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Shades of Caste and Class and the Woman in *Samskara*

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Samskara by U R Anantha Murthy is a fine discussion on the caste and class structure of India. This paper will explore this class and caste structure through various women characters in the novel. It will decode the various forms of domination and hegemony by focussing on the women characters of the novel. The various dogmas that are associated with it are also being narrated. In order to do this various theories of domination and hegemony are also taken into account. The politics of the Agrahara has been taken into account for this explanation and in doing so the nature and artificiality of both men and women has been dealt with.

The nature of symbols has always been debated. It has been argued relentlessly whether they are signifiers or signified, or both. However, this paper is not actually concerned with their nature but its concern will move in the periphery exploring this and that of symbols and further it will talk about the nature of symbols on both ways. This paper will further deconstruct various myths that are associated with the symbols and it will be discussed in the light of philosophy of domination and internal psycho-hierarchy. The focus of the paper is to see how caste system in India has nourished them and what are the reasons that have led this caste system strengthen into enigmatic class system, if so. The paper will try to narrate this semiotics through women characters in the novel that will put a line in the definitions of caste and class system in India.

Samskara by U.R. Anantha Murthy, translated into English from Kannada by A.K. Ramanujan, is a novel about the people in a Agrahara, mainly of Brahmin caste, contemplating about the last rites of a dead man of Brahmin caste but who breached his caste limits during his life time. This is also the subtitle of the novel, *Rite for a Dead Man*. This contemplation is the turf of the whole novel which brings in many symbols of the caste system and class system; these symbols are mainly live in nature consisting of men and women. The paper will focus on the woman as symbols of various shades and complexions.

The women in the novel have been stratified finely by the author who displays his potential in exploring the nature of caste and class system in defining the identity and multi-fold pressure on them. Some are moulded into the system, some put resistance and others become the vehicle of it. Of course there is a limit of words both syntactically and semantically, and a due cognizance of this has been taken in

the novel. That is precisely why every woman character is the symbol not only of past or present but also of future. She represents her class, caste, nature of deeds which are defining her present and future. 'She' in the novel presents the whole behind her giving space to more and more criticism. For this, Arguing more systematically is the need of the paper which is being totally followed.

Firstly, there is Chandri, a low-caste woman who is lesser than wife of the dead man, Naranappa. She symbolizes all women of her caste and class. She is the most discussed character after Naranappa in the novel and also more critical. Since, she is from the class of prostitutes, thus categorising her as the member of lower caste. Everyone feels shame on her. She is not only untouchable to Brahmins but even invisible. A look of her will pollute the Brahmins. Everyone in the Agrahara looks down on her but behind the veil everyone is mad for her beauty and wants to possess her. Because she belongs to the lower caste, her understanding is permanently under question as if she is an immature. This is just a wrong belief because in the whole course of the novel she is the one who presents herself with more mature vision than anyone in the whole Agrahara, even than the authority, Acharya. But the class and caste structure make her so much underweight that "if the Acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bath again before his meal" (2). Her low-caste status would pollute the Brahmins by her presence. This finally makes her so much marginalized that her existence falls much below the level of human existence. Simultaneously this lowering is putting Brahmins on higher strata, and this could be argued that her untouchable categorisation puts a safety valve for the hegemony of Brahmins. After informing all Brahmins about Naranappa's death, she silently waits for their decision for the last rites which are being lead by Acharya, as he is the one who is well educated as Kashi and consequently has final authority in every matter because in Agrahara nothing is out of religion. Though she is of low caste, she is not different from Brahmins' wives. Though they often refer to Chandri as a "filthy whore" (8) and describe her as "provocative" (15), and though they consider her beneath them, she is in many ways more free than the Brahmin women because she is not tied down to duty of just an onlooker. The novel wonders, "How can sin defile a running river?" (44) And this is how Chandri approaches her life. The duties of the Brahmin wives do not apply to her. Chandri is the perfect woman. If she "luckily...wasn't wearing too much" (25), a man would be almost expected to have her – "no one could escape falling for that woman Chandri" (32) – at least according to Naranappa, who encouraged the whole Agrahara to give in to their desire, like he did with Chandri. A sharp contrast is drawn between their appearances, objectifying women on both sides, saying that "these Brahmin women, before they bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall – not hers" (45). This passage is essentially saying that the Brahmin

women weren't as good as Chandri because she was more beautiful, and "Naranappa had guzzled at her body like a ten year old" (45), and any other man could do the same. Chandri in many ways symbolizes domination, free exercise of desire and a kind of sense which is not only common but more practical according to the nature of world. She represents a woman who is very much conscious of her identity and for that she has the capacity to exert it in a way that is not possible for Brahmin wives.

Another woman in the novel is the wife of Putta who represents inter-caste theory in the novel; though this is not much different from untouchable even they are from Caste Hindu sect. According to *Manu Smriti* this inter caste relationship will naturally put the offenders in untouchable sect. Putta is the product of an inter-caste marriage, naturally an untouchable. He is part Brahmin, and part lower caste. He mentions occasionally that he is having problems with his wife, and that the solution to this is just to beat her. "My wife hasn't learned the lesson, despite the beating" (108), he tells Praneshacharya, seeking advice. The only problem with him is that his wife just wants to visit her parents because she loves them and her husband Putta does not want to bear the expenses of her journey. This shows that after marriage a woman cannot visit or love her parents. She has to lose every relationship and make herself only related to husband. He will decide her feelings and desires even though they are just and respectable. In Putta's wife the domination is only exerted by physical force but she rebels in the psycho-hierarchy form in her consciousness and this rebellion pushes Putta to beat her again and again.

There is also a child widow, Lakshmiddevamma, who has now become an old and lonely woman. Although she is a Brahmin he resides on the outskirts of the village. She represents another direction of the caste -class symbols combine. The passage describing her ill fate "married at eight, widowed at ten. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law had died when she was fifteen. The Agrahara had sneered at her" (42) – seems to imply that the people of the Agrahara believe that she was responsible for the deaths around her, that she had done something wrong, or that she was cursed somehow. She lives alone, and became "all venom" (43) when Garuda took everything from her. Though Praneshacharya talked to Garuda, but nothing was done to return the things that were taken from Lakshmiddevamma. There is clearly a prejudice against her in that town, and this maybe because she is a widow, or because she is a woman living alone, or both. She represents the very male form of hierarchy and domination of caste system where a woman even though belongs to the Brahmin caste cannot have her share in the village community. She has to live alone and behaves like an untouchable. The economic angle which is very clear her is that after her father, husband and in laws and since

she does not have any son, her property and belongings will fall into the hands of others.

The most fatal of all the women characters in the novel is Bhagivathi, the Acharya's wife, a symbol of Praneshacharya tapas or penance. According to Naranappa "His wife was always ill and he didn't know what it was to have pleasure with a woman" (24). Every day he takes care of her with a "routine that began with the bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, and medicines for his wife" (1) and he cares of her quite lovingly, "lifting his ailing wife with both hands like a baby" (35) when he has to move her. Praneshacharya continues this routine even when he is busy with other things in the Agrahara, but he does not do it purely out of love. Instead he hopes that by caring for his wife he will attain liberation/Mokasha. "The Acharya is filled with pleasure and a sense of worth as sweet as the five-fold nectar of holy days; he is filled with compassion for his ailing wife. He proudly swells a little at his lot, thinking, "By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready" (2). He does not simply want to take care of her; he also wants to use his caring for her as a way to practice his penance and tapas. His first thoughts when he finds she is ill is how he can see if her fever has risen, because she is polluted by her menstrual blood, and he cannot touch her (84), but he later decides to do so because the Acharya does care for his wife, despite also using her for his own personal gain to get into heaven. This is again a symbol of woman who, despite her infertility and physical deformity, is used as a way to reach heaven. This is learning which Acharya brought from Kashi with him and how he is clear about it "takes us closer to the Indian idea of the self, and without too much mystification" (Naipaul 104). When Lakshmidamma, Chandri or Putta's wife are having different angles of domination and psycho-hierarchy, this Bhagivathi is used when she just represents a bodiless woman. This domination is so much ridden that you can find everyone to exert it and when there is the question of the last rites of a man, you will find every way of being blocked by it. Going further with women they are representing various dimensions of it through different identities and features. But it remains where it is. Thinking of breaching it will bring examples of Goddess of destruction, Kali or in the way of it you will have examples of Menaka.

Finally, we have in the novel the Brahmin wives, such as Anasuya and Sitadevi, who represent Brahmin women and women in general. Every women of the novel is the comprehensive symbol of the women who come into the same category as they are symbols of. Murthy in the novel has made each woman character as a universal symbol. These Brahmin women unlike Chandri do not have any desire or will but they are not on the side of Chandri, Lakshmidamma or Putta's wife or even Bhagivathi because they consider themselves much luckier in comparison to

them. They are as flat characters as possible but on the other hand Chandri is as round as possible. “The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising the readers in a convincing way. A round character must have the incalculability of life within the pages of a book” (Forster 69). In actual terms they are slaves of domination. If we talk of the free will or desire they are not better than Chandri but even below her they also do not have any say in any decision nor they are allowed to do anything in this regard. Taking this as a reservation they even go on to criticise Chandri as mentioned above. In this regard Chandri is more free in comparison to them, who exercises her free will with regards food and fasting which eventually makes her more healthy and beautiful. With total control over this these Brahmins have made themselves a curse like just a step away from Bhagivathi. Next is their greed for the gold of Chandri, telling that they do not know Lakshmiddevamma. These Brahmin women seem to be a part of this domination and psycho-hierarchy as anyone is. This whole phenomenon is saying that individual efforts can only bring curse. There should be an institutional effort to bring change which could only be brought up by individuals alone if they come together and share their rationale for this. Rejecting all this even Acharya put his feet into the shoes of Naranappa. This is also an example of rebelliousness but to make life less complicated Murthy come with it so that domination in any way could be cursed.

The solution to the orthodoxy of Brahminism and its resultant casteism thus basically involves giving up all kinds of rituals and practices traditionally associated with Brahminism. Praneshacharya, after a disappointment with Brahminism, does what Naranappa did for years; wanders through forests and lonely roads, sleeps with the prostitute Chandri, thinks of sleeping with another, visits fairs and cockfights, and eats in a temple in an unclean condition. Despite all these, a sad realization haunts him: “he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him”. As a matter of fact, Praneshacharya makes this statement about Naranappa. Nevertheless, very soon he finds himself trapped in this truth. It goes without saying that this realization is not just of Praneshacharya but also that of the author (Jalki 191).

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