

Response to the Reception of *Samskara*: A Critical Journey

Jaishree Kapur

Ph. D Research Fellow, GGSIPU

Abstract

First published in 1965, U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* created a furore by questioning the graded inequality sanctioned by the traditional *chaturvarna* system. While the book was critically attacked, the film was banned on a pan-national level. However, both the verbal narrative and the cinematic narrative have been able to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries over the past few decades. The objective of this paper is to highlight the critical responses made on the work by various scholars who have examined the work as a representative of two opposing worldviews and present a counter-argument to emphasize a few instances where the work defies any compartmentalisation into a strict binary category as it lends space for liminalities, in-between spaces, and fluid identities to emerge in both the verbal and the visual medium. The paper further argues that during the process of adaptation of a story from one medium to another, the subjectivity of the filmmaker lends new meaning to the discourse, which further dilutes these binaries, rendering the cinematic text as an independent work of art. The arguments shall be foregrounded by a close analysis of the texts as well as cross-references to other critical resources.

Keywords: Binaries, Liminalities, Adaptation, Fidelity, Interpretation

Kannada literature has been categorised into three major phases according to the themes, subject, writers, and its relationship with the outside world. While the first phase from the late 19th to early two decades of the 20th century called "Arunodaya" (Dawn) was preoccupied with presenting reformist tendencies in writing, the second phase, commonly called as "Navodaya" or New Dawn (1920-1960) aimed at responding and addressing the West.

U R Ananthamurthy, in an interview with Rajiv Mehrotra, explains how the third phase of Kannada writing stretching from the nineteen sixties to seventies, commonly called the "Navya" movement, was rooted in transforming the language at the level of style, form, and imagery. *Samskara* became a key work in Kannada literature. It almost became a manifesto of "Navya"

movement despite the fact that it was subjected to a massive backlash for its supposed anti-brahmanical content. V S Naipaul's oft-quoted argument in his book, *India: A Wounded Civilization* highlighted, "Knowingly or unknowingly, Anantamurti (sic) has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquickened by intellect or creativity" (Naipaul 109). Ananthamurthy readily accepts his deliberate critique of Brahmanism in his words, "Hurting brahmans, for me born and brought up as a brahman, is not an issue that I like, but is inevitable. My writings like *Samskara*, *Ghatashradha*, *Bharatipura*, have hurt Brahmans . . . What I have written are the essential truths brahmans must face" (Ananthamurthy 107).

The novella has been widely read as a work premised on the functioning of two opposing worldviews. The translator, A K Ramanujan, himself considers characters as "polar opposites" and theme as determining "complex relations between asceticism and eroticism." (Ananthamurthy 101). U R Ananthamurthy not only as a writer and intellectual but as a lover of mathematics too, successfully weaves contradictions within the fabric of his text. From "the crest jewel of Vedic learning" (6) Praneshacharya to the "fallen" Brahmin, the contaminant Naranappa, from invalid Bhagirathi to replenishing Chandri, from the sterile, wasted bodies of upper-caste women to the seductive, voluptuous bodies of the low caste women, from an age-old tradition-bound society to the forces of modernity creeping in, from death rites of the antagonist to the initiation rites of the protagonist, from the strict structure of society to an individual's philosophical investigation—all are adjusted well within the structural contours of the narrative.

TRS Sharma, in his essay, "Renegotiating Identity in 'Samskara,'" opines:

"Madhavas as a close knit sect believe in a world of dvandvas of binary opposites. It is a Manichean world they envisage, and one witnesses the Acharya being plunged into a world of dualities: say from the ascetic to the erotic he has traversed – his imagination all aflame with erotica, i.e., from the hidebound village life to the open forest, from the sick invalid wife to the forest river like Chandri" (Sharma 132).

Most of the critical responses on the work have tried to understand the conflict between Praneshacharya and Naranappa as a mirror to the conflict between tradition and modernity, between life and death. The presence/absence of living/dead body, whether of Naranappa's corpse

or the voluptuous flesh of untouchable women, is constantly juxtaposed. Naranappa himself claims that, “Every action results not in what is expected but in its exact opposite” (Ananthamurthy 24) in the verbal narrative, which holds true as the idea behind disciplining the disciples by Praneshacharya has led to their erratic behaviour: asceticism, restraint and self-denial has paved way for eroticism, desire and a wilfulness for seeking pleasures. Not only has it held true in case of corrupt Brahmins in the *Agrahara* but also in case of the most illustrious man, Praneshacharya.

Sura P Rath too through his deconstructive reading understands the novel as “. . . a contest between Praneshacharya and Naranappa, between the brahman women and Chandri, between high caste and low caste Hindus, between Hindus and Muslims, and in larger sense between the dead and the living” (Rath 110). Furthermore, Meenakshi Mukherjee sums up these binaries in a nutshell, in her essay, ‘Samskara’ as she explains how the novella presents many opposed/opposing ideas such as varna/karma, allegorical/ realistic, purity/pollution, physical/metaphysical, self/other, rational/irrational to trace a quest with all its complexities.

Having mentioned this, exceptions to these contradictions are unavoidable. Chandri is an ambiguous character in the novella who lends herself—carnally to be enjoyed by Naranappa for more than ten years, emotionally by Sripathi and his friends for whom she cooks food even at midnight, visually to be ogled by the Brahmins and sexually by the long starved Praneshacharya. Her ambiguity is heightened by the author as she assumes the role of a river, a mistress, prostitute, mother, a temptress, a sexual object and furthermore, through the symbols of birds and snakes. Interestingly, she becomes an agent for both, the death rites or samskara of Naranappa and birth or initiation rites for Praneshacharya, yet denied any lawful status by both of them. By constantly denying her any status yet utilising her, she remains, what Victor Turner in his essay, “Liminalities and Communitas” would call a “liminal” person who is “neither here nor there” but placed “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 359) structured society. The basic attributes of a liminal person noted by Turner—ambiguity, humility, total obedience, unselfishness, silence, acceptance of pain and suffering are all manifested in Chandri. The common characters of liminal persons or principles identified by Turner are that, “(1) they fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs” (Turner 371), attributes that further aligns with Chandri due to her caste, class, gender and occupational status.

Furthermore, within the verbal narrative, the man/woman dichotomy is blurred when the author writes, “. . . like pregnant woman, the brahmans longed for the soups of sour mango-mash” (Ananthamurthy 16). The identities are constantly rendered misty since Pranasha performs roles that are generally assigned to women, i.e., cleaning, cooking and feeding one’s partner. Moreover, the young disciples of Naranappa like Sripathi has been assigned to perform the role of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala highlighting the skill en (gendered) in him by his teacher, Naranappa. Clearly, there are instances where the man/woman dichotomy gets blurred.

Ambiguity does not prevail only in terms of characters, sections and belief system but also at the level of the creator himself. Hailed as a “critical insider” the identity of the author dissolves into his creation, “...he may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him” (Annthamurthy 9) holds true for Naranappa, Praneshacharya and the author himself.

Adaptation of a story from verbal narrative to visual narrative involve changes at several levels according to the medium specificity and the subjectivity of the film maker. It can retain, alter or debunk the verbal narrative depending on the choice of the film maker. During the initial stage of adaptation studies, literature and cinema were seen as two distinct realms where the latter was judged by the accuracy with which it has replicated the former. The approach followed under fidelity criticism led to a widely common misnomer that cinema was necessarily an inferior art form in comparison to literature. George Bluestone in his famous work *Novels into Films* explains novels and films in dialectical terms by calling the two mediums as hostile to each other. According to him, the films allow spectators to see visually through the eye that forms the “percept of the visual image” and imaginatively through mind that forms the “concept of the mental image” (Bluestone 1) in case of novel which marks the essential difference between the two mediums. However, with the recent development in the field of adaptation studies, especially with film theorist like Robert Stam, Brian Mc Farlane, Thomas Leitch and Linda Hutcheon the insistence on relying on the source text has been relinquished with an objective to understand each work as an independent work of art.

The film marked an important landmark within the Kannada New Wave cinematic tradition and was felicitated with several national and international awards after a pan national ban on its screening. Snehlata Reddy, the director’s wife played the role of Chandri and the famous writer, intellectual and artist Girish Karnad wrote the screenplay and played the role of Praneshacharya

on screen. A small group of friends with similar ideological leanings and low budget made the film which fell short to capture the philosophical nuances of the novella but managed to garner the attention of critics, scholars and academicians across the globe due to its content. The film retains the basic structure, plot, characters and theme of the novella yet shows certain changes. This section of the paper shall make an attempt to identify a few instances from the cinematic text where the binary opposition maintained in the verbal narrative is not transmuted on to the screen.

The verbal narrative draws a clear binary between the sexually sterile dried up bodies of high caste Brahmin women and the tempting, lascivious, voluptuous bodies of low caste Shudra women throughout the fabric of the narrative. The mythic references to Matsyagandhi, Meneka and Urvashi, the modern brothels of Basrur, Sankara's dalliance with the queen (qtd. in Nalini Natarajan 156) and instances of Brahmins cohabiting with Dravidian women, analogy with birds, snakes and flowers are tropes employed by the author to heighten the sexuality of low caste women in the novella and render brahman women as sexually abhorrent. The film however, departs from such a projection of women. Though brahman women occupy the inner space within the *Agrahara* when men discuss the cremation of Naranappa, these women are not portrayed as a contradiction to the Sudra women. Interestingly, at the beginning of the film, the Brahmin women are involved in performing their daily chores of drawing Kolam and drawing water from the well just as an untouchable woman is the carrying water pot on her waist. Furthermore, constant objectification of women's body parts, instances such as Durgabhatta grabbing a coolie woman's breast or men ogling at the scantily clad sarees in Ravi Verma's paintings are absent in the film. Although brahman men like Sripathi lust after Belli, the film also mentions an instance where another low caste woman Malli slaps a Brahmin boy unfolding how in a caste ridden patriarchal society an untouchable woman too can exude control over her body as well as have autonomy over her decisions. In fact, Chandri, who is likened to a bewitching temptress and a lascivious doll in the narrative, is not even looked upon by the Brahmins when they discuss the death rites of Naranappa. Nowhere does she become a sexual object or a subject of the male gaze in the film. In fact, before her sexual encounter with Praneshacharya, her open dishevelled hair, lifted eyes to look at acharya, loosely draped sari, and drinking water where Pranesh's feet were present are few ideas that the filmmaker employs to highlight the female desire on screen through visuals.

Moreover, the upper caste widow who constantly belches and abuses in the verbal narrative is treated as a nuisance in the organised structure of the *Agrahara*, but rather than portraying her in

a negative light, P Reddy gives her words so much autonomy at the beginning of the film itself, so as to focus on how one of the most marginalised women has the potential of accusing the upholders of power structures before the discussion among men could actually begin. It is through the cinematic language that the film maker shows her affinity with Chandri as they stand together in a moment's flash, bound together in their lonely marginalised state of the single event of the death of one's partner which has/will change their entire life. This bringing together of two marginalised women characters from contradictory caste positions is another instance where the film maker disrupts the caste binaries on screen.

Furthermore, the central premise of the novella is based on the death of the renegade Naranappa and the course of action to be followed for his Samskara. Praneshacharya declares, as everybody accepts, that "Naranappa may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him" (Ananthamurthy 9) due to which the onus of cremating his body lies with Brahmins only. Naranappa himself claims that "Every action results not in what is expected but in its exact opposite" (ibid.) and to present the "exact opposite" solution to this crisis, it is not a Brahman man or even a shudra man who do the samskara, but a Muslim man and the low caste shudra woman who "most unceremoniously" cremate him, disrupting the foundations of the essence of samskara itself. In his autobiography, *Suragi*, Ananthamurthy mentions his dissatisfaction towards with the ending of the film. Girish Karnad deliberately insisted on keeping the "suspense" of Naranappa's cremation with the audience so as to lend the film a truly open ending. Ananthamurthy on the other hand, felt that a philosophical dimension is erased since the metaphorical corpse is carried within Praneshacharya even when the corpse has disappeared. Another reason for the film maker's decision to follow the screen player's version of the story instead of the author could have been his awareness of the controversies that the novella had raked up for its anti-Brahminic content and visually showing a brahman cremated by a Muslim could have led to an adversely extreme reaction from the public. In all, even in the treatment of the corpse, an exact contradictory position is avoided by the filmmaker.

Moreover, the ending of the film departs from the ending of the verbal narrative, which further dilutes the binary oppositions between the learned Praneshacharya and the renegade Narranappa. Towards the end of the novella, Pranesh has reiterated the actions of Narranappa, as soon as he realises his action of consummation with Chandri he feels, "I was defeated, defeated—fell flat on

my face” (Ananthamurthy 100). In this idea of contest between ritual sanctity and moral corruption, between his earlier self, bound by austerities and Naranappa’s corrupt ways, the latter has won and he feels defeated. Praneshacharya reiterates the actions of Naranappa by leaving his lawfully wedded Brahman wife and sleeping with the low caste mistress Chandri, consuming coffee, enjoying a heightened sensual state, and corrupting the entire festival by eating with the Brahmans during the period of pollution. An immediate identification is drawn between Naranappa and Praneshacharya as the latter tells Putta he will meet the prostitute Padmavati later. Putta, at this point, is reminded of Naranappa’s visits to the woman. During the last few conversations between Praneshacharya and Putta, Pranesh again tells him a lie in order to get rid of him, ponders if he should pour out his dilemmas in front of the simple-hearted man, decides otherwise but lacks the courage to face the *Agrahara* brahmins all by himself and is pushed inside the cart going to Durvasapura by Putta with a promise of meeting tomorrow. The novel ends while tracing the psychological dilemma of Praneshacharya in the following words, “He will travel, for another four or five hours. Then, after that, what? Praneshacharya waited, anxious, expectant” (138), a typical trope of existential crisis reflected in the Modernist phase of Kannada literature or “Navya movement” with which the author identified himself. The film however, departs from this ending. While Praneshacharya in the novel thinks, “I slept with Chandri. I felt disgusted with my wife. I drank coffee in a common shop in a fair. I went to see a cock fight. I lusted after Padmavati.”(132) in the film his thoughts gain greater significance as he speaks them aloud to Putta. Consequently, there is a stark change in Putta’s behaviour, a disgust engulfs his face as he hears the truth heightened by the film maker in his denial to accompany Praneshacharya and in his symbolic parting of ways by taking a different route for the rest of journey. It would be worthy to recollect that immediately after his sexual encounter with Chandri in the film, Praneshacharya had hid himself behind a tree for the fear of being caught. His revelation to Putta is not a mere purgation of his pent up emotions but rather an act where he claims ownership of his actions that indicates his growth as a person. Praneshacharya, who willingly steps inside the cart to leave the fair for Durvasapura is no more a confused man. He smiles, exchanges his secret, is comfortable after seeing the completely changed behaviour of Putta and is certain that there is somebody back home who is ‘waiting ’for his arrival. After crossing the symbolic river for a new beginning, his body language is calm, composed and the head is held high. Instead of interchanging his location with that of Naranappa and going through an existential crisis because of it, he now attains the full meaning of his name, Praneshacharya—the lord and teacher of Prana, of Life itself. In doing so, he transcends the conflicts, the binaries and continues to forge the life long journey.

Since verbal and visual are two different mediums and the same story is created by two different artists, it is inevitable for the differences to arise. Instead of the drawing binaries between the novella and the film, based on the premise that whether the cinematic text has been loyal or disloyal towards it, the focus has to be laid on considering adaptation as what Linda Hutcheon in her well-acclaimed book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, calls, an “interpretive act” by the adaptor in order to delimit the previous text. The film here also becomes an interpretive act away from the contradictory hold of the word.

The contemporary relevance of the work can be witnessed through the lecture series at Max Muller Bhawan, New Delhi, where two months after the demise of Girish Karnad, he was remembered on the Independence Day of 2019 for his contribution to cinema in general and the film *Samskara* in particular. Even after sixty years of its publication, the work has been able to garner the attention of scholars, critics, and academicians across the globe. Unarguably, both the verbal narrative and the cinematic narrative have been able to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries over the past few decades, paving way for the work to become part of the canon.

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