UNIT 3 SAMSKARA : FORM AND THEMES

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to enable you to get to know the allegorical form of Samskara and the thematic preoccupations of the writer in Samskara.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Samskara is a multi-dimensional text and has received varied interpretations from critics. This unit begins with a discussion of the allegorical form of the novel and then goes on to discuss the major themes in it.

3.2 SAMSKARA AS AN ALLEGORY

The term allegory is derived from Greek allegoria, from allos ‘other’ + agoria ‘speaking’ ‘speaking otherwise’. An allegory is a story, a poem, or a picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning. It is a mode of thought and its roots are ancient. Allegory has been considerably employed in literature, particularly in ancient and medieval literature, and it is sometimes used even now. For students of English literature, the best known examples of it are John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678) and Edmund Spenser’s The Faire Queene (1589, 1596). The myth of the Cave in Plato’s The Republic is another very well-known example. Nearer home, the Ramayana is popularly talked of as exemplifying the victory of good over evil, of punya over paap.

A.K. Ramanujan, the eminent translator of the novel, in his Translator’s Note, has described it as ‘an allegory rich in realistic details’. (ix) The question is: Why has the writer resorted to the allegorical form for his novel? What is it in
an allegory that appealed to Anantha Murthy. Let us find out and see which feature or features of an allegory *Samskara* has. If, as Ramanujan says, the novel is ‘rich in realistic details’, which are the areas where the novelist has made use of realistic details?

There is a hint of why Anantha Murthy chose allegory combined with realism for *Samskara* in the course of his remarks on the works of a Kannada writer – M.S. Puttanna. In his talk on ‘Why Not Worship in the Nude?’, he quotes from this writer’s English preface to his novel *Madiddunno Maharaya*, wherein the latter disapproves of most Kannada works as being derivative (‘either expansions or contractions’) from our two great epics and goes on to suggest that ‘these pitfalls’ could be avoided ‘by transferring the attention from those ideal heroes and heroines to a conception of characters of our daily life, which in their nature and in their deeds, more or less approach the ideal Rama and Sita, Yudhishtra and Draupadi’ (*Literature and Culture*: 61-62).

‘The impulse expressed here,’ says Anantha Murthy by way of comment, ‘is to absorb reality into myth. What he [Puttanna] wants to write is both allegory and novel, on the surface, a realistic story which is also deep down a fable…. The dual impulses – to mythify and to modernize – jostle together in an unexpected combination of allegory and realism – creative modes necessary for grasping the entire Reality of Indian life. As Puttanna can lead to Garcia Marquez, he can lead to the writing of a novel like Samskara too’ (*Literature and Culture*: 62).

Obviously, the dual impulses that worked in Puttanna were working in Anantha Murthy too. He too wanted to capture the contemporary reality of Brahminical India and he chose to present this reality by foregrounding the old dichotomy of asceticism and erotocism. Allegory, says Cuddon ‘appears to be a mode of expression so natural to the human mind that it is universal’ (*Dictionary of Literary Terms* 23). The choice of this universal mode of expression must have appeared attractive to Anantha Murthy particularly, because the idea of asceticism and eroticism as being adversaries is ancient and is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. In the words of the well-known anthropologist, T.N. Madan, ‘This struggle is one of the abiding themes of Hindu classical literature, as it is of living folklore. It is also the very stuff of everyday life. Is there a Hindu villager, illiterate and unsophisticated though he may be, who is not familiar with the debauchee and the ascetic, with the life of sensuality as opposed to that of spirituality?’ (*Non-Remunation* : 5) So it was natural that Anantha Murthy should have chosen to present this ancient opposition through the use of allegory.

Allegory proceeds by illustration – it presents ideas through images that are illustrative. There is another way – through representation – in which the writer tries to evoke ‘a total and convincing impression of the real world to us’. (Scholes and Kellog: 84) The latter is the more usual way employed by writers to convey meaning in literary narratives. In *Samskara* Anantha Murthy uses both the ways; he is at once illustrative and representational, allegorical and realistic. The effect of this dual treatment will be clear in the portrayal of the major characters in the novel.

Allegory permitted the writer to state his theme sharply, if somewhat in a simplified manner, and it enabled him to draw upon the wealth of associations
in myth and legend that it would have aroused in the mind of the Indian reader. This helped to strengthen the basic theme.

Besides, the allegory not only affected the presentation of major male and female characters, but also the kind of flowers grown in the gardens of the dissenter Naranappa and all the other Brahmans.

As in an allegory, the characters in Samskara are ‘somewhat simplifed and represent polar opposites’. The fundamental opposition posited is between the ascetic and the pleasure-seeker, between control and self-denial on the one hand and indulgence in sensuous pleasures on the other, between Pranesacharya and Naranappa. Two other characters, Mahabala and Naranappa’s protégé, Shripati could be grouped with the latter. Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya are guilty of the sin of avarice and greed and Dasacharya of the sin of gluttony. All the three of them are primarily illustrative.

However, the major characters don’t remain simplified for long. For example, Pranesacharya’s penance in having married the invalid Bhagirathi is an illustration of his asceticism. So is the fact that he recites sacred legends but himself remains completely unaffected by his own descriptions of beauty in them. But his concern about Chandri waiting in his verandah, awaiting his decision about Naranappa, is an example of conduct that humanizes his character and makes it representative. Later his self-analysis right till the end, makes him a very intense and intimate character.

Similarly, though Naranappa, is a pursuer of pleasure who belongs to the ‘Hedonist School’, he is not entirely an iconoclast. He has been a real source of inspiration for the young enthusiasts of Parijata Drama Group. He had donated a harmonium to the group and was a fine drummer himself. This drama group is a symbol of his creativity. This adds complexity to his character and makes him very life-like.

The women characters are similarly seen in binary terms: low-caste, voluptuous big-bosomed mistresses like Chandri and Belli on the one hand and the flat-chested, withered brahmin women on the other. The references to Matsyagandha, Menaka and Urvashi in relation to Chandri and Belli help to strengthen the allegorical opposition. Of the two characters, Chandri breaks the allegorical mould and because of her compassion and her motherly instinct and her perfect understanding of the Acharya’s need, becomes a memorable figure. On the other hand, Padmavati too, like Belli, whom the Acharya meets in the company of Putta is a figure of temptation.

The allegorical split extends even to the flowers that grow in the gardens of the brahmans of the agrahara. In the agrahara homes the flowers were used for worship and never for beauty or fragrance (“The Brahmins went to each other’s yards each morning to get flowers for worship....But the flowers that bloomed in Naranappa’s yard were reserved for Chandri’s hair and for a vase in the bedroom” [14]). As Meenakshi Mukherjee has pointed out, the basic polarity ‘between direct involvement in the sensuous aspects of life and a detachment through the denial of the senses’ is indicated as early as on page 14 (Samskara: A Critical Reader: 86).

The allegorical nature of the novel can be seen when this opposition is openly stated:
‘As far back as he [Pranesacharya] could remember Naranappa had always been a problem. The real challenge was to test what would finally win in the agrahara: his own penance and faith in ancient ways, or Naranappa’s demonic ways’ (19-20).

In the novel, the opposition between asceticism and eroticism is part of a larger opposition between brahminism and anti-brahminism. A belligerent Naranappa says: ‘Let’s see who wins in the end – you or me. 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’ (23).

When Naranappa accuses Pranesacharya of corrupting young minds by telling them sexually exciting stories like that of Shakuntala, the Acharya vocalizes the conflict in a third way: ‘With a sigh, he said: ‘Only sin has tongue, virtue has none’ (24): The opposition is thus not only between asceticism and eroticism and between brahminism and anti-brahminism, but also between virtue and sin.

The allegorical mould in which the principal characters have been cast does not, however, remain inflexible for long. For by the end of Part One, the Acharya has taken Naranappa’s mistress, Chandri. This is the key moment in the book, the major turning point. This changes everything. The accuser becomes the accused. The opposition between asceticism and eroticism gets diluted. This is where the realistic details start coming in increasingly.

We are taken inside the mind of Pranesacharya and see how it works in view of the sea change that has taken place. The Acharya’s journey is both real and symbolic, with the writer exercising control over what he is to see and where he is to go. So is the guided tour on which he is taken by Putta. Putta is a protean figure who performs so many multiple roles – ‘he is riddle-master, expert bargainer, pimp without any samskara’ – that it strains the readers’ credibility. The last decision that the Acharya takes to travel alone is again symbolic; ultimately we are all alone and all our crucial decisions have to be our own.

At times, the allegory flies in the face of realism. As Ramanujan has pointed out, it was unrealistic that a learned Brahmin like the Acharya should not have been able to sort out the problem posed by the death of Naranappa (143). Secondly ‘every villager is supposed to know that no crow or vulture would touch a plague-ridden rat’ (143). However both these factual inaccuracies would have remained unnoticed without being pointed out.

The use of allegory and the numerous references in the book, serve as a means of economy as well. If the novel had been written without the allegory and these references, it would probably have been bulkier.

The old oppositions between asceticism and pleasure-seeking, between brahminism and anti-brahminism and between virtue and sin utterly change. Midway the novel converges on to the Acharya and his great need to evolve a new, more rational and more individual identity for himself. Firmly rooted in the Indian tradition, it becomes a modern man’s quest for a new self.
Exercises

1. Pick out the thoughts of the Acharya that show that his valuation of Naranappa has changed after he has taken Chandri at the end of Part One.
2. What is in common among Chandri, Belli and Padmavati? Why does the writer keep comparing them with Matsyagandha, Menaka, Urvashi?
3. There is a Brahmin wife in the novel, who teaches her daughter to deny sex to her husband. Can you identify her? How would you characterize her?
4. In what ways were the low-caste women different from Brahmin wives in the agrahara?

3.3 THEMES

3.3.1 Some Preliminary Considerations

Having discussed the narrative of the novel thoroughly and having also discussed the novel as an allegory, it should be easy for you to answer the question: What is the novel about? What is its major thematic preoccupation?

The most obvious theme seems to be a quest for the right moral choice. The central character is an ascetic Pranesacharya, who is also the spiritual leader of a small Brahmin community. Initially, he is confronted with a situation in which he has to decide what he should do in regard to the cremation of a heretic Brahmin, Naranappa, who is a pleasure seeker. Should they cremate the heretic? And if yes, who should do it? Naranappa had no children of his own. So someone else would have to undertake the task. Later he accidentally meets and mates with Naranappa’s mistress, Chandri. This experience turns all his ascetic and brahminical beliefs upside down and he is confronted with the need to find answers to new and bigger moral questions about himself and his relationship with Chandri and his erstwhile Brahminal followers. He is thus faced with the challenge of having to forge a new identity for himself.

Let us pause for a moment and consider this question of identity which has become crucially important in modern times. How is this identity to be defined? Is this identity determined by the caste or the community of the individual? Or whether the individual carves out an identity of his own? So far as this novel is concerned, the central character’s identity as an ascetic and scholar has been given to him by the Brahmin community of which he is the leader. But later this identity proves unsatisfactory and he tries to forge a new identity for himself as an individual.

How would you like to define yourself? Would you like to define yourself in terms of a particular religion? In other words, would you like to be described as a good Hindu, a good Muslim, a good Christian, a good Sikh? Would any of these descriptions be adequate? Or would you like to describe yourself in more secular, more humanistic terms? When you begin to ask questions like these, you will perhaps discover that the novel deals with concerns that are very real, very Indian, and also, very universal. Is the central character in the novel a rebel against tradition? In what sense does he move towards modernity?
As for the theme of asceticism and eroticism, it is an ancient theme in Indian myth and thought. As T.N. Madan, the well-known anthropologist says in his book called *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture* (1987; 2001), ‘this struggle [between asceticism and eroticism] is one of the abiding themes of Hindu classical literature, as it is of living folklore. It is also the very stuff of everyday life. Is there a Hindu villager, illiterate and unsophisticated though he may be, who is not familiar with the debauchee and the ascetic, with the life of sensuality and as opposed to spirituality” (5)? In the third chapter of the book he deals with three literary representations of the moral dilemma involved in grappling with ‘the contrary and powerful pulls of asceticism and eroticism’ (5). The novels chosen are *Chitralekha* (Hindi: 1933) by Bhagwati Charan Verma, *Samskara* (Kannada: 1965; English trans. 1976) by U.R. Anantha Murthy and *Yayati* (Marathi: 1959; Hindi trans. 1977) by Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar. It will be interesting to find out how these modern novelists have treated this ancient dichotomy between the two. It would be very good if besides *Samskara* you can find time to read at least one novel listed above.

**Questions to ask**

1. The brahminism depicted in it is in a state of decay – except of course its leader, Pranesacharya. Is it then a religious novel? Or, does the novel address larger issues?

2. Related to this question of religious identity is also the question of the place of asceticism and physical pleasure in human life. Is this an either/or question? Is the relationship between the two simple or complex?

The writer has his own way of dealing with the question. And you don’t have to agree with what he is saying in the novel. But you will, I hope, grant that these have been questions that have been crucially important to Indian culture and are still highly relevant.

Of course you are not to forget that what you are to read is a work of fiction, one of the best that India has produced, a work of which, I need hardly say, we can be justly proud. I would suggest you reading the novel at one go – if possible. But at least you must figure out the story of the novel *from the novel* and see how the writer has treated the events in it and what he wants to say in it.

### 3.3.2 Quest for Identity – Journey towards a New Birth

As suggested above, the salient theme of the novel is quest for identity. This quester is of course, the central character of the novel, Pranesacharya. This quest for identity takes the form of a journey and it is a journey of self-discovery.

In his play *The Zoo Story*, Edward Albee says: ‘Sometimes one has to go a long way to come back a short way.’ This is so very true of *Samskara*. Pranesacharya, after his experience of sex with Chandri in the forest finds himself in a spiritual turmoil. Following the death of his wife he thinks there is nothing to hold him back in Durvasapura and he sets himself adrift and is ready to go where his feet take him.
In the course of the journey he experiences what he had not experienced so far in the cloistered Brahmin community of Durvasapurapura. He has his lessons in humility for he is taken to be an ordinary mendicant Brahmin on his beggarly rounds. He meets a half-caste young man Putta, who offers him a bidi (which he refuses) and later offers him some eatables, which he accepts. He moves around with his young companion in the car-festival in Melige, is persuaded to drink coffee, watches a fight between two roosters who get bloody in the process, and also visits a prostitute, barely managing to get away with the promise to return later, and finally sitting down to meals among the poor Brahmans in the temple. The last three experiences that are particularly frightening are the cockfight, the visit to the prostitute, and sitting down to meals in the temple. In the cockfight he has his first brush with life in the raw, with violence and cruelty in the ordinary world and in the second he experiences the stirrings of lust when he is face to face with Padmavati. The third experience that proves the most frightening and that precipitates matters is the experience of being identified in the temple.

This journey also gives him an opportunity to analyze himself or rather to continue his self-analysis that had begun after mating with Chandri. He seeks answers to several questions: Why did he not go back to agrahara after the death of his wife? Was it because of his fear of being caught? Then, what was the extent of his responsibility for making love to Chandri? Initially he believes that his union with her was ‘undesired, as if it was God’s will’ and that he was ‘absolutely not responsible for making love to her’ (95). But he keeps wrestling with himself and feels himself to be in a Trishanku-state till he has finally decided to accept full responsibility for his sexual union with Chandri (‘In that moment, decisive of which way I should turn, the decision was taken to take Chandri. Even if I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still mine. Man’s decision is valid only because it’s possible to lose control, not because it’s easy’ [96]). He also agonizes over his realization that his individual action affects others also (…there’s this deep relation between our decisions and the whole community [106]).

He realizes that he can free himself from this Trishanku-state through a free, deliberate wide-awake, fully willed act (107). Earlier he had decided to go where his legs took him (85). But now he decides to act and to ‘remake myself in true wakefulness’ (107).

In the course of his musings, he thinks of going to Kundapura and living with Chandri. And he comes back to this thought many times during these spells of self-analysis (See pages 107, 109, 112, 113, 114, 122, 125, 127 and 129). This suggests at least the possibility of his finally going to live with Chandri.

Pranesacharya has no sense of regret and naturally no feelings of guilt. But he is constantly haunted by the fear of his old identity as the spiritual leader of Durvasapurapura Brahmans being discovered. In the temple he is recognized but before he is exposed, he runs away from the temple and decides to proceed to Durvasapurapura in order to make a complete confession before the Brahmans and to cremate Naranappa’s dead body. ‘Only then will he be free from fear and be really free to do whatever he wants to do’. ‘In full view of the frightened Brahmans, I’ll stand exposed like the naked quick of life; and I, elder in their midst, will turn into a new man at midnight...When I tell them about myself, there should be no taint of repentance in me, no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner’ (132).
It is very natural that the writer should use the metaphor of rebirth or remaking while talking of Pranescharyaya’s new identity. Witness his musings on page 107 quoted above. Near the end when he has taken the final decision of confession, he imagines that he ‘will turn into a new man at midnight’ (131). The rebirth motif reminds us that the title Samskara not only means a rite for a dead man, but, as Ramakrishnan suggests, also transformation ‘The rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living’ (137).

Another related metaphor that Pranescharyaya uses to describe his uncertain spiritual state is that of a lost soul, a ghost. After the loss of his wife, he says, he ‘entered limbo, a lost soul’ (120-21). But he also dreads entering the real world, the demonic world of cock-fights, a world of cruelty and violence and passion. ‘I dread it. It’s the dread of being transformed from ghost to demon’ (118). The encounter with Padmavati also offers him another chance to leave ‘the ghostly stage’ behind and ‘move to the next stage of soul’ (121) but he still dreads the moment of transition and goes away for the temple. It is only in the temple that he decides to take the final plunge and be a fully autonomous person.

We can see Pranescharyaya moving out of himself and undergoing experiences that he had not dreamt of but significantly he finally decides to come back home. Clearly the movement is from the identity given by a moribund, closed, god-driven community to the identity as a fully responsible individual. When the novel ends, the confession is still several hours away and so is the new identity that he will make for himself. But though he is autonomous, he feels himself to be accountable to his community. Hence his decision to go back to his agrahara. Pranescharyaya could be called an insider-rebel but he is not an iconoclast of the kind Naranappa is.

Exercises

1. Can you chart out the stages in Pranescharyaya’s journey towards self-discovery? Begin with his quest for salvation through penance.
2. Look for other examples of the use of the metaphor of rebirth or its variations in the text.

3.3.3 Asceticism and Eroticism

We have already talked of the theme of asceticism and eroticism at some length.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the Hindus believe in four ashramas or four distinct stages of life: that of the student, the householder, the hermit and the ascetic. A related concept is that of the four ends (purusharthas) of life: dharma or righteousness, duty or virtue, artha or material gain, kama, love or pleasure, and finally moksha, liberation from worldly life. Clearly pursuit of asceticism is but one stage of life and sexual pleasure is an important goal of it. But in popular imagination, asceticism, other worldliness and a life-denying ethic have been over-valourized. Witness the veneration that the ascetics once enjoyed in common life as in the courts of kings. Samskara represents a society where asceticism is prioritized and valorized beyond what is due to it and is opposed to the pursuit of pleasure. But I suggest that we need to
interpret the term ‘eroticism’ broadly to include not only pursuit of sex and pleasure but also the whole engagement with the affairs of the world.

The following points may also be kept in mind:

1. Asceticism and eroticism are represented allegorically and in opposition to each other. The novel presents the inadequacy of asceticism and the growth of the central character to a new awareness of the need to go beyond the duality of asceticism and eroticism.

2. The opposition between the two ideals is stated in extreme terms. Pranesacharya is a householder in name only because at sixteen he married an invalid wife who was incapable of bearing children and has been living the life of an ascetic. So great is his self-denial that even though he tells sexually exciting stories from puranas and other ancient books, he himself remains unaffected by them. On the other hand, Naranappa is a heretic Brahman who has rejected his own wife, who has broken every known Brahman taboo and who has been living with a whore for ten long years.

3. The turning point comes when Pranesacharya has his first experience of sexual pleasure with a low-caste voluptuous woman. This is a key episode in the novel. It marks ‘the fall’ of Pranesacharya, but it is a fortunate fall. His long-suppressed hunger for sex – ‘tigerish lust’ as the writer calls it – leaps up and bewilders him. He becomes aware of his physical needs of pleasure and of hunger and those of the other senses. His gaze turns this worldly and he now wants a share in all the good things of life. This mating marks the beginning of a transformation in him – the end of the old self and the birth of a new one.

4. We are given a close-up of the interior monologue of Pranesacharya as he comes to terms with his past and as he endeavours to deal with the real world around him shown by Putta. He owns complete responsibility for his mating with Chandri and is possibly thinking of living with her.

5. Pranesacharya emerges as a fully autonomous human being who accepts complete responsibility for his actions – his responsibility to cremate Naranappa and also explain his liaison with Chandri to his community of Brahmins. But he also recognizes the difficulty of making moral choices without infringing the autonomy of other individuals. He wants to transcend the duality of asceticism and eroticism so that he is not faced with the necessity of having to decide.

6. The Acharya’s confrontation with Naranappa loses much of its meaning. In a very real sense, Pranesacharya of Parts two and three, belongs to Naranappa’s party and he knows it.

3.3.4 Brahminism and Anti-Brahminism

1. Brahminism and anti-brahminism is another important thematic strand in the novel.

2. Anantha Murthy is himself a Madhava Brahmin reared in an agrahara.

3. The writer’s presentation of brahminism as being decadent is almost savage. The Brahmins are greedy and gluttonous, and lead a parasitic existence. They are ignorant and grossly superstitious. The only exception is Pranesacharya. Naranappa is a lapsed Brahmin who knows the different sins the Brahmins are guilty of and who brazenly indulges in all those things that are held sacred by the Brahmins.
4. The life of Brahmans is circumscribed by taboos and the fear of pollution.

5. The inability of their leader Pranesacharya to find a solution to the question: who will cremate the heretic Naranappa? – brings the entire agrahara to a halt.

6. Several questions arise. First, is the novel a complete repudiation of brahminism? Is the writer viewing brahminism as a critical outsider or as he viewing it as a critical insider? Naranappa’s defiant anti-brahminism is clearly stated in the novel. But how far does his opposition go? Does he suggest an alternative to the system that he rejects? In what other ways does the writer express his criticism of Brahmans or Brahminism? A related question is: who is a Brahmin?

7. Anantha Murthy’s views about brahminism and related issues:

i. **Feelings towards Brahmin orthodoxy:** ‘Now I had a strong kind of feeling against Brahmin orthodoxy. But I also had a fear of losing myself, getting myself torn away, from my community. Nobody can get out of the hold of community easily….I wasn’t anti-brahmin. Nor was I able to say that everything was fine.’ (‘Tradition and Creativity’, in Literature and Culture: 118-19.)

ii. **Different responses to Samskara:** ‘In my village everyone thought Samskara was a totally realistic novel and they identified every character with a living person in the agrahara. And when I went back to my village the woman next door said, ‘O Anantha, you have created Chandi perfectly.’ Each and every character was real. And the novel was considered against some people in the village. Now you come to Shimoga, the district headquarters, and see how the novel is read there. There it was seen as a novel against the Madhava Brahmans. It became a little abstract. Not against some characters, but against one set of characters. They said it was anti-Madhva. In Bangalore it was anti-Brahmin. It became more abstract. When Naipaul read it, he found it anti-Hindu. Again more abstract’. (‘Tradition and Creativity’, 121-22)

‘And now many of my radical friends say that it [Samskara] is a Pro-Brahmin novel, that I have really championed the cause of the Brahmans’ (122).

iii. **On Tradition:** To me tradition does not mean something of the past….Tradition is a kind of continuity of memory which makes you human, which makes it possible for you to interact within a certain context, thereby adding something significant to that context. It has to be a living tradition. For, let us not forget the fact that whatever tradition we could have had has been lost to us through a certain amnesia because of our terrible attraction to the modern world system.’ (‘Tradition and Creativity’, 125).

### 3.3.5 Tradition and Change

The title of this section is another way of putting the preceding theme of brahminism and anti-brahminism; only it is broader.
Like a large number of post-independence Indian novels, Samskara captures a moment in India's long, ongoing struggle with tradition and change. Ananth Murthy had 'a strong kind of feeling against Brahmin orthodoxy' and in this novel his critical gaze is directed towards the brahminical tradition represented by a set of Madhav Brahmins in a remote Karnatak village during the thirties or the forties. The vitality of a tradition depends, to use the words of R. Radhakrishnan, on 'the ability or otherwise of any system or worldview to deal with a crisis effectively and legitimately.' The moribund community fails this test. The brahminical tradition embodied in the inhabitants of the small Brahmin colony of Durvasapura is in a state of decay, except its ascetic and scholarly leader, Pranesacharya. The colony is faced with a grave crisis, which even its learned leader fails to resolve. What are they to do? Brahminism doesn't seem to offer a solution. Yet there is a solution, which is a product of fresh thinking and it comes through the low-caste but clear-eyed Chandri. While the Brahmins are busy debating about who should cremate the childless heretic Naranappa, Chandri finding that the body has started rott ing, takes the matter in her hand, treats the dead body as a dead body and with the help of a Muslim friend of Naranappa cremates it in the darkness of the night ('Only one thought burned clear: it's rott ing there, that thing, it's stink ing there, its belly swollen, ...It's neither Brahmin nor Shudra. A carcass. A stink ing rott ing carcass' [68]).

The suggestion is that the brahminical society has lost its capacity to question itself and to adapt itself to changing circumstances, which implies that it has lost its capacity to renew itself and needs the re-vitalizing touch of someone who lives on the periphery of the brahminical world.

This touch that will revitalize the best Brahmin in the agrahara, Pranesacharya, also comes through the low-caste Chandri. Chandri, through her mating with him, is a source of new life for him and acts as a catalytic agent for change. The writer has invested the sexual union with allegorical significance and has made it centrally important. By doing so, the writer is suggesting the need for a paradigm shift in the caste relationships. The archetypal model so often alluded to in the novel is the union between Parasbar and Matyagandha.

If Chandri reawakens all his senses, Putta continues Pranesacharya's education by opening up the sublunary world to him in all its varied hues, including the world of ordinary pleasures, passion and violence and cruelty. And Putta is a half-caste Maler.

When the novel closes, Pranesacharya's confession is still several hours away. What his new relationship with his agrahara will be, no one can say. The heretic Brahmin Naranappa is dead and gone. In the changed circumstances, the only hope for change lies with Pranesacharya, who is an insider and who with his new orientation can be a harbinger of change. But will he be a changed man? And will he be the harbinger of change? The novel ends on an uncertain note: 'Pranesacharya waited, anxious, expectant.'(135)

The novel's message seems to be that change can come in tradition through a critical insider.
3.4 LET US SUM UP

_Samskara_ is Janus-faced. It looks back at Indian tradition and makes full use of its resources and patterns; and at the same time it looks forward to modern times and focuses on the modern man’s search for his true self, true identity. A sensitive individual living in a culture such as ours, which is in a stage of transition has necessarily to face the crisis of identity that Praneshacharya had to face. Ours is also an age of evasion and it takes some strength of character to own up our responsibility for what we have done and its consequences. Moreover, when values are in a state of flux, decision-making becomes even more difficult. All this is well and truly reflected in our novel.

3.5 GLOSSARY

_Allegory:_

The term allegory is derived from Greek _allegoria_, from _allos_ ‘other’+ -_agoria_ ‘speaking’, ‘speaking otherwise’. Cudden in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1992 edition) defines an allegory ‘as a story in verse, or prose with a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning; and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning. It is a story, therefore, that can be read, understood and interpreted at two levels. It is thus closely related to the fable and the parable. The allegory could be literary or pictorial or both’ (22).

_Illustrative and Representational:_

‘The connection between the fictional world and the real world can be either representational or illustrative. The images in a narrative may strike us at once as an attempt to create a replica of actuality just as the images in certain paintings or works of sculpture may, or they may strike us as an attempt merely to remind us of an aspect of reality rather than convey a total and convincing impression of the real world to us, as certain kinds of visual art also do. That kind of art, literary or plastic, which seeks to duplicate reality we will designate by the world “represent” in its various forms. For that kind of art which seeks only to suggest an aspect of reality we will use the world “illustrate”....The illustrative is symbolic; the representational is mimetic’ (Scholes and Kellogg: 84).

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Which is the major theme in the novel – asceticism and eroticism or brahminism and anti-brahminism? Discuss.

2. In what sense do you think the author is rooted in the Indian tradition?
3. Allegory often has a didactic intent behind it. Do you think this applies to *Samskara*?
4. Do you think the novel is a complete repudiation of brahminism and therefore of Hinduism?

### 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


This section is based on Prof. K.V. Thirumalesh’s article entitled ‘The Context of Samskara’ in the anthology U.R. Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara: A Critical Reader* (2005), 79-80.