

Conflict of Tradition and Modernity in Samskara**Neha Punia****Assistant Professor (English)****DAV (PG) College, Karnal**

In this paper, I shall study the interaction of tradition and modernity in U.R. AnanthaMurty's novel: Samskara. The inquiry will be aimed at showing the distinctiveness of the Indian novel as a category. The discussion of Indian novel as caught between the conflicting claims of tradition and modernity is informed by the recognition and acceptance that the novel form was imported from the West. But the discussion does not end with this acceptance, but rather begins at this juncture; otherwise we would end up seeing the Indian novel as a servile copy of, and as such, inferior to its Western counterparts. To look at the Indian novel as a distinct category is really a project of Postcolonial Cultural Criticism. The endeavor is to view the Indian novel as a form born of a distinct and different cultural experience. But as the colonial experience is also a part of this experience; Indian novel inevitably involves a negotiation between East and West; tradition and modernity. This is a very complex relationship and both the elements act upon each other.

I am not talking of some universal notion of modernity. The modernity being referred to is a specifically Western historical phenomenon. This notion is characterized by individuality, temporality, linear time etc. The rise of the novel in the West coincided with the rise of modern sensibility. The Western novel as a cultural artifact also depicts this modern sensibility in its narrative conventions. This novel is characterized by what Ian Watt calls 'formal realism' – in its narrative procedures. The Western novel, thus, may be defined, in words of Ian Watt, as:

A full and authentic report of human experience, - is under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (32)

This experience Ian Watt is talking of, is that of the modern (Western) individual. Viewed in this way – “novel is necessarily bound by its historical and geographical co-ordinates” (Mukherjee 12). It is interesting to see what happens when the novel crosses over from a ‘modern’ to a ‘traditional’ culture. Some profound difference inevitably occurs because novel is “ an organic product of a specific environment in a particular society at a given point of history” (Mukherjee 12). The whole complexion of the novel, in all its aspects including the formal, changes when it is written in a different cultural environment.

It is here that we may start looking at the Indian novel as the site of interaction between the values of two different cultural – between tradition and modernity. What we get is not a copy of the Western novel but an entirely different novel. The analysis of this novel demands different tools of analysis, or the adaptation of existing paradigms to its complexities.

I shall now analyze *Samskara* and see whether the factors of ‘formal realism’ are present in it or not. I shall begin with the narrative. The story is not that of the experience of the individual; in fact, the narrative has a very strong element of fantasy. The historical validity of the narrative is doubtful. The narrative hangs between ‘realism’ and ‘allegory’. There is an attempted realism of place, time and custom. But many loose-ends still remain. The central dilemma regarding the death-rites is itself not convincing. A learned Brahmin like the Acharya who is called the Crest – Jewel of Vedic Learning” should be able to find an answer to the problem as A.K. Ramanujan observes, “Certain simple ritual modifications and offerings would have solved the problem, as the guru of Dharmasthala clearly suggests” (145)

The treatment of time in the novel also points towards a conflict between linear and circular time. E.M. Forster located the modernity of the novel in its portrayal of ‘life by time’ as against the traditional portrayal of ‘life by values’. Locke defined personal identity as an identity of consciousness through duration in time while Hume located the source of personal identity in memory which is also related to time. This also explains the cause and effect structure of the novel as the individual personality is explored in relation with the past experience. The modern novel depicts the

everyday and its concerns as against some timeless nature and this depends upon its “power over the time dimensions.” as Watt says, “Novel’s closeness to the texture of daily experience directly depends upon its employment of a much more minutely discriminated time scale.” (22)

U.R. Ananthmurthy tries his best to contextualize the narrative by referring to actual historical events in the novel. Yet the treatment of time in the novel is, “a stereotype of what might be called Indian Village Time – indefinite, continuous, anywhere between a few decades ago and the medieval centuries” (Ramanujan 145). This is some sort of local time which is not affected by any outer influence. The yearly routine of the Brahmins is more or less fixed:

All twelve months of the year, they had vows to keep; they had calls for ritual meals occasioned by deaths, weddings, young boys’ initiations. On big festival days, like the day of the annual temple celebrations or the death-anniversary of the Great Commentator, there would be a feast in the monastery thirty miles away. The Brahmins’ lives ran smoothly in this annual cycle of appointments. (Ananthamurthy 16)

This ‘closed’ world of the Brahmins was being threatened by Naranappa who represents outer, alien, modern elements of historical time when he says; “your texts and rites don’t work anymore. The Congress party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all the outcastes” (Ananthmurthy 21). He disturbs the more or less stable world-order in the village by breaking all rules as he says, “I’ll destroy brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there’s no brahminism really left to destroy in this place – except you ‘ (Ananthmurthy 21).

The title of the novel, as it occurs as a metaphor and symbol throughout the novel, disrupts the linearity of the narrative and rather universalizes it. The meanings of the word *Samskara* implicitly inform the narrative throughout the novel. These meanings are not always parallel to each other; they may be opposites. The action depends on the several meanings being at loggerheads with each other. Ramanujan observes:

It is significant that, in the brahminical texts, there is no division between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’, ‘social’ and ‘individual’, ‘ritual’ and ‘spiritual’

aspects: they imply and follow each other in one seamless unity. ‘Just as a work of painting gradually unfolds itself on account of several colors (with which it is drawn), so *brahmanya* (brahminhood) is similarly brought out by *samaskaras* performed according to prescribed rites. (Ramanujan 141)

This progression is not exactly cyclical. Western discourses often assume that the concept of time operative in traditional societies is ‘cyclical’. This sense of time is opposed to the ‘linear’ sense of time in Western societies. This facile distinction, however, is not a valid philosophic observation as G.N. Devy says, “Cyclical and linear are in fact only historiographical notions and not attributes of time or of the perceiving human consciousness. The distinction, whatever its source, accurately reflects the unequal power positions of the cultures” (Devy 11). Indian novel constantly negotiates between these notions of time. In *Samskara*, the perpetually delayed answer to the question of the last rite of Narnappa is the force that helps the narrative to progress and there is an element of traditional myths here:

As in many traditional tales a question is raised; kept alive, despite possible solutions; maintained, till profounder questions are raised. Answers are delayed until the question is no longer relevant. The delay is filled with ‘promised answers, suspended, jammed or partial answers, snares and ambiguities. The ‘perpetually deferred reply plots the story. (Ramanujan 141)

The element of caste also undermines the modernity of the novel. Caste operates not as background but as the functional impulse at the very conception of the narrative; so that it can be removed at the cost of the whole structure itself. Caste functions almost as a character, which predicts and prefigures the behavior of all the other characters. Characters remain chained in caste stereotypes. The wall built around caste is almost impregnable and the material it is build of is none of the combustible stuff of reason and morality. No amount of penance or prayer can change the status of a person as it is determined not by vocation but by birth.

In short, caste is its own ruler. It is a small and complete social world in itself, a quasi-sovereign body; all inclusive and masked off from one

another and yet subsisting within the larger and wider society. The citizens owe their moral allegiance to the caste first; rather than to the community as a whole. Samskara is conceptualized as a novel of caste-conflict. No character in the novel acts on his own; each is forced to act under the influence of the role s/he has to play according to values represented by his caste. Conflict in the novel arises due to the intrusion of non-brahmanical values. The conflict is not among individuals but values.

Chandri, for example, can not hold her position in the Brahmin society because of her caste. In spite of all her qualities, she is associated with evil. On account of their position in the caste system, Dalit women can not act but are acted upon. They don't speak, but are spoken of. They are mere sex slaves; there is no agitation for them. Further, these dalit women do not have any individual aspirations as we understand the term in a Western context. Their fate is already decided by their position in the caste system. Their role as sex slaves has been sanctified by the religious authority down the ages. They have been led to believe that to be consumed by a Brahmin is an act of salvation and their birth is justified on that score:

Her mother used to say prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men. Such a man was Acharya, he had such looks, virtues, he glowed but one had to be lucky to be blessed by such people. (46)

Thus, Chandri's encounter with Acharya, the moment of crisis in the novel, was not merely an accident or individual failing; but her fate was inevitable. She had nothing to choose. The encounter would not have been possible if she had been an individual with freedom of choice. So, the act, though performed by Chandri, is actually brought about by caste as an active factor. Similarly, all the crisis that Pranesacharya goes through arises only because of his being a Brahmin.

Due to caste factor, the novel does not remain a report of individual experience. In fact, all the characters are caricatured. While all the Brahmin wives are sexless, unappetizing, smelly ... other castes are seen as glowing sex-objects and temptations to the Brahmin.

We observe that the novel engages in complex negotiation between traditional and modern elements. The characters are allegorical but the

setting is realistic; the narrative is both traditional and modern. The time and its treatment also hangs between the cyclical and linear. In short, we have to refer to the native social structure and traditions to come to terms with the narrative.

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