

**Images of Self and the Other in U.R. Anandamurthy's *Samskaara*****Arathi Unni**, Research Scholar, St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Calicut, Kerala, India

**Abstract:** The inclination to judge and demarcate things and people that one sees around is a trait that is ingrained so deep in human psyche. This tendency to see everything in binaries as right or wrong, rich or poor, black or white, male or female is a feature that our society cannot do without. When people create divisions among themselves, hierarchies appear. The class that occupies the lowest rung of the society will face discrimination and oppression from those in the upper rungs. The discrimination is carried out by setting the culture, lifestyle and practices of the dominating class as the normal standard to follow while those of the others are marginalised. But this aspect of marginalising the cultures of the 'other'- that which is not us or ours- is not a characteristic restricted to those in the upper rungs of the society alone. Sub- castes and in-groups can be found within each category. These are the defining features of any society. '*Samskaara*' is a work that portrays a slowly decaying Brahmin community. The characters are an example of the ways by which people seek differences amongst communities and hold prejudices against the other. There are conflicts within Brahmins and non- Brahmins, within sub-castes, sexes within the same caste, within the cultures of two different geographical spaces i.e. the civilised village culture and the uncouth city culture etc. This is what the paper intends to analyse in detail to show that segregation and discrimination is not a feature that is limited to a particular sect or society but a trait that is inherent in every individual.

**Keywords:** self, people, psyche, society

U. R. Anandamurthy wrote *Samskaara* originally in English which was published in the year 1965. It was later translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan and serialised a decade later, in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. The work provoked controversy and protests from certain Brahmin communities because of the way the work pointed out the ways and practices of the Brahmin community which were unjust and hypocritical. The novel is centred upon a decaying Brahmin community after the death of an anti- brahminical Brahmin Naranappa. The title *Samskaara* has many connotations. One of the meanings that it denotes is the Hindu ritual of bodily cremation after someone's death. One can find different such rituals and rites performed by different religious groups or sects, as part of their culture. One of the reasons why people conduct these ceremonies is to project their particular religious or caste identity. *Samskaara* is considered to be a purifying ritual. Quite paradoxically, it is in the background of conducting this very ritual that the Brahmin community sinks into decay and the many foul hypocrisies and prejudices of the community are exposed.

In our society, there are many marginalised groups. The most obvious ones who bear the prejudices of the others and are mostly rendered voiceless include women and those who belong to the lower caste or class. *Samskaara* offers instances of discriminatory practices committed against each of these groups. In this way one can say that, what *Samskaara* portrays is a microcosm of the Indian society.

**Caste in *Samskaara***

One of the important issues that *Samskaara* deals with is the problem of caste. The *agrahara* that is the main focus of the novel is a closed space that provides no access to people of other castes or religion. The major part of the narrative is centred on the community of the Brahmins in their attempt to solve the problem of the cremation of Naranappa. Naranappa was a radical who refused to follow the norms and conditions of the *agrahara*. He abandoned his wife and lived with low- caste Chandri and ate the food she cooked. He also associated with Muslims and ate fish and drank liquor. Associating oneself with lower castes and their ways were considered as polluting and for this Naranappa was treated as an anti- Brahmin. Though he was threatened by community that he would be excommunicated, he refused to discard his anti- brahminic ways. Instead, he threatens back that he would invite his Muslim friends inside the *agrahara* and pollute the whole community.

Here we can see both the parties asserting their selves. The Brahmins in the *agrahara* in order to assert their caste superiority involves themselves in a practise of casting other castes and the Brahmins like Naranappa who associate with them as impure and unclean and are seen as the 'other'. On the other side, Naranappa also refuses to change his unorthodox habits and instead ridicules the Brahmin's blind faith and age-old customs as irrational.

Caste prejudices are not just between the upper and lower castes. The author has also provided instances in the text to show the fissures that existed within the various Brahmin sects like between the Madhawas of Durvasapura and the Smartas of Parijatapura. The Madhawa sect considers themselves superior

to the Smartas. The Smartas were cross- lined Brahmins and it was considered a sin for the Madhawas to even dine with them. The Madhawas also has a story about Smarta clan that their great founder Shankara in his hunger for full experience is said to have exchanged his body for a dead king's to enjoy himself with the queen. This is an example of the how certain dominant groups meddle with history and conjure up stories and myths about socially less dominant groups that picture them in a bad light. This is one of the cultural tools employed by the dominant groups to repress others and validate their hegemony.

In postcolonial studies, it is said that colonial domination is ensured by acknowledging and reinforcing the racial difference between the natives and the colonial masters. The Europeans possessed the power to govern while the natives were subjects to the system created. These structures were sustained through a complex dynamic of what one may call 'representation' and 'discourse'. Colonial powers produced images and representations of natives that were in turn consumed by the natives. The downright false representations and prejudices produced by the colonial powers about the natives were made believable and assimilated by the natives through different ways like education system, religion and law. Frantz Fanon mentions that the colonial powers paints the native differently as evil or pagan or primitive and over a period of time the native accepts this radicalized view as true. The natives lose their sense of self and identity because they can only see themselves through the eyes of the whites.

Here, in the novel, one can apply the same theory and see that the Madhawa Brahmins who assume the uppermost rung in their society mirror the characteristics of the colonial masters, while the others echo the natives. The religious myth about the founder of the Smarta clan propagated by the Madhawas helps in spoiling the image of the Smartas and they view themselves as inferior to the Madhawas. After the death of Naranappa, when the duty to cremate Naranappa is handed over to them, the reaction of the Smarta Brahmins were depicted as follows-

"The Parijatha folks were unhappy over their friend's death, but quite happy they were getting a chance to cremate a high caste Brahmin".

This shows their acceptance of the Madhawa clan's superiority.

One can see a tension in the relationship between the Brahmin women and other lower caste women also. The lower caste women like Chandri and Belli are depicted as prostitutes in the novel. The Brahmin women viewed women like Chandri as an evil seductress having no morals or dignity like they did. However, one can see that while the Smarta Brahmins accepted their low status, Chandri refuses to see herself any worse off than the other Brahmin women. There is a moment in the text, where Chandri is ruminating about her body. One can see that she is proud of her status as a lower caste prostitute. She considers herself as a running river like the Tunga which no sin can defile. Unlike the Brahmin women, she being born to a family of prostitutes is an exception to all rules. "She was ever- auspicious, daily- wedded, the one without widowhood". Her views on Brahmin women are important. She pitied their bodies which unlike hers became unattractive- "their eyes sink cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall"- after childbirth. Here, she is asserting her low- caste self without aspiring to become the superior other.

### **Gender in *Samskaara***

In this novel, there are very few prominent women characters. Aptly mirroring an Indian society, one can see that women in this novel, irrespective of which caste or class they belonged to constitute a voiceless entity. In the beginning of the novel, after the whole agrahara comes to know of the death of Naranappa, they gather around to discuss about his cremation. The women folk take no part in the discussions and even when they attempt at making any suggestions like Lakshmana's wife Anasuya, they are immediately hushed by saying that it was an assembly of menfolk. The author clearly states that this was done in order to reassure the husband's superior status. Many Brahmin men like Naranappa and Sripathi abandon their lawfully wedded wives for their mistresses. Compared to the Brahmin women who lead supposed upright life with their respective husbands and children, the lower caste women like Chandri, Belli and Padmavati enjoy more freedom, for they are not circumscribed by the conventional roles of womanhood like faithful wives or as child- bearing mothers. However, they too are subjected to exploitation at the hands of the upper caste men. The lower caste women in this novel are described mainly in terms of their seductive bodies they possess. They have no other identity than being objects of fancy and pleasure for upper caste men.

According to feminist criticism, patriarchal society attributes particular values to the women's body, and the women assimilate these values. Mainly women are objectified and stereotyped in two ways- the figure of self- sacrificing /faithful mother / wife or as an object of pleasure commodifying women's body for the men's gaze. One can see instances of both the stereotypes in this work.

The Brahmin women come under the first category. As mentioned earlier they don't talk in the assembly of their husbands. Putta resorts to beating his wife because she is not obedient. They are expected to perform certain roles circumscribed by the patriarchal agrahara. It is hence clear that the Brahmin men did not consider the women folk as their equals but as mere objects for serving and rearing their children. The Brahmin women are considered as physically unattractive compared to the lower castes women. There is an instance in the text where Durgabhatta ogles at Chandri and considers her as a 'precious object', 'a sharp type' as described by Vyatsyayana in his manual of love. The character Sripati, says about Belli that she was "alright for sleeping with, she was no good for talk". These descriptions are enough to reveal the way the men in agrahara perceived women. Othering takes place when one refuses to acknowledge the other person as having an identity similar to their own. In this case, the women clearly become the other for they are never acknowledged by their men as people like them but as mere bodies or objects of pleasure.

The tragic case in this is that the women tend to accept the superiority of men. They do not question it and is happy to accept their oppressed selves. It was already mentioned how myth-making helps in making the lower groups into believing their inferior identity and accepting the dominant ones as their masters. The character Chandri, is told by her mother of a superstition in which it is said that prostitutes like her can be cleansed and purified of all their sins if they were impregnated by a good Brahmin. This propagates discrimination at two levels. A lower caste woman needs the help of an upper caste Brahmin to purify her. It also kind of reinstates the stereotype that the ultimate aim and duty of a woman is to be a mother. Again the prejudiced claim that woman's dependency on a man is mandatory to gain anything is made evident here.

#### **Ethnicity in *Samskaara***

It was when Praneshacharya in his quest for experience, tours out of the agrahara and the village of Durvasapura that he meets with Putta who takes him to the town. It was his first experience outside his closed space of agrahara. The sights that he sees there awake responses that reveal the prejudices that the upper castes hold against the townfolk. The Brahmin culture of the village is considered as refined and high culture whereas the town culture exhibited by the lower castes is considered to be brutish and barbaric. The people drank cheap toddy and engaged in blood sports like the rooster fight. All this instils in Praneshacharya that he has reached a demoniac world of violence and cruelty. Accustomed to the peaceful and harmless atmosphere of the agrahara, he finds the town culture unliveable.

Praneshacharya's refusal to accept the townfolk and their culture is another sort of racial prejudice of the brahminical community. Considering one's culture and traditions as the only pure and standard form is in a way hegemonic.

#### **Treatment of the differentially-abled in *Samskaara***

In our society, the differently abled people are neglected and not given the proper care and motivation to come into the mainstream society. Owing to the prejudiced belief that they can't perform as good as the others and hence cannot contribute productively anything to the society, they are often ignored, discriminated and removed from the mainstream society.

In *Samskaara*, it is said that Naranappa abandoned her lawfully wedded wife for being an invalid. A differently-abled woman faces double discrimination. Since the upper caste men can perceive women only as objects for pleasure, an invalid woman is naturally abandoned. Praneshacharya marries an invalid woman. But this is not out of love for the woman or for giving her a decent life. Marrying an invalid woman and the sexless marriage that ensues is considered as a 'sacrifice' which would purify Praneshacharya and give him moksha according to belief.

Another invalid character that one gets to see in the novel is the dim-witted Lakshmiddevamma. She was called the 'Ill Omen' for she was a child widow. She was thrown out of Garudacharya's house and abandoned for being a burden.

#### **Conclusion**

These are the various instances provided in the text wherein images of the self and the other are evident. The issue of self and the other can be solved by acknowledging the simple fact that the person that one considers as the other is a human being just like them. One of the things that we can state here is that discrimination will be complete only when those who are discriminated accept the superiority of the dominant classes and also their own inferior status as stated by the hegemonic upper class/ caste people. Hence, even a simple act as reclaiming one's true identity and rejecting the identity of the oppressors can be seen as an act of rebellion.

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