

An Overview on Samskara by U.R. Ananthamurthy

LALRINCHHANA
Mizoram University

Abstract- U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara (1965) is a landmark in modern Kannada literature and Indian literary modernism. Written while he was a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham, the work became an iconic text for the "Navya" (modernist) novella tradition in Kannada and has since been globally recognized through its English translation as A Rite for a Dead Man (U. R. Ananthamurthy, The Hindu).

I. INTRODUCTION

Set in a Brahmin agrahara in the 1930s–40s, likely in Karnataka's Malnad region, the novel interrogates the rigidity of Brahmin orthodoxy and the crisis of ritual, caste, and spiritual authority arising from internal contradictions in tradition (The Nation). Ananthamurthy was influenced by Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, particularly its meditation on plague, death, and existential doubt; under advice of his mentor Malcolm Bradbury, he wrote *Samskara* over four intense days (This Moment in Time).

Its impact was multidimensional: critically lauded for its bold engagement with caste, ritual hypocrisy, and moral complexity, it also invited controversy among conservative Brahmin groups who saw it as a scathing attack on their traditions (The Nation). The 1970 Kannada film adaptation, written by Ananthamurthy and directed by Pattabhirama Reddy, was initially banned for its anti-caste message, only to win the National Film Award for Best Feature Film once released (Wikipedia).

II. PLOT OVERVIEW

The novel opens with the death of Naranappa, a Brahmin who had systematically violated caste and religious norms—drinking, eating meat, living with a low-caste woman named Chandri, and defying his caste identity (The Nation). His unexpected death triggers a moral and legal chaos: being a Brahmin, only another Brahmin can perform his funeral rites, yet

none are willing, not least because he was not excommunicated in life (The Nation).

The community turns to Praneshacharya, their head priest—a model of orthodoxy—who now faces a paradox: adherence to dharma demands performing the rites, but doing so means touching a man deemed impure. With the corpse decaying in the agrahara, communal life grinds to a halt—no worship, food, or purification rites can occur until the body is disposed of (The Nation).

Praneshacharya's search for someone to perform the rites leads him beyond the agrahara. He encounters Putta, a riddle-telling commoner immersed in the coarse life of fairs, cock-fights, prostitutes, and markets. Under Putta's informal tutelage, the Acharya explores the sensual, ordinary world he had long condemned (All About English Literature).

A turning point occurs when Praneshacharya unexpectedly sleeps with Chandri. He experiences intense shame, seeing himself as embodiment of sin, and flees. By the end, he resolves to return to the agrahara and accept responsibility—but his journey has fundamentally transformed him (This Moment in Time, The Hindu).

III. CHARACTERS & SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE

Naranappa

He embodies apostasy and the embodied rejection of orthodoxy. He lives openly with a lower-caste woman, eats meat, drinks, socializes with Muslims—all casting him as the anti-Brahmin archetype. Yet he defies his own death; even the community refuses to bury him due to fear and impurity (The Nation, kr.cup.edu.in). Symbolically, he represents prakriti, the materialist, sensual, disruptive force in contrast to rigid tradition (SAGE Journals).

Praneshacharya

The village's ideological core, Praneshacharya initially is the epitome of Vedic Brahmin virtue: celibate, scholarly, ritual-obsessed, married for penance to a disabled wife to attain moksha ([IvyPanda](#)). But the crisis of Naranappa's death forces him into existential self-questioning: the distinction between outer fidelity and inner vitality collapses. His journey constitutes a *samskara*—a rite of transformation—not imposed ritual but spiritual rebirth (All About English Literature).

Chandri

Though of lower caste, she is depicted not as a passive victim but a force of aesthetic and sensual agency. Her beauty and erotic presence destabilize the *agrahara*. Scholars like Sharon Pillai argue that while gender politics in the novel are subtextual, Chandri represents a possible positive disruption to Brahmin patriarchy: she is aesthetic labor and initiative, though the text also critiques her objectification (SAGE Journals).

Putta

He symbolizes the unrefined, untutored life of *prakriti* in its raw state. His world offers Praneshacharya a counterpoint to sterile orthodoxy: fairs, markets, gambling, sexual vitality, cheap food. Through Putta, the Acharya begins a personal ritual of letting go—of caste, shame, and self-containment—and entering the messy realm of lived experience (All About English Literature).

Other Brahmins (like Garuda, Lakshmana, Dasacharya, Durgabhatta) function as allegories for inertia, hypocrisy, hidden desire, or profit-minded religiosity. When the *agrahara* starves because rites are suspended, Dasacharya laments loss of free meals; Durgabhatta lusts after Chandri behind closed doors—both symbols of systemic decay ([asymptotejournal.com](#), [IvyPanda](#)).

IV. THEMES & PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS

Ritual, Caste and Orthodoxy

At its core, *Samskara* interrogates the meaning of rituals when their underlying moral and spiritual

authority erodes. The Brahmin community is bound by *samskaras*—both outer rites and inner refinement—but finds itself incapable of upholding them. Naranappa's death accentuates how lifeless ritual becomes when divorced from empathy and authenticity (All About English Literature, All About English Literature).

This crisis also displays the caste hypocrisy: Brahmin identity depends on purity, but is unsustainable in practice. While Naranappa lived openly immorally, the community that pretends virtue is revealed as complicit and cowardly. The standoff over funeral rites symbolizes caste paralysis: obedience to tradition paralyzes humanity itself (The Nation, [asymptotejournal.com](#)).

Samskara as Transformation

The Sanskrit term *samskara* denotes purification rituals, mental impressions, conditioning, and rites of passage. In the novel, these meanings are layered: ritual rite (funeral), inner transformation (Praneshacharya's spiritual crisis), and preparation for a new awareness (All About English Literature, Wikipedia). The funeral dilemma triggers a deeper transformation: the protagonist confronts mortality, sin, desire, and faith.

Existential Conflict & Self-Authenticity

The Acharya's arc aligns with existential themes: his fear, doubt, and ultimate decision to embrace lived experience reflect an existential quest for authenticity. He moves from scripted orthodoxy to individual responsibility, recognizing the inadequacy of rote ritual without inner engagement (All About English Literature).

Within the existential frame, Naranappa is the id-figure, Praneshacharya the superego, Putta the id without restriction. The dialectic among them unfolds into a crisis of self: religious identity, social obligation, personal desire, and mortality collide. The novel suggests that self-transformation comes not from tradition but from confronting rupture and embracing paradox.

Materialism vs Spiritualism

Naranappa's life reflects Charvaka philosophy—atheism, sensualism, skepticism, rejection of ritual and religion. In contrast, Praneshacharya embodies Vedantic spirituality and dharma orientation. The conflict mirrors a larger philosophical tension between rational materialism and hierarchical spiritualism in Indian thought (kr.cup.edu.in).

Ananthamurthy does not wholly endorse either extreme but dramatizes their conflict to expose the limits of both. Violating caste through contact with Chandri opens space for compassion; enduring assimilation into Brahminism reveals hypocrisy. The ultimate resolution points neither to full renunciation nor full indulgence but to a nuanced transformation.

Symbolism, Allegory & Imagery

The novel is rich in symbolic structure. As interpreted by Vishnu Kumar, Praneshacharya symbolizes orthodox Brahmin tradition; Naranappa represents apostasy; Putta incarnates unrefined prakriti. The corpse, rotting in the agrahara, mirrors the rotting moral core of the community (This Moment in Time, thecreativelauncher.com).

Imagery such as cock-fights, temple fairs, pawnshops, prostitutes, rats and vultures among the corpse—these create an allegorical tapestry of decay, desire, conflict between order and chaos. The visual world of Putta's crowd is emphatically different from the spiritual stillness of the Brahmin enclave—a tension that provokes Praneshacharya's inner rupture (All About English Literature, This Moment in Time).

Gender & Feminist Perspectives

While gender is not foregrounded, feminist critics like Sharon Pillai highlight that Chandri, as a lower-caste woman, is depicted with both objectification and agency. The Brahmin men's obsession with her beauty and desire reveals a gendered hypocrisy: their public piety contrasts with private lust. Chandri's aesthetic agency is acknowledged but not fully emancipated (SAGE Journals).

Naranappa's sexual relationship with Chandri is transgressive, violating caste and gender taboos. But Chandri also initiates action—she delivers news of

Naranappa's death to the village when no Brahmin acts immediately, asserting agency in absence of institutional courage (asymptotejournal.com).

Praneshacharya's sexual liaison with Chandri is complex: morally taboo, traumatic, transformational. He experiences intense guilt ("I am sin...my birth is in sin")—a self-accusation that merges caste impurity, gender violation, and existential collapse (This Moment in Time). His shame points to deeper social anxieties about caste-crossing intimacy.

Feminist readings might critique the text for using Chandri as catalyst for the Acharya's transformation, rather than centering her subjectivity. Yet others argue her presence destabilizes patriarchal and caste hierarchies, making her essential to a narrative of radical spiritual transformation.

Reception & Critical Interpretations

Since its publication, *Samskara* has inspired a vast body of criticism, interpretation, and debate. Scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul, and Eric Erickson have discussed its modernist and socio-political resonance. It consolidated the Kannada Navya movement and became an icon of Kannada literature globally (The Hindu).

Academic studies include examination of gender (Sharon Pillai's work highlighting subtextual gender politics) (SAGE Journals); symbolism and allegory (Vishnu Kumar, focusing on imagery and mythic structure) (thecreativelauncher.com); philosophical reading in the context of Charvaka materialism versus spiritualism (Yashpal's MPhil thesis) (kr.cup.edu.in); existential and postcolonial readings (analyzing Praneshacharya's quest for authenticity) (All About English Literature).

The American magazine *The Nation* praised the novel's capacity to evoke pre-modern social consciousness, likening its structure to García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, with cinematic shifting points of view across villagers, presenting a mosaic of collective inertia and moral paralysis (The Nation).

In South India, especially among conservative Brahmin groups, the novel was criticized as

scandalous, for its frank depiction of lust, caste-crossing sexual relations, and ritual failure. But ultimately, it gained canonical status and continues to be taught and debated widely (The Hindu, U. R. Ananthamurthy).

Comparative & Broader Significance

Within Indian literature, *Samskara* can be compared to other caste-critiquing novels such as Bhyrappa's *Vamshavriksha* (1965), though Bhyrappa's narrative emphasized renunciation rather than conflict. While both were published the same year, they represent divergent philosophical trajectories—renunciation vs immersion (The Hindu).

In world literature, parallels can be drawn to existential plague narratives like *The Seventh Seal* and *Death in Venice*, where mortality precipitates self-examination. The novel's structural resemblance to García Márquez suggests a globalized literary sensibility merged with local Kannada context (The Nation, U. R. Ananthamurthy).

Samskara remains powerful for its continuing relevance: caste debates, ritual rigidity, gender inequality, moral hypocrisy, and identity crises are still live issues in contemporary India. Its compact form, rigorous allegory, and existential intensity make it ideal for both literary study and social commentary.

CONCLUSION & REFLECTION

Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* offers a layered, multifaceted exploration of ritual, caste, authority, and individual transformation. Through its allegorical structure and vivid social tableau, it critiques communal conformity, moral paralysis, and spiritual emptiness. The conflicting figures of Naranappa, Praneshacharya, Chandri, and Putta map onto philosophical tensions between material and spiritual, tradition and authenticity, caste and desire.

Its thematic density emerges from the layered meanings of its title: purification and transformation (both ritual and interior), death rites and renewal, remembrance and judgment. Praneshacharya's journey—from orthodoxy to crisis, from denial to acceptance—mirrors a cultural *samskara*: a confrontation with death, sin, and the refuse of

tradition, leading not to nihilism but to a new form of engagement.

As a research subject, *Samskara* rewards enquiry across disciplines: literature and mythology, philosophy, gender studies, caste studies, and post-colonial critique. Its continuing inclusions in academic syllabi and translation into multiple languages attest to its global resonance.

In sum, *Samskara* is not just a novel about a Brahmin corpse; it is a novel about the living corpse that tradition becomes when inner substance atrophies. And it proposes that true ritual is not performed through rites alone but through responsibility, introspection, and transformation.

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