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Individual versus Communal Morality in U.R. Anantmoorthy's *Samskara*

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Two things fill my heart with constantly renewed and
Gripping wonder and awe, the more often and more intently
my thought focuses on them : the starry heaven overhead and
the moral principle within.

- Kant (qtd. in Puri 85)

In every age and every epoch, there have lived men and women who conformed to the dictates of the social authorities. Such people tried to uphold the rules which the authorities- whether legal or religious – set for them. However, time and again in the annals of time, mankind has also witnessed the lives of those few who have tried to live upholding their inner truth, in the course violating the codes of the society. Repeatedly, they have been called heretics, lunatics, criminals and offenders of the law. Such adherents of the inner truth chose not to be hypocritical, and attached greater value to their integrity instead of maintaining an outer veneer of respectability and honour.

Philosophers and thinkers have defined morality in various ways over the centuries. However, none can actually give a single point of view with regard to moral behavior. The first perspective considers that thing or behavior to be moral which the community sanctions. Breaking of these standards by the members of the society incurs the hostility of the people at large. These rules have their foundation in religion, economics, politics and also the power structures of the society. The second dimension of morality takes into consideration the individual's point of view. Here, morality is determined by the conscience of the individual and not the dictates of the society. The voice of the conscience is given foremost importance with even personal advantages and disadvantages not given any regard. The paper adopts the stance that individual morality is a superior and a higher value as compared to communal morality. G. Wallace and A.D.M. Walker in *The Definition Of Morality* (1970) assert that it is quite possible that while the members of the society follow the commandments of the societal authorities, they may not be conscientious individuals. Also it is possible for a community with lesser rigid social and moral confines consists of greater moral individuals. The stance adopted in the paper draws on the idea that strict and rigid moral laws of a society may lead to hypocritical behavior within a society, leading greater amount of hidden deviant behaviour.

Lionel Trilling equates individual morality with the word sincerity. He gives an account of Professor Henri Peyre, who in his *Literature and Sincerity*, writes that sincerity is primarily a French concept and in French literature, sincerity is being what one is really before oneself and others. Being true to oneself is also deeply connected with the 'being' of a person. This is what Trilling calls 'authenticity' and he is of the

opinion that the claims of the society on the individuals destroy this authenticity. In his analysis of the last part of Wordsworth's 'Michael' (1800), Trilling explicates on the idea of authenticity – to be oneself. In the last lines of the poem we see Michael, who has lost his son, building he sheepfold that was left incomplete by his son. His neighbours say that sometimes he just sits without doing anything and does not express anything. Thus, this becoming one of him and his sadness, according to Trilling connotes authenticity. The idea of upholding one's inner truth is in synchronization with individualism and against absolutism. Pepita Hazra observes that "there is something immoral in the very notion of an absolute value or end, an absolute ideal, inasmuch as it ultimately denies our freedom of choice"(61).

Morality as a social code and convention is usually determined by two authorities – religious and the legal. The legal is more often than not contingent upon the religious because morality is primarily associated with the soul, which is a concern of the soul. However, the moral directions given by such authorities deal with the 'ought' rather than the 'is' of human behavior. Often, as George F. McLean opines, things are not forbidden because they are bad, but they are bad because they are forbidden. Hence, morality becomes "arbitrary" and "authoritarian"(215). Also, the basis of most moral rules is the apprehension of coerciveness associated with them. People carry out such behavior due to fear and in such a case, "an action has no moral value at all if it is the product of constraint resulting from fear alone (Fries 204-5). Added to this,

The morality of the public life can only be utilitarian; All and everyone becomes a means for profit and power. Morality done in these terms becomes the radically immoral reduction and abuse of the human person who in truth is the image of God (McLean 217).

It is in light of such ideas championing the morality of the individual that the paper seeks to analyze U.R. Ananthmoorthy's novel *Samskara*. The study primarily deals with the sexual transgression in the novel trying to bring to fore the idea that the protagonist Praneshacharya is an individual who exhibits individual morality flouting the tenets of communal morality. In his commitment towards individual morality he would rather leave a place where he is greatly revered to wander in anonymity. Transgression in the present context can be most appropriately defined in the words of Bataille, "the prophet of transgression"(Jenks 88). For him, transgression meant an "inner experience" in which an individual went beyond the rational behavior, which pertained to "profit, productivity or self-preservation"(Suleiman 75).

Ananthmoorthy's *Samskara* is seen as a vicious indictment of the orthodoxy of the rigid brahminical system. However, another perspective that pervades beyond this one and adds to the depth of the novel is the issue of the conflict between the flesh and the soul. The novel puts forth the challenges faced by the aspiring ascetic Praneshacharya who tries to rise above his bodily fetters. However, in a deluge of unforeseen circumstances, he is carried away from his spiritual practices, to explore grave questions about life and its meaning. It is not only the sexual act itself that threatens Praneshacharya's *stapas* but also the fact that it is an act of transgression.

Praneshacharya, the 'crest-jewel of Vedanta' is a revered leader of a Brahmin community. He is engaged in serious spiritual endeavours to achieve that which he desires most – salvation. A great scholar of the community his life is full of outstanding achievements both professionally and personally.

He knows all about alliances and misalliances, has studied it all in Kashi

, he knows all the scriptures, earned the title Crest-Jewel of Vedic learning...our Acharya has won all sorts of argumnets with all the super-pundits, your and ours, won honours of every seat of learning in the South, fifteen lace shawls and silver platters (*Samskara*6).

Personally too he seeks no pleasure from his wife as he deliberately married an invalid woman, unable to give him any pleasure or children. This selfless service of his wife is another austerity that he pursues in order to strengthen his claim to salvation.

Living with the boundaries of the *agrahara*, Praneshacharya is largely distinguished from other Brahmins of the *agrahara* is his compassionate and austere nature. His life is forever caught in the denial mode where he chooses a life of celibacy and chastity in spite of being an expert narrator of erotic descriptions of the Puranas. It is important to take note of the fact here that Praneshacharya's strict discipline and self-restraint is not baseless. Celibacy was of prime value in the one's education and realization of life in the Vedic culture. For a student of Vedanta *brahamcharyawas* a regulation which promised great spiritual benefits. As Carl Olson opines, "The classical Hindu attitude towards celibacy is captured nicely in the *ApastambaDharmasutra*, where it affirms that those practicing celibacy attain immortality and acquire superhuman powers on earth"(Olson 14). In *Sacred and Profane: Dimensions of love as exemplified in the Gitagovind of Jayadev*. Lee Siegel writes that Vatsyayana composed the Kamasutra only after observing strict celibacy. As Siegel elucidates, passionlessness remained the goal even in the sexual science, the art and science of love had to applied with restraint, with the senses under control(*Jitendriyah*), never with excessive passion (*atiraga*).Also sexual behaviour is seen by Vatsyayana as a means to forward other aims of life, not as an act in itself. Moreover, his fidelity to the cause of celibacy was consolidated after he witnesses the fall of his friend Mahabala who got lured by the pleasures of the flesh while he was still studying.

Praneshacharya's association and commitment towards asceticism is untouched with any experience of the *samsara*. However, struggling with the scriptures to derive an answer about the cremation of Naranappa, he undergoes an experience that challenges all his austerity and scholasticism. All his life trying to oppose Narannappa's hedonistic way of living, Praneshacharya, suddenly after a sexual encounter (ironically with Narannappa's concubine) is shaken and pulled into a vortex of conflicting emotions. Involved in deep austerity, hungry to please god Maruti, he unites with Chandri

His body's tigerish lust, talking on a form of pity and compassion, tamed by a righteousness, which had brought him this far – it could be nothing else. At the touch of Chandri's...the animal leaped to its natural self and bared its teeth(*Samskara* 81).

Sura P. Rath highlights the effect of this encounter on Praneshacharya, seeing Chandri as the agent of destiny who opens the door of newer revelations to him.

She punctuates his blindness towards his repressed desires, in the process bringing him an insight he was incapable of on his own... he learns what

Naranappa knew all along, that breaking social taboos and challenging communal superstitions does not lead to all hell breaking loose upon the violator, that fear is often a culture's tool of repression (Baral 107).

Praneshacharya represented in the *agrahara* the orthodox form of brahminism in its concentrated form. He was the only one who practiced such great austerity in Durvasapur, otherwise populated by lustful, greedy and gluttonous Brahmins. However, it is this new experience now that consumes his loyalty to the cause of salvation. At the pinnacle of his life as a scholar and as an aspirant of salvation he realizes the void in his life, a sense of lack which, when fulfilled has a rejuvenating effect on him. Being bound by duty his whole life, Rath asserts, he discovers the pleasures of spontaneity.

This act of his can be seen as a transgression in various ways. Firstly, it is an act of transgression as a married man and secondly because he the 'Crest –jewel of Vedanta' has slept with a low-class, meat-eating prostitute. However, for Praneshacharya this act brings release from a self-imposed asceticism. Like the prison house of *The Scarlet Letter*, Praneshacharya is caught in the prison-house of the *agrahara*, with its redundant and constraining Brahminical system. But here also like the rose bush in Hawthorne's novel, there is the night-queen, which symbolizes the fragrance of nature as opposed to the society. Earlier detached and dispassionate, now the acharya wants a share of every pleasure for himself. Now he is no longer the epitome of purity, chastity and virtuosity, as now he has the desire to "tell lies, to hide things, to think of one's own welfare", wanting to live fearlessly and openly like Naranappa. He is unable to resolve this dilemma till the end. However, Praneshacharya's morality is proved by the fact that he soon becomes aware of the battle waged on the arena of his mind. Mukherjee says about this combat,

During his introspection a Sanskrit verse about man's sinfulness comes to his mind. He rejects because he does not think that what he has done is sinful. Readymade words and verses will not do for him anymore, yet this desire to free himself from self-deception conflicts with his inability to tell the truth to the community (Baral 91).

Praneshacharya now falls in the category of a transgressor who is right by himself but would be labeled a sinner by the community. His behavior is also not totally outrageous to the readers because the *agrahara* is populated by hypocritical Brahmins who indulge in same transgressive behavior with prostitutes or lower-caste women. Hence, to the readers as well as to Praneshacharya himself the question that assumes colossal dimensions is as to what is moral and what is immoral.

Praneshacharya now wishes to free himself from his duties and obligations to the community as deceiving the other Brahmins would be against his inner truth. Not wanting to do so he chooses to walk away. He, in order to be moral prepares himself for the scourge of infamy and humiliation. He wishes to confess before the whole *agrahara* that their much-revered leader is also an ordinary human being, driven by inner desires.

Chandri, get up. Let's go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself. As for my authority to decide for the *agrahara*, I have ...lost it. I'm ready to do the funeral rites for myself.

I've no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that's all (Samaskara 68).

This need to be true to his self is so ardent that he realizes that the Brahminism he upheld till now was only the outer layer- this layer, now striped off, makes him search for his true self. Now, as S. Nagarajan observes, he feels, "as if Brahminism were per se an excrescent super-imposition on his personal existence." The word *samskara* also means reformatory method, and hence it reforms the protagonist's outlook towards himself and the world. Compared to his fellow Brahmins, he is at least ready to confess his deeds. He acknowledges that his morality consists of his inner truth which he cannot ignore. He knows he has done an act, gained unprecedented pleasure and he wants to own up his mistake totally aware of its immensity. He, one who preached staunch austerity, was ashamed to acknowledge before everybody that he had also experienced the pleasures, which Naranappa relished. However, he could not gather enough courage to reveal before the community that their venerable religious leader has indulged in guilty pleasure. He wondered if it was "pity, self-preservation, habit, inertia, sheer hypocrisy?" and finds the answer that "even if he had left desire, desire had not left him".

Hinduism insists that a human being must go through all the four ashramas in order to attain *moksha*- *brahmacharya*, *grihasta*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*. However, in Praneshacharya's life we see the desire to pass from *brahmacharya* to the third stage, without experiencing pleasures of a householder and thus, this experience is lacking in his strivings for *moksha*. He is not beyond bodily pleasures; he has just not known what it means to have sexual pleasure. Thus, his denial is more of a wish to please himself rather than being a wholehearted giving up of pleasures. Siegel cites John Woodroffe, who in his study of the Mahanirvana Tantra, sheds light on how *bhoga* opposed to asceticism can also pave a way towards spiritual upliftment. He was against the view that *yoga* only liberates while *bhoga* only ensnares. He mentioned the Bengal *Sakta* worshippers who regarded that body can also facilitate and need not be a stumbling block in the way to attain *moksha*. Natural functions are not anti-thetical to spiritual endeavours. Thus, one can conquer them by experiencing them. The heroic man, Woodroffe opines is one who does not turn his face away from the worldly pleasure but one who experiences and moves ahead with the desire fulfilled.

As Praneshacharya returns to the *agrahara*, he leaves the task of revealing his newfound experience before the whole community to Chandri, who, in turn, leaves the village. Praneshacharya cannot bear the burden of this secret guilt and leaves Durvasapur too to find answers to his dilemmas. He cannot bear to act with the veneer of respectability and deceive the people. Though none remains in the village who knows of Praneshacharya, yet he stands by his individual morality and chooses to discover the solution to his predicament – to give any importance to his experience to Chandri or to revert his commitment to Brahminism.

But if I don't tell the *agrahara* Brahmins...I cannot escape fear. If I decide to live with Chandri without telling anyone, the decision is not complete, not fearless. I must now come to a final decision. All things indirect must become direct...But it is agony either way...Have I the authority to include another's life in my decision? The pain of it, the cowardice of it (*Samskara* 132).

It is imperative to note here that a fact that adds to Praneshacharya's morality is the fact that he does not adhere to either strict brahminism or sexual pleasure until he is convinced that he is fully submitting himself to the cause. The agonizing disharmony that he experiences within himself shows that he has the capacity to acknowledge that hidden guilt is not something he can carry within for long. Suresh Raval insists that he "never indulges in any kind of self-incrimination, never considers himself irredeemably lost and fallen"(Baral 120). His misery is motivated by a desire to find something moral and intellectual clarity and coherence,

When I tell them about myself, there should be no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner. If not, I cannot go beyond conflict and dualities...only the form we forge for ourselves in our innermost will is ours without question (*Samskara* 135).

He looks for a middle path, which can mediate between his tradition and experience.

The question as whether Praneshacharya is moral or not becomes all the more debatable in context of the community to which he belongs. V.S. Naipaul observes that Anantmoorthy knowingly or unknowingly describes a barbaric society that has lost appreciation of anything deeper and sensitive (Baral 79). It is primarily motivated by greed and materialism covered with the veneer of decadent Brahminism. Moreover, the decadence that pervades the village in the form of plague also characterizes the life-denying nature of the agrahara. Except for the act of transgression, nothing appears to be life-affirming. Hence, the act of transgression here assumes greater importance when contrasted with tradition and orthodoxy. In the course of his transgressive act, "the protagonist becomes something of a witness and a testifier to a kind of demythologization and deconstruction of that tradition..."(Baral125). This act of transgression also arouses some hope towards the foundation of a new community as Praneshacharya displays "a capacity for honesty and a commitment to values that imply a struggle for forging a relation between tradition and modernity"(Baral 125). It is also noteworthy how the so-called low caste prostitute Chandri is more sensible and morally superior compared to the avaricious Brahmins and their wives. This becomes evident in the detached manner in which Chandri gives her gold jewelry to Praneshacharya for cremation while all the Brahmin wives claim their share in it. Also, while it is Praneshacharya who embodies restraint and thoughtfulness, it is Naranappa and Chandri who have the capacity to act decisively, whatever their course of actions be. It is Chandri, a low-caste, uneducated woman who solves the problem that Pransacharya, 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. The biggest problem at the core of the novel is solved in the most ironic way and all the concern about '*samskara*'- the technicalities- is thrown to the winds.

After Praneshacharya leaves and tries to find a solution for himself, during his quest he finds that Putta and Chandri belong to a different world. This world is in *dvandva* with the rigid confines of orthodox Brahminism. Hence, the disorder of the world of instinct also finds no merit with Praneshacharya and his intrinsic morality forbids him from associating with this chaotic discovery. While he is at the temple, the conscientious person that he is, Praneshacharya is disturbed due to his fears. As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, he fears that he would pollute the other Brahmins. Secondly, he fears that if anyone recognizes the 'crest-jewel of Vedanta in a disgraceful state, he would hurt everyone leading to the cancellation of the chariot

festival. While he is still questioning whether he has any right to disturb the lives of so many people, someone recognizes him and flees away sensing danger to the whole affair. Still, he is uncertain of the solution to his dilemmas. He cannot decide if he should confess his deed and what should he live as after he also admits of sharing the same pleasure due to which Naranappa was declared an outcaste.

The study tries to affirm Praneshacharya's morality through it all raising various questions – Can the laws of community hold true for an exceptional case like his? Will the community label him as a sinner for the single time he gave way to his inner desires? And is the community (here consisting of lustful and lecherous Brahmins) at all entitled to call Praneshacharya a sinner? The analysis tries to reach a conclusion in light of statements given by particularists in ethics such as Jonathan Dancy who maintains that, “basic moral facts are contingent and not necessary, not universal in form.”(Puri 2). Thus, morality cannot be pinned down to a few commandments because it evolves in a struggle between reasons and inclinations. Moral laws do not stem totally from what the society upholds as the society may be fundamentally hypocritical, seen in the case of Durvasapur. It should rather be seen as stemming from an individual's sense of justice and conscientiousness. Praneshacharya's case is also endorsed by the words of XieDikun who cites Hegel's views on morality. Hegel was of the view that “morality is the reversion of the will to itself and something purely spiritual. For this reason morality is simply subjective and assumes no binding duty towards family, society and state...”(Puri90). Seeing in the context of these ideas one cannot doubt that the morality that is seen in Praneshacharya's life is commendable and upholds the voice of the conscience.

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