

Samskara as an Existential Novel: A Critique

Madhushri Kallimani

Assistant Professor of English,

Rani Channamma University, Bealgavi

India

Existentialism is about being saint without God; being your own hero, without all the sanction and support of religion or society.

Anita Brookner

Existentialism was unknown until Kierkegaard and Sartre introduced it to the literary world. Existentialism is a philosophical theory which deals with one's search for meaning in life. The key words of this theory are existence and essence. The theory explores that a person changes according to the experiences one experiences in life. Existentialism is connected to the irrationalities and uncertainties of life where a character turns utterly absurd and confused as nothing seems to be clear and permanent. The past, the present and the future remain unconnected for the character. In existentialism the character alienates one's own self and tries to occupy another. Existentialism gets its name from an insistence that a human life is understandable only in terms of an individual man's existence, his particular experience of life. It says that a man lives rather than is, and that everyman's experience of life is unique, radically different from everyone else's and can be understood truly, only in terms of his involvement in life or commitment to it; from the outside a man appears to be just another natural creature, from the inside he is an entire universe, the center of infinity. The existentialist insists upon this latter radically subjective view and from this grows much rest of existentialism.

Existentialism insists upon reuniting the lower or irrational parts of the psyche with the higher. It insists that man must be taken in his wholeness and not in some divided state, that whole man contains not only intellect but also anxiety, guilt and the will to power which modify and sometimes overwhelm the reason. A man is seen in this light is fundamentally ambiguous, if not mysterious full of contradictions and tensions which cannot be dissolved

simply by taking thought. Kierkegaard emphasized that we encounter the true self not in the detachment of thought but in the involvement and agony of choice and in the pathos of commitment to our choice. Man is convinced that he lives in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other men, from his own true self. For the man alienated from God, from nature, from his fellow man and from himself, what is left at last is but nothingness. In a purposeless universe man is condemned to freedom because he is the only creature who is self surpassing who can become something other than he is. Precisely because there's no God to give purpose to the universe, each man must accept individual responsibility for his own becoming, a burden made heavier by the fact that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men 'the image of man as he ought to be'. A man is the sum total of the acts that make up his life- no more, no less- and though coward has made himself cowardly its always possible for him to change and make himself heroic.

Samskara is a novel by U R Ananthamurthy noted for its controversial and satirical issues like caste, morality, humanity and existentialism. Samskara is popularly known for the mocking societal conventions, which also explores the journey of existentialism. The novel juxtaposes both decadent Hinduism and Brahmanism. As a religious novel about a decaying brahmin colony in the south Indian village of Karnataka, Samskara serves as an allegory rich in realistic detail, a contemporary reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths, and a serious, poetic study of a religious man living in a community of priests gone to seed. A death, which stands as the central event in the plot, brings in its wake a plague, many more deaths, live questions with only dead answers, moral chaos, and the rebirth of one man. The volume provides a useful glossary of Hindu myths, customs, Indian names, flora, and other terms.

The main character of the novel named Praneshacharya, a severe Brahmin, is the victim of existentialism in Samskara. He encounters with existentialism and turns existential only after experiencing several incidents which come across his life creating a paradigm shift. The novel too ends abruptly and absurdly symbolizing Praneshacharya's life. Samskara represents an existential novel only because of Praneshacharya and his existential journey. The character introduced in the beginning of the novel turns topsy-turvy at the end. There are several instances throughout the novel which transform Praneshacharya to an existential character. The characters who change him are Naranappa, Lord Maruti and Chandri. The beginning of the novel introduces Praneshacharya as a devoted husband to his ailing and bedridden wife

and a religious scholar of Agrahara, a great ascetic and 'Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning'. His marriage to an invalid wife reveals that he believed in salvation through suffering. The occurrences which transform him to an existential character are Naranappa's death, Naranappa's arguments over Brahminism, the Vedic texts, Lord Maruti and his sexual encounter with Chandri.

His existential journey begins with Naranappa's death. Naranappa is a foil character introduced in the novel to challenge and oppose Praneshacharya and his principles. Naranappa though a Brahmin, was notorious as a scoundrel because of his non brahmanical ways like eating meat, polluting the temple pond with his Muslim friends and relationship with Chandri, his low caste concubine. When he died the whole agrahara condemned him and questioned the responsibility of performing funeral rights to the dead body of Naranappa as all the Brahmins living there considered him as a non Brahmin. It was Praneshacharya who had to take up the responsibility of funeral rights and find out what to be done by referring to his Vedic texts. He remembers how Naranappa had challenged him while he was alive, how Naranappa had ironically claimed that his preaching were preaching of love and lust and as a result Praneshacharya had declined preaching those luscious puranic stories. To quote, 'That night, when he sat down for his prayers, he couldn't still the waves of his mind'. He said, 'O God', in distress. He gave up telling the luscious Puranic stories in the evenings and started on moral tales of penance. The result-his own enthusiasm for reciting the puranas faded and died. The young listeners who used to look at him with lively eyes and bring joy to his heart, stopped coming. Only women bent on earning merit, uttering the names of god over yawns in the middle of the stories, and old men, were his audience now'.

The above instance is an example of Naranappa being successful in altering the preaching of Praneshacharya. After turning every leaf of the text Praneshacharya is bewildered to realize that there was no remedy and was afraid of admitting that the Book of Dharma had no solution to the present dilemma. This weakens him and his faith in the Vedic texts. But as a firm believer of God, he decides that only God can save him and solve this riddle. He visits Lord Maruti temple and humbly worships the lord with utter devotion for the solution. To quote,

'Praneshacharya waited desperately for the god's favour, His solution. 'Without a proper rite, the dead body is rotting; o Maruti, how long is this ordeal going to last?' -he pleaded. 'If it shouldn't be done, give me a sign, at least the flower on the left, please,' he begged. He

entreated. He sang devotional love-songs to the god. He became a child, a beloved, a mother. He recalled the holy songs that blamed the Lord, listed His hundred and one faults. The man-sized Monkeygod Maruti just stood still, carrying on His palm the mountain with the life-giving herb that He carried to save the wounded hero in the epic war. Praneshacharya prostrated himself, laying the entire length of his body on the ground, and prayed. It was evening. Night fell. In the lamplight, the flower-decked Maruti didn't yield; gave neither the right flower nor the left'.

The above lines are clear enough to prove that Praneshacharya has utterly failed to receive solution to this puzzle even by Lord Maruti. This incident shakes him to the core and makes go deep into his own self and introspect, question and distrust the hard ascetic learning of several years, belief in the Vedic texts and firm faith in the Lord above. Wearied and heart broken by the incident and weakened by the hunger for three days, Praneshacharya leaves the temple as he is reminded of his sick wife and the medicine he had to give her.

Praneshacharya's shocking encounters with life don't end here, as he had to still come across some more experiences which would shatter him more. As he moves on from the temple towards his home, it was pitch dark night in the forest where he surprisingly meets Chandri. Chandri is Naranappa's concubine. Chandri is a very humane woman. It is only Chandri who comes forward and sheds off her jewellery, when the financial problem to perform funeral rites to Naranappa's dead body is discussed in the agrahara, where all great Acharyas were present. She symbolizes 'Prakruti' and is sexually abundant. Apart from Praneshacharya it is only Chandri who is really worried about Naranappa's funeral rites. She respects Praneshacharya deeply and is compassionate towards him as she evidences his struggle. She is also mesmerized by his aura and remembers her mother's words that a prostitute should bear children from such men. She secretly follows Praneshacharya and witnesses all his acts. She is also guilty thinking that she too is responsible for the present status of Praneshacharya. Filled with compassion for Praneshacharya she falls at his feet in order to seek forgiveness. As she touches, Praneshacharya who is unaware of the warmth and pleasure of a woman's touch, suddenly loses his self and control over his mind and body which in turn leads to a sensual and sexual experience for both, especially for Praneshacharya. He is intoxicated by the unusual pleasure and is in trance. When he returns to his normal state he realizes that he is no more a pure Brahmin or a crest jewel of Vedic learning. As an utter loser he returns to agrahara and confesses his failure. To cite,

'I've lost it. If I don't have the courage to speak tomorrow you must speak out. I'm ready to do the funeral rites myself. I've no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that's all.' Having said the words, Praneshacharya felt all his fatigue drop from him. For the first time, a desolation, a feeling of being orphaned, entered his inmost sense. Thoughts after waking are different from the thoughts when one is unaware. He became aware, this life is a duplicity. Now he's really involved in the wheel of karmas. The Acharya closed his eyes, drew a long breath, and gathered courage. But the words that came out of his mouth were: 'I'm lost. I couldn't get Maruti to say anything. I know nothing. You do whatever your hearts say.'

As a lost man Praneshacharya walks off after his wife's death. He is in a confused chaotic state. A state of absurdity hovers within his self. He experiences the meaninglessness and uncertainties of life for the first time. He questions the reality of his existence and essence of life. He craves to meet Chandri who has disappeared from agrahara. He thinks he could solve this dilemma of his past and present life only through Chandri. To cite,

'Meaning to walk wherever his legs took him, he walked towards the east. He remembered the first maxim of yoga, 'Yoga is the stilling of the waves of the mind'. 'But No!' he said to himself. 'Put aside even the consolations of recitations and God's holy names, stand alone,' he said to himself. Dualities, conflict, rushed into my life. I hung suspended between two truths, like Trishanku. The root of all my anxiety is because I slept with Chandri as in a dream. Hence the present ambiguity, this Trishanku-state. I'll be free from it only through a free deliberate wide-awake fully-willed act. Otherwise, a piece of string in the wind, a cloud taking on shapes according to the wind. I've become a mere thing. By an act of will I'll become human again. I'll become responsible for myself. That is ... that is ... I'll give up this decision to go where the legs take me, I'll catch a bus to Kundapura and live with Chandri. I'll then end all my troubles. I'll remake myself in full wakefulness'

By the end of the novel, Praneshacharya is transformed in such a manner that he is juxtaposed with Naranappa. He accepts that Naranappa has won and he has lost. Praneshacharya in the beginning of the novel stands as a contrast to the same at the end. He looks forward to meet Chandri and is expectant. This existential journey of life teaches him what those vedic texts could not teach and transform him into a new human.

Works Cited:

Ananthmurthy U R. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/encap/resources/Existentialism.pdf>

<https://mullin35.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/bigelow-a-primer-of-existentialism.pdf>