Lord Hanuman and presumes that if the flower from the right side falls, the Lord gives his consent to the Brahmins to cremate the body and if the flower falls from the left side, the Lord denies his consent. Whole day he waits for the signal but gets none. Late in the evening, tired and frustrated, he decides to return home. On his way he meets Chandri. Chandri goes close to him to touch his

feet and Praneshacharya's hand inadvertently touches her breast and his long suppressed desire flares up and they make love. Back home, Praneshacharya finds himself at a dead end and leaves the commune. While Brahmins are fretting and fuming without any solution, Chandri sells her jewelry and cremates the body. Out in the open, Praneshacharya stands in queues along with beggars for free food. He even takes up accommodation with an untouchable whore and urchins and eunuchs give him company. He realizes that his degradation is complete and wants to confess his sins to the Brahmins at the commune. He even hops into a cart heading towards the commune. The novel ends without telling us whether he really does so.

Samskara can be read as a sad story of the fall from grace of a rare soul. It can also be read as a scathing attack on the intellectual bankruptcy and barrenness of an old order. It can also be read as a naturalist realist presentation of human condition. And it can also be read as a celebration of touching nobility of an untouchable.

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