

Samskara: evolution of self



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Samskara: Evolution of Self The novel Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man, by U. R. Anatha Murthy, tells the story of a Brahmin village community, an agrahara, and the revered Brahmin man Praneshacharya who lives there. Central to the novel is its namesake, the concept of samskara. Adjacent to the title page, the author supplies the many definitions of the samskara, including: “ making perfect”, “ refinement”, “ the realizing of past perceptions”, and “ any rite or ceremony” just to name a few.

Throughout the novel, these various understandings of samskara play into the lives of the Brahmins living in the agrahara of the protagonist.

Particularly for Praneshacharya, he goes through a sort of rite of passage throughout the novel, in a way his own samskara. The novel begins immediately with the death of Naranappa, a Brahmin member of the agrahara who had long abandoned his orthodox Brahmin dharma.

Naranappa, though deceased at the outset of the novel, is a major character, who acts as a polar opposite to Praneshacharya.

Naranappa breaks all tradition from the Brahmins of the agrahara. He eats meat, he drinks alcohol, and he even disregards the caste system, sleeping with Chandri, a lowcaste woman. In his life, Naranappa defied the rigid moral code of the Brahmins, and then in death through his samskara, his death rites, he challenges the traditions of the agrahara, and in doing so exposes the samskara of the local Brahmins, or lack thereof. Naranappa’s death triggers a comical confusion of Brahmin traditional funeral rites.

Having essentially renounced his brahminhood through his conduct and going so far as threatening to become muslim, Naranappa could well have

been excommunicated from the Brahmin community; however, since he was not, it was understood that he must be cremated by Brahmins, lest any pollution enter upon the ceremony. This was problematic for two men, Lakshmana and Garuda, who wanted to acquire the gold jewelry donated by Naranappa's wife Chandri towards the death rites. In this way, the samskara, or refinement, of these Brahmin men is called into question through Naranappa's samskara.

Praneshacharya is affected in a very different way by Naranappa's death. Having lived the life of an orthodox Brahmin all his life, studying the scriptures and such, Praneshacharya knows only of the ascetic lifestyle of purity, avoiding pollution at all times, learned from scriptures and tradition. His samskara, his perfecting, involved not lived experience but recitations of scripture. He even reads erotic scriptural passages yet understands not of the sexual compulsions they relate to.

However, through his stressful dealings with Naranappa's death rites, he has a sudden reversal moment of his thinking in his experience with Chandri. This moment is the beginning of his samskara, which takes him through various stages of self-reflection, thinking through his past (samskara), until he ultimately decides to return to the village, yet it is unclear what he plans to do once there. By the end of the novel, Praneshacharya does not entirely change his way of thinking to that of Naranappa's. Indeed, he is still very different in personality, however there are many overlaps.

Praneshacharya does many things which are strictly forbidden by his orthodox Brahmin Mahdva background. He sleeps with a lowcaste woman,

Chandri, also the widowed wife of Naranappa, herein lying one major connection between the two men. He also frinks coffee in town with Putta, and even eats food at the temple during the time he should be fasting after his wife's death. Praneshacharya seems to accept these violations as his decisions, and therefore his identity. By identifying with these experiences, he is confirming his experience as samskara, a rite of passage.

He does however still fear many aspects of his anti-brahmin lifestyle as reflected through his experiences with Putta in the town. He fears the cock-fighting ring and the demoniac attitudes of those involved. He also still cannot bear the pollution of his unwashed hands after leaving the temple meal. Clearly, Praneshacharya is in a state of transition in the novel, and indeed it is part of his samskara. The final line of the novel suggests even he does not know where he stands, just that it isn't as before.