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A Bakhtinian Analysis of U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

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Abstract:
It has long been noted, as Michael Watts and Robert F. Smith in "Economics in Literature and Drama" suggest that although economic forces, function as institutions in some ways separate from literary and cultural forces and conditions, they do play an important role in shaping public opinion and standards and create a discourse of their own. Literary authors are probably most aware of the potential of human resources, often in an explicitly economic setting. One such discourse is created by the material economic forces in *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) by U.R. Ananthamurthy, which becomes an integral part of the larger "dialogic" structure of the novel- as defined by Bakhtin and the papers studies *Samskara* from this Bakhtinian perspective. Bakhtin's theories focus primarily on the concept of dialogue, and on the notion that language – any form of speech or writing – is always dialogic. Dialogue consists of three elements: a speaker, a listener/respondent, and a relation between the two. Language, and what one says in language, are always thus the product of the interactions between (at least) two people. Bakhtin contrasts the notion of dialogue with the idea of the monologic, which are utterances by a single person or entity. *Samskara* establishes this dialogic mode, which is further exploited in the novel. The novel falls very close to Bakhtin's argument that the structure of the novel is dialogic and polyphonic. It has a polyphonic structure since it incorporates the others' voices within itself.

Keywords:
Dialogic, polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival, grotesque.

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man (1965) by U.R. Ananthamurthy has become a classic of Indian Literature. The setting of *Samskara* establishes a dialogic mode, which is further exploited in the novel. The novel falls very close to Bakhtin's argument that the structure of the novel is dialogic and polyphonic. It has a polyphonic structure since it incorporates the others' voices within itself because 'the other's discourse' – the discourse of Naranappa gradually and stealthily penetrates the consciousness and speech of the hero Praneshacharya.

The dialogue in the agrahara conveys a Baktinian multiplicity of discourses brought to bear upon the issue. It represents the coexistence of socio-ideological groups in the present. "Praneshacharya's return to the village is symbolic of a journey from outside to the inside, a detour, so to say, a movement backward, that is forward" (Radhakrishnan 136). The narrative voice attempts to delineate community presumably united in its belief in the Ancient Law Books, but everywhere in the dialogue modern secular languages may be read. "Naranappa has left brahminism but brahminism has not left him" (SM 63). In this statement Brahminism is still held

as a commanding and controlling discourse, but Naranappa's violation of its secured status is seen not only as an anti-Brahminic stance but also a mode of signifying the other.

Bakhtin's idea of the self is radically dependent upon others; the self, for him is an act of grace, the gift of the other human consciousness. Self is formed only in a process of perpetual negotiation with other selves by way of their languages. It is supremely social and a person who grew up without ever having been exposed to speech would not be fully human for Bakhtin. Praneshacharya, in the novel finds his self only in dialogue with others- with Naranappa, Chandri and others as for Bakhtin intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity. Paradoxically, while consciousness is where Bakhtin locates selfhood, consciousness for him is fundamentally linguistic, and thus in his terms an extraterritorial part of organism. As he suggests that language lies on the border between oneself and the other.

The opening event of the novel is a death. It is of an anti-brahmanical Brahmin's death. This death brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, teasing questions without answers, old answers that do not suit the new questions, and the rebirth of a good Brahmin- Praneshacharya. In trying to solve the dilemma of who, if any, should perform the heretic's death-rite (a samskara), the Acharya begins a samskara (a transformation) for himself. A rite for the dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living Acharya. A.K. Ramanujan, for instance, sums it up as "a religious novel, a contemporary reworking of ancient themes" (143). The cremation of the decomposing body then, is of second importance, the villages, must first wash their own decomposed lives. Ramanujan, the translator called the novel "an allegory rich in realistic details." (viii) The difficult and uneasy process of transition between the fixed settled order of life and the still inchoate stirrings of self is part of the thematic concern of the novel. The novel begins with an emphasis on the static quality of life as lived in the Brahmin colony of Durbasapura village. The word "routine" is repeated three times on the first page, highlighting the lack of spontaneity in Praneshacharya's acts :

> The words were part of a twenty-year old routine between them. A routine that began with the bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, medicines for his wife. And crossing the stream again to the Maruti temple for worship. That was the unfailing daily routine. (01)

The detail emphasizes the sterility of this ritual bound existence and although the Tungbhadra river run behind the houses, the flowing water seems to have no relation to the enclosed lives of the Brahmins. The static quality of the life in Durbasapura village is in dialogue with the flowing water outside the village.

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speaker, a listener/respondent, and a relation between the two. Language, and what one says in language, are always thus the product of the interactions between (at least) two people. Bakhtin contrasts the notion of dialogue with the idea of the monologic, which are utterances by a single person or entity.

Pranchacharya's discourse is in dialogue with Naranappa's discourse. Naranapp's discourse is not self-constituted, for it includes Chandri, Padmavati, Belli and other women as well as Putta, the Smarta Brahmins and Muslims, thereby implying multiplication of signifiers. Bakhtin writes :

> A sign does not simply exist as a given part of reality – it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore, it may distort reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view and so forth. Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation (i.e. whether it is true, false, correct, fair, good, etc.) The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too. Everything ideological possesses semiotic valve (DI 86).

Here we need to notice that this insistence on the sociality of language leads to a notion of what Voloshinov calls the multiaccentuality of sign, the idea that the signs of language bear different accents, emphases and therefore meanings with different inflections and in different contexts. Meaning emerges in society and society is not a homogeneous mass but is itself divided by such factors as social class, signs do not therefore have fixed meanings but are always inflected in different ways to carry different values and attitudes as is in case with Naranappa and the Acharya.

The agrahara of Durbasapura is famous, we are told at the outset, because of the learned man Praneshacharya (the crest jewel of Vedanta) and because of the notoriety of the scoundrel Naranappa. The basic issue of combat is also set forth fairly early : "The real challenge was to test which would finally win the agrahara : his own penance and fault in ancient ways, or Naranapp's demonic ways" (SM, 28). They seem to be trying to reach the same destination in their different ways. The Acharya remembers his friend Mahabala and adversary Naranappa, both of whom had vanquished him : "Naranappa, did you go through this agony? Mahabala, did you go through it?" (123)

From this point onward the novel progresses more in the mind of Parenshacharya than in terms of physical action in the outer world. He reviews his entire life in the light of the new situation. The sacrifice in marrying an invalid, he can now see, was in the nature of an investment, a strategy to gain credit in the spiritual world. He thinks with envy and admiration : How fearlessly Naranappa lived with Chandri in the heart of the agrahara.

This ethical imperative is central to Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky, and to the aesthetic of polyphony more generally, yet it should not be confused with a more familiar liberal individualism, which is as alien to Bakhtin as it is to Dostoevsky. Paradoxically, though the individual human being retains the irreducible moral status which has been described, that human being's consciousness cannot be conceived as existing in isolation. Just as the individual cannot be the source of a language, for the utterance always only occurs between people, so the individual consciousness is equally intersubjective. This is a challenging notion; as Bakthin cryptically puts it in his notes for rewriting the Dostoevsky book, that single consciousness is contradiction in adjecto [a contradiction in terms]. Consciousness is in essence multiple. Bakhtin provides some explanation for this assertion by insisting that consciousness can only realize itself, however provisionally, in dialogue with the order. We might add to this by recalling Voloshinov's conception of 'inner speech', the notion that consciousness is constituted by multiple words that carry with them the traces of a myriad other consciousness – carried there by the multiple words that are the constituents of consciousness. So, Samskara is inhabited, not by the many independent individuals of classical liberalism, but by characters whose truth only emerges in contract with, or anticipation of, another's truth. 'Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (PD 84)

From being a dispassionate observer of life Praneshacharya wants to be an involved participator, and in the process he becomes human, he wants to live openly and fearlessly like Naranappa. Although he cannot resolve his contradictions he becomes aware of them. He says : "I must now come to a final decision. All things indirect must become direct". (SM, 125)

However, the protagonist never indulges in any kind of self-recrimination, never considers himself irredeemably lost and fallen. His agonies are motivated by a desire to find some moral and intellectual clarity and coherence.

> When I tell them about myself, there should be no trace of any shame that I am a sinner…. I cannot go beyond conflict and dualities. I must see Mahabala. Must tell him: only the form we forge for ownself in our inmost will is ours without question. (99)

Thinking that Praneshacharya seems to involve everyone else in what he does, he recognizes that even if he does something apart from all others, he can never be fully apart from his community. The whole Naranappa's dialogue creates the emotional condition in which a new kind of knowing is made possible for the Acharya. The basic polarity of the novel between direct involvement in the sensuous aspect of life and a detachment through the denial of the senses is indicated very early in the novel. The flowers that bloom in the garden of the brahman's in Durbaspura village are set in dialogue with those of Naranappa's flowers. These flowers are used

for purposes of worship and were never enjoyed for beauty or fragrance. Only the flowers in Naranappa's yard were different because these were solely meant for Chandri's hair and a vase in the bedroom for sensuous human enjoyment and not for divine consecration. Much later in the novel when Praneshacharya's accustomed world is shattered by Chandri's touch, he becomes aware of this opposition between his earlier detachment and present involvement. The smell of the nigh queen bush in Naranappa's yard broadcasts to the village the latter's message :

> In the darkness of the night, the bush was thickly clustered with flowers, invading the might like some raging lust, puring fourth? Its nocturnal fragrance the agrahara writhed in its hold as in the group of a magic serpent binding spell. (42)

Praneshacharya's invalid wife epitomizes the diseased sterility of the entire agrahara, the life principle embodied in women has dried up in the rigidity of the orthodox community, while outside the enclosed world there is a celebration of life much more desirable by contrast. It is not difficult to see that the tiger belongs to the Dionysian world which constantly threatens the repressed orderliness of the Brahman agrahara. Thus the mode of the novel is dialogic. What is important in them is not the presentation of facts about a character, then, but the significance of facts voiced to the hero himself and to other characters. In a sense, the hero is a word and not a fact in himself. Bakhtin identifies such polyphony as a special property of the novel, and he traces if back to its carnivalistic sources in classical, medieval, and Renaissance cultures. Bakhtin contrasts the monologic novels of writers such as Leo Tolstoy with the dialogic works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Instead of subordinating the voices of all characters to an overriding authorial voice, a writer such as Anantha Murthy creates a polyphonic discourse in which the author's voice is only one among many, and the characters are allowed free speech. Indeed Bakhtin seems to believe that a writer such as Anantha Murthy actually thought in voices rather than in ideas and wrote novels that were thus primarily dialogic exchanges.

The narrative exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin's dictum in *The Dialogic Imagination* that the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia. In presenting a diversity of attitudes and interests, Anantha Murthy captures the complexity and tensions of a highly traditional village in India. Anantha Murthy presents this diversity not only through the characters with their different attitudes but also in the way in which the social psychological struggle is expressed in different discourses and actions. The nearly speechless Praneshacharya, the virtually speechless prostitute, the noisy and aggressive Naranappa, the whining and selfish chatter of various Brahmin males and their wives, the Muslim who cremates the corpse, the young pimp Putta who tries to lure Praneshacharya to a prostitute – all these together constitute a microcosm of communities in South India and its densely filled social panorama, even though the novel is concerned primarily with portraying the happenings in a small brahaman community. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee :

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> The incident provides the context for producing the diversity of languages and discourse, attitudes and interests that constitute the everyday reality of this community. For instance the prostitutes voice for all her status as a marginalized and reviled woman represents sanity and moral clarity whereas the brahmns closet to the deceased plot in devious ways to get the gold, she has offered as reward for any Brahmin who performs final rites. (38)

Bakhtin opposes monologic language to heteroglossia which is the idea of a multiplicity of languages, all in operation in a culture. Heteroglossia might be defined as the collection of all the forms of social speech, or rhetorical modes, that people use in the course of their daily lives. A good example of heteroglossia would be all the different languages we use in the course of a day. We talk to our friends in one way, to our professor or employer in another way, to our parents or children in a third way, to a waiter in a restaurant in a fourth way, and so on.

Pranesh's own knowledge and understanding marked by his extreme idealism give him little innovative maneuver to resolve the dilemma. All of the virtues are thrown into confussion and disarry as he struggles to find a solution to the problem of cremating the dissolute Naranappa's corpse. According Radha Krishan :

> If the antagonist in his life and through his death, gives rise in the radical heteroglossia that nearly turns upside down the moral coherence of the community, the protagonist stands at the centre of the volatility of the novel and its moral and psychological pressures, disclosing capacity for honesty and a commitment to values. (138)

Thus different members of the agrahara voice different positions regarding Naranappa. They quote from different discourses – biographical (the life of Sankara,) painting and mythology (the mythological painting of Ravi Verma), caste history etc. Each of the participants in the debate has a different opinion concerning the problem and the identity of Naranappa. Thus Samskara does not recognize any overriding monologic point of view outside the world of its dialogue, but on the contrary, everything in the novel is structured to make dialogue opposition interminable.

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin articulates an aesthetic which celebrates the anarchic, body based and grotesque elements of popular culture and seeks to mobilise them against the humourless seriousness of official culture. Rabelais is Bakhtin's supreme example of this aesthetic, Bakhtin writes :

> Grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed : it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world….

> Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up the another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world. (46)

The essential principle of grotesque realism, Bakhtin writes is degradation, but he is also insistent that this degradation is not merely a negative process. On the contrary, Bakhtin stresses the ambivalence of carnival imagery and its use in Rabelais. The degradation enacted in carnival and in carnivalized writing – the incessant reminders that we are all creatures of flesh and thus of food and faeces also – this degradation is simultaneously an affirmation, for even 'excrement is gay matter', linked to regeneration and renewal.

Naranappa's death, instead of being his defeat, turn out to be a victory. The corpse of Naranappa seems to swell gradually and fill up the whole agrahara in a metaphorical as well as real sense. The plague, the stench, the panic, the confusion, everything seems to proclaim the power of the dead man the security of the place gives way to a reign of fear – there are vultures during the day, ghosts at night :

> Naranappa's challenge was growing, growing enormously like God Trivikrama who started out as dwarf and ended up measuring the cosmos with his giant feet. Praneshacharya was afraid of admitting, that the Book of Dharma had no solution to the present dilemma. (46)

Thus this grotesque body is celebrated by Bakhtin as well as by Anantha Murthy. This is a body in which becoming rather than completion is evident, a body whose openness to the world and the future is emphatically symbolized by various features of the body the consuming maws, pregnant stomachs. One name Bakhtin gives to this celebration of the incomplete is 'gay relatively' an attitude in which the monologic, official certainties are relativized, inverted or parodied.

When Praneshacharaya wakes up in Chandri's arms in the forest he knows that he has lost the battle : "I was defeated, defeated– fell flat on my face," and the reader knows that the basis of the defeat goes back to his early life when he stifled the natural instincts of a man in his zeal for piety. This defeat, at least, breaks the shell within which he has lived all these years.

Access to Chandri's body brings grace to his life. It is allegorically significant that his act, which opens out a new world of naturalness and wholeness to the Acharya, happens in the forest outside the frame of stratified society. His vision suddenly become clear, as if a veil which was for all these years separated him from the throbbing pulsating world has dropped. All his five senses are awakened in a sudden awareness. There is a direct contrast between the prematurely

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old Praneshacharya, burdened with the wisdom of all scriptures in his head and the responsibility of the morbid agrahara on his shoulders- and the child frostily responding to creation:

> He, now, becomes aware of the sensuous joy of swimming in cold water and rolling in the sun-warmed sand afterwards, caressing the neck of a playful calf as its hair began raising in pleasure and it began to lick his ears and checks with its warm rough textured tongue. All these becomes vividly rich experiences. (83)

His senses become more acute, the smell of grass and wet earth hit his nostrils and the stars become as sharply visible as to a child's eye. The place of his rebirth is outside the arena of stasis of the agrahara, where time is stagnant and space is enclosed.

Samskara undoubtedly articulates this aesthetic of the grotesque, which celebrates the anarchic, body based and popular culture, and seek to mobilize them against the humourless seriousness of high culture. Grotesque realism can here be seen as a kind of artistic practice which moves both from upper to the lower level of the biological body and from heaven to earth; indeed these two movements are equivalent.

Arguably, the presence/absence of the human body is central to Sanskara's narrative geography, whether the body is Naranappa's defiling corpse, or Chandris reductive flesh, or the emasculated Brahmins and their emaciated figures or even the contaminated figures or even the contaminated agrahara itself. The question of ethics is deeply connected to the thematic of the body as well as the problematic of reading.

The Acharya's personal tragedy or remedy begins here. He is convinced that he is now a fallen man, just like Naranappa, and the irony that he slept with none other than Naranappa's own woman is intolerable to him. The Acharya is haunted by an existentialist-angst and wanders away in the company of a stranger who he runs in his sojourn. In a short span of time he undergoes all kinds of experiences but is always haunted by doubts, questions, dilemmas and indecisiveness. The Achraya is horrified by the tigerish world of cock-fights, which threatens his new found values as well as his orthodoxy.

In the village fair (carnival) Praneshacharya is outside his professional and commercial framework, freed from an expected pattern of behaviour and therefore able to contemplate the true nature of his self- unfettered by social and familial role playing. In the carnival when he has shed his conventional past, his traditional history, the world sees him as just one more Brahmin. In the eyes of the villager he meets on the way, he is no longer the 'crest-jewel of Vedanta' but a lowly Brahman perhaps on his alm-collection round, and if he loses even the external appearance of a Brahmin, his image of himself would have to be further adjusted to the world's image of

him as an anonymous, casteless wanderer. After leaving the village Pranesh's initial impulse is one of freedom – freedom from duties and obligations to the community.

The central character attempts to reject a rigid dehumanizing code of religious custom as socially practiced, and one does not know till the end of the novel, how far he will succeed in his attempt to liberate himself. The Acharya's struggle is with the dogma that stifles spontaneity. The author writes:

> Once in the fair, he instantly becomes a part of it, reveling in its noise, its smell, its visual delights. He must take a look inside the bioscope box to see the God of Tirupti as well as the Bombay concubines. A natural participator he must throw a coin to the begger, buy a yard of ribbon for his wife, drink a bottle of soda water and belch with satisfaction bet at a cock-fight and thereby take his full share of the festive spirit of the fair.(84)

The cock fight is to the Acharya the most traumatic experience of this world. Putta naturally belongs here and the Acharya can only stand and stare from a horrified distance. The noise, the dust, the colour and the smell that assault his sheltered and secluded sensibility in the market place are nothing compared to the intensity of violence at the cock fight.

The sharp cruel looks of the audience, the glint of knives tied to the roosters, the throaty inhuman rounds of the people encouraging the fight, frighten him and make him reconsidered his decision. They may have rejected the brahmanical world of austerities and penance but he will not be able to embrace this demonic world of cruelty either. He wavers, realizing the dual aspect of the newly discovered world : "One part of lust is tenderness and the other part is demonic will." Within a space of half a page he passes through various stages – fear, feeling of vulnerability, then an upsurge of desire obliterating all self-consciousness. He passes from being a victim to being a predator :

> Bird ravaging, bird ravaged. The knives, the violence of the cock fight enters his consciousness and will not be exorcized. In a brief Kaleidoscopic flash the scenes of his life come back to him, bringing image of Naranappa, Mahabala, Chandri, Bhagirathi. (98)

His inner Kaleidoscopic vision is paralled by the outer Kaleidoscopic view of the market place – the medicine man, the acrobat, the mutilated bodies of lepers reminding him of the rotting corpse he has left behind seated in a line with hundred of hungary brahmans waiting for a meal.

The pain and agony involved in his dilemma is the pain of transcending one mode of existence to go into another. In this informed stage he even thinks nostalgically of an earlier time of certainty,

the stability and order of the agrahara before the crisis the lightening of lamps in the evening when the cows and calves return and their milk is offered to God. Now that a whole series of things have happened to him, he is fully conscious of their implications for his former self-image :

> I slept with Chandri, I felt disgust with my wife. I drank coffee in a common shop in a fair. I went to see a cock fight. I lusted after Padmavati. Not a confession of wrong done not a repentance for sins committed just plain truth. My truth, the truth of my inner life. Therefore this is my decision. Through my decision here ! I cut myself off. (132)

Paraneshacharya's experience of the world calls into question his absolutist postulates in terms of which he has functioned as a priest in his community. Therefore, the dialogic in the novel is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception. The Chief characteristic of Samskara is, therefore, a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.

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