

**U. R. ANANTHA MURTHHY'S *SAMSKARA* AND MAHASWETA DEVI'S
RUDALI: AN ATTEMPT TO VOICE THE UNVOICED**

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to discuss the deep concerns of the marginalized sections of Indian Hindu society. Both U.R. Anantha Murthhy and Mahasweta Devi have tried their best to depict the subaltern and the unvoiced palpitations of these caste afflicted sections of Indian society. Anantha Murthhy wrote *Samskara* in Kannada in 1965, which was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujam and was published in 1976. *Rudali* was originally written in Bangla in 1979 and was adapted into a play by Usha Ganguli, a leading theatre director from Kolkata. Anjum Katyal translated *Rudali* into English in 1997 and a film was also made. Both the texts have their different settings. *Samskara* is a story of south Indian Agarhara Brahmin of Durvasapura village in Karnataka where the lives of Brahmins are entirely governed by the stringent conventions of the holy scriptures of Hindu based on caste discrimination. On the other hand, *Rudali* is about Tahad village of West Bengal where the low caste untouchable tribal people Ganjus and Dushads are compelled to live an afflicted life under the repression and tyranny of upper caste Rajputs who enjoy their so called inborn privilege of capturing the land of these tribal people by hook and crook.

In my paper I have endeavoured to show that both writers have depicted the miserable lives of the subaltern people of society. The nucleus of their concern is definitely to give voice to the unvoiced conditions these marginalized sections of society. Both the writers have portrayed the festered power politics of the people of superior hierarchy of Hindu Caste system who just exploit the marginal and tribal people in numerous ways in the name of religion, caste, and so called established socio-cultural practices.

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Caste system is such blight on Indian society which mars all our claims to reign over the world in 21st century. This system simply exploits the low caste people and women in numerous ways in the name of so called socio-cultural and religious establishments. There is one common element in both the writers i.e. the critique of caste based exploitation of marginalized section of society. They are entirely successful in depicting the abuse of subaltern people based on caste based supremacy and authority by dint of using the literary apparatus of humour, satire and irony. The term subaltern denotes the unvoiced, marginalized, oppressed and exploited low caste women or men. The term was adopted by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian social theorist in *his Prison Notebooks*. The concept of subaltern refers to the hegemony of the dominant ruling classes over those who according to Ashcroft have “less access to the means by which they control their own representation and less access to cultural social institutions”(216). Bill Ashcroft refers Ranjit Guha’s definition of the term Subaltern “as a name for the general attributes of the subordination in South Asian Society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (216). Indian caste system is predominantly based on *Manu Smirti* which has granted supremacy and various privileges to Brahmins, Kshatryias and Vaishyas. Commenting on the caste system in India Shakuntla Devi points out: “caste is not merely a social institution but part of Hinduism, which on that account has been described as a socio-religious system, for it is partly a social organization based on caste and partly a religious belief”(9). Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* ironically spotlights on the age old ascendancy of Brahminism and vilify their so called legitimate right to afflict the low castes. *Rudali*, on the other hand, targets the tyranny of malik mahajans and zamindars who implement all the possible deceiving tactics and have no hesitation in crossing all the precincts of humanity to make the subalterns submissive. The most glaring excellence of both the works is that they are not just a cynical portrayal of the unvoiced repression of the marginalized, rather an attempt to raise a passionate call for reforming revolution and make the subalterns realize their power of resistance against the festering and tyrannical social configuration. The reformative and revolutionary visions of both the writers are manifest everywhere in their narratives.

Samskara is a specific narrative about Brahmin society in India in the sixties or more precisely the Brahmin society of all times. Though Brahmin society is related to the upper caste section of society, in spite of that there are various serious problems regarding their backwardness which is the consequence of their blind faith guided by age-old convictions, superstitions, and traditions. In the novel all the sensitive issues related to rituals, samskara, untouchability, sexual relations, etc are perfectly raised. The novel also spotlights the voracity, lust and inhuman attitude of Brahmin community. The most striking thing about Ananthamurthy’s characters is that they stand for liberty from a life shackled in traditional rituals.

The novel aims at convincing the readers to comprehend the socio-cultural crisis of Indian society so that a right attitude can be developed to build up a progressive and cordial

ambience in India. Title of the novel is very suggestive and it means as Maheshwari states : “Samskara means religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community” (16). The novel is all about the question whether the Brahmins are really civilized and enlightened enough to understand the meaning of being a Brahmins. Of course we see the process of samskara or purification in case of Praneshacharya whose shifting from orthodox ritualism to pragmatic realism is really interesting. After completing his study from Varanasi he returned with the title of “Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning”. He has got the reputation of Guru not only in Durvasapura but in all the adjacent villages. He is the follower of the principles of Karma whose aim is to achieve the salvation at any sacrifice. He has intentionally married an invalid and sick woman to lead a celibate life to keep him chaste and dedicated to his creed selflessly. Naranappa is another mottled character in this agrahara.

The novel starts with the death of Naranappa who remained an insurgent throughout his life. As the translator A.K. Ramanujan’s “Afterword” ascertains: “the opening event is a death, an anti-brahminical Brahmin’s death—and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answers, old answers that do not fit the new questions, and the rebirth of one good Brahmin, Praneshacharya. In trying to resolve the dilemma of who, if any should perform the heretic’s death-rite (a samskara—a transformation) for himself. A rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living.” “In life as in death, Naranappa questioned the Brahmins of the village, exposed their ‘samskara’ (refinement of spirit, maturation through many lives) or lack of it. He lived the life of a libertine in the heart of an exclusive orthodox colony—‘agrahara’--, broke every known taboo; drank liquor, ate flesh, caught fish with his Muslim friends in the holy temple-tank, and lived with a lowcaste woman. He had cast off his lawfully-wedded Brahmin wife, and antagonized his kin”. A controversy arises regarding Naranappa’s death rite because being a Brahmins he was antibrahminical in practice. “Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance.” Naranappa like a catalytic agent who wants to bring a complete change in conventional norms to give place to modernism. Being a true rebel he rebuffs and derides Brahminhood by bringing his home Chandri, a prostitute from Kundapura a nearby town. Moreover, he consumes wine, invites Muslims to eat meat and throws Saligrama, the holy stone representing God Vishnu into the river and spits after it. Such profane acts of Naranappa simply shocked other Brahmins who firmly believed, till then, whosoever touches the fish will vomit blood and die. Apart from this he is also responsible for corrupting other youths of the agrahara. Because of him one young man left Durvasapura and joined the army, where he is forced to eat beef. Another young man left his wife and home, and joined a travelling group of singers and actors.

The only aspiration of Naranappa is to spoil the so called shackles of Brahminhood of the agrahara. He is really regretful to find that Brahminism is just a burden of simulated pretensions. The traditional hard core Brahminism does everything to restrain radical anti-Brahmin deeds of Naranappa and ultimately he is excommunicated. But Praneshacharya does not support this drastic step because he is hopeful to convince Naranappa back to the proper path of Dharma. He does not want the conflict between Dharma and Adharma to take place. Afterwards Naranappa goes to Shivamogge town and returns with high fever which ultimately develops a big lump and he dies within a couple of days. It is with his death that the real action takes place with a complex question full of dilemma “Who should cremate Naranappa?” All Brahmins are frightened to favour the cremation of dead Naranappa for they think that this sinful act would tarnish their Brahminhood. In the words of R. K. Gupta “The novel dramatizes a conflict between

two extreme ways of life, the ascetic and the hedonistic; the former is represented by the orthodox brahmins led by Praneshacharya, the latter by their defiant and contemptuous opponent, the pleasure-loving and anti-brahminical Brahmin Naranappa. When the novel opens, Naranappa has died, leaving behind him the thorny problem of whether a heretic could receive the death rites due to a brahmin. *Samskara* is basically structured around the attempt to solve this dilemma". Praneshacharya endeavours to solve this problem but he gets no relief from the holy books and Lord Maruti. In his effort to provide an orthodox answer to this thorny problem, Praneshacharya moves from one place to another and during this course of action he is exposed to a variety of experiences including a sexual encounter in the forest with Chandri, the lowcaste woman who had been Naranappa's mistress. Chandri introduces Praneshacharya to the life of a common man where all the rituals have no meaning. He runs away from home after the death of his wife because of plague but wherever he goes he, the fear of discovery and Chandri's contact haunts and troubles him utmost. Ultimately he decides to return to Durvasapura and accept his own fall. The novel ends with an unanswered question: what does one do when faced with such truth? The religion so rigorously followed by him, now becomes the cause of inner struggle of Praneshacharya. He finds himself "caught in the play of opposites" (115). He laments his sins and in that mood he expresses all his secrets and breaking of ritual to himself, one by one: "I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust for my wife. I drank coffee in a common Shop in a fair. I went to see a cock-fight. I lusted after Padmavati. Even at a Time of mourning and pollution, I sat in a temple-line with Brahmins and ate a holy feast. I even invited a (lower-caste) Malera boy to come into the temple and join me. This is my truth...the truth of my inner life (131-32).

Mahasweta Devi is the leading writer in India whose writings have been always been concerned with the honest effort to bring positive changes and transformation in social structure in India. All her writings are guided by her socio-political intentions. Her writing career and activism are based on social transformation and cultural politics. Her fictional narrations have been widely read and critically theorized as powerful representational attempts from the third world, the marginalia. The issues of class, caste and gender are the nucleus of all her discussion in the textual premises of her radical narrative praxis. Voicing the unvoiced, signifying the marginalized gender, the gendered subaltern treatment, empowerment of women, and feminist realism are always the core issues of her texts.

As far as Rudali is concerned it depicts a low caste woman Sanichari who is the prey to social hierarchy and phallogocentric patriarchy. The novel is the portrayal of the desperate dilemma of Sanichari who represents the nexus between caste, phallogocentrism and feudalism of typical rural North Indian village Tahad which is a distinctive representative site of what Dr Ambedkar says "ditch of regionalism and the den of ignorance and parochialism" (34). In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like other villagers her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering [...] to herself she would say – huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday – was your life any happier? Somri, Budha, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier lives? (54) Obviously caste, creed and gender are crucial constituents of Indian society and the glaring reality of every Indian village. The narrative expounds how the socio cultural constructs of caste and gender hierarchy play a decisive role in forming the identity of village and at the same time our national reality too.

Through the character of Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi depicts the painful subaltern reality of a low caste woman, their poignant and inconceivable afflictions. The true glimpse the

pathetic death of the wretched low caste woman and the destitution of such living dead has been very genuinely portrayed in the following lines: “Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out, over and over, ‘food, give me food!’ It was pouring that night. Sanichari and her sister-in-law lowered the old woman on to the ground. If the rites weren’t carried out before the night was over they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn’t even a cupful of grain in the house! So Sanichari was forced to go from neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain. Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry. So what if there wasn’t? the old woman had given her so much trouble that even if Sanichari had tried to cry she wouldn’t have been able to wring out many tears(55). Such agony and discrimination merely confirms the insensitivity of the caste patriarchy of Indian society. Sanichari and her band of the vast majority of woman are the instances of those who are even deprived of their intimate emotions and even tears to shed. The everyday strives under the tyrannical circumstances, perennial feelings of injustice and hierarchical standards demean and dehumanize them: “Their grief must have hardened into stone within them. To herself Sanichari had sighed with relief. Is it possible to feed so many mouths on the meagre scrapings they bring home after labouring on the malik’s field? Two dead, just as well. At least their own stomachs would be full”. (55)

Besides that there are various instances of caste cruelty, hostility, callous afflictions and overarching hegemony. According to the Vaid (physician) of the village, “the lower castes have no patience, no ability to bear up” (61). Obviously the curse is always on the caste rather than on personal flaws and inadequacies. Such inhuman conduct of upper caste people and feudal lords along with their class oppression and financial hardships become a perpetual purgatory for the marginalized and the subalterns. “the lice medicine killed the creatures in Sanichari’s hair. After sleeping comfortably she realized that her sleepless nights had been caused by the lice, not mental anguish. No matter how grief stricken one is, a work worn body is bound to sleep well” (67). Thus the entire social structure has got festered and needs reformist intervention. Even the death of a feudal lord is the occasion of the demo of caste privilege and hegemony. The lamentation of upper caste on such occasion has nothing to do with the dead, rather it is for the dread of losing caste supremacy and distinctions: “Hai, Chacha! As long as you were alive, the lower castes never dared raise their heads. For fear of you the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend government schools! Now who will take care of all these things” (68)? Behind this lamentation their chief concern is the keeping of marginalized people away from schools and from all the distinctions and privileges of upper caste. Even the burial ceremony is the occasion to show off the caste of the dead body: “We must perform the ceremonies and burial with pomp and splendour. Dress up the body, place him on a big bed and inform our entire Rajput clan” (68). Even the most perverted face of caste patriarchy can be seen in the forced custom of making the low caste woman weep over the dead body of the upper caste. This coerced act of weeping is not just mortifying but a kind of mutilating rape with the emotional domains of the gendered subaltern. Their lives are full of immoral actions as they do not meet the standards of morality. The true morality is grounded in spirituality and moral is that which reflects a spiritual awakening. Conduct is imperfect unless it proceeds from a spiritual vision of all being as one. All good spontaneously follows from spiritual realization. Therefore; Swami Rama says: Highest morality is just such an adjustment of inner relations with outer relations that the good outside becomes greatest joy within (111). The title Rudali refers to such a humiliating task of the low caste women who wail over their caste master’s death. This forced misery that has assumed caste

status is called the rudali work or toil. They (upper castes) need rudalis to wail over the corpse. They have got hold of tow whores. In the household of the masters, whores weep for the dead and get money, clothes and food for it. “The two of you go, wail, cry, accompany the corpse. You will get money, rice. On the day of the kriya ceremony you will get clothes and food(70). At the beginning Sanichari opposes but her material reality compels her to become a rudali. Obviously the low caste whores and wailers are the formations of the caste lords and they think that the bodies/minds/spirits of these whores are all their sole property. “The Rajput Maliks literally forced the tag of “whores” on to the low caste women and constructed a descent of prostitute wailers, a caste called Rudalis. Singhs of this world treat their labourers and whores alike—they tread them into the mud [...] what vicious bastards that lot are! The worst is Gambhir Singh. He kept a whore, had a daughter by her. As long as the whore was alive, he kept the child in comfort. When the mother died, he told the girl, a whore’s daughter is a whore—practise your profession and support yourself [...] the girl is now rotting in Tohri, in the randi bazaar. From a five-rupee whore she’s down to a five-paisa whore (70-71). The company of “whores” is therefore literally produced and maintained for the purposes of hegemony. Thus the wailing whores are not only made but are kept, preserved and rated too according to the commodity price index. “Lachman Singh has ordered that ten, twenty, and whatever it takes he wants good rudalis. Two hundred rupees have been budgeted for this” (71). Their wailing potential is well nurtured and promoted with adequate food. “And feed them well – they cant mourn convincingly on an empty stomach” (71).

The writer has discussed the caste maze of India more thoroughly in her recent novel *Poet Bandy*. She utterly criticizes the government’s evasion of the mystery and puzzle of caste. In fact Devi lampoons the Brahmanic intellectual hegemony and its role in the determination of policies and positions of left government. The historically developed caste groups have always controlled and captured the decision making power in all political parties and in the public service. All the crucial social powers have been used quite systematically to proliferate savarna values. The Savarna power elite has conquered and dominated all power centres of society including media, academia, corporate world, judiciary, legislature and the whole realm of popular culture. Both Anantha Murthy and Mahasweta Devi are steadfastly anxious about the unvoiced, subalterns and women in their works. Anantha Murthy himself being a Brahmin by caste exposes the profligacy and degradation of brahminism as a true critic. On the other hand we have Mahasweta Devi, a true activist who spent most of her life with marginalized tribal people to bring under light their miseries and humiliation. In *Samskara* Murthy has exposed the hypocrisy of the high caste Brahmins who are involved in rituals as per the guidelines of Dharamshatras and their distance from downtrodden people as samskari Brahmin as a gimmick. The fact is that they are far and far away from true religious and spiritual morality. “Their lives are full of immoral actions as they do not meet the standards of morality. The true morality is grounded in spirituality and moral is that which reflects a spiritual awakening. Conduct is imperfect unless it proceeds from a spiritual vision of all being as one. All good spontaneously follows from spiritual realization. Therefore; Swami Rama says: Highest morality is just such an adjustment of inner relations with outer relations that the good outside becomes greatest joy within”(111). If the psyches of these samskari Brahmins are sincerely scanned then we come to know their inherent lust, greed, and other debasing urges worse than Chandri and other so called untouchables. As Parthasarathy observes, Anantha Murthy’s “writing itself can be viewed as a ‘samskara’—a rite of expiation, ‘prayascitta’—to atone for the oppressiveness of Brahmanism when its orthodoxies were being repeatedly questioned in the reformist climate of the 1930s and

40s. The novel, thus, is a serious contribution to the dialogue on the politics of religion in the Subcontinent”(189). In *Rudali* too Mahasweta Devi has portrayed the Rajputs as debased human beings who, instead of spending money on the treatment of the ailments of their relatives, have more interest in performing their extravagant and sumptuous funerals. Furthermore they are so insensitive that they have no time to mourn their death and therefore they hire rudalis to make the genuine show of mourning scene. Quite contrary to them we feel more humane bonding and emotional touch in the marginalized man and woman as it is well reflected in Prabhu’s daughter-in-law breast feeding the grandson of Sanichari when her daughter-in-law has left her son after her husband’s death. Both Anantha Murthy and Mahasweta Devi have discussed the disintegrated attitude of Indian society and the chief cause it is the unending hunger to get material supremacy and achievements. Krishnamurthy is right when he says that “the cause of disintegration is desire for more in every field and so the more we acquire the greater is our disintegration... from this desire to be or to acquire more, springs the universal disease jealousy, envy etc”(169).

Anantha Murthy and Mahasweta Devi have also shown that not only the low caste women but even the high caste women are also exploited and marginalized. Brahmin women in *Samskara* and Rajput women in *Rudali* have no opportunity to voice their feelings in any decision. They are just confined to housekeeping and child nurturing within the male Laxmanrekha of purity. The male have full domination over financial resources and are equipped with all freedom to have illicit relationships with mistresses who are later abandoned to become whores and prostitutes leading a deprived and hand to mouth lives worse than animals. The male attitude have developed such a strangulating and disgusting tradition where women are just treated as consumer’s commodities irrespective of their roles as wives, mistresses, widows, prostitutes etc. It is because of male’s lustful slavery to his wills that has made this society an insecure place. Mr Ishar Singh is absolutely right when he says: “Evil emanates from Man’s nature. God is not a source of evil. Satan’s existence is not denied but that is a power created by God to test a man. Man’s will is the only source of evil. Man encounters in his mind seven social sins of sensuality, dishonesty, intemperance, anger, talkativeness, malice and illness and he is required by Judaic Law to avoid these sins (78).

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