Research Paper

Morality of the Transgressor in U.R. Anantmoorthy’s *Samskara*

Two things fill my heart with constantly renewed and
gripping wonder and awe, the more often and more intently
my thought focuses on them: the starry heaven overhead and
the moral principle within.

- Kant (qtd. in Puri 85)

In every age and every epoch, there have lived men and women who conformed to the
dictates of social authorities. Such people tried to uphold the rules which the
authorities—whether legal or religious—set for them. However, time and again in the
annals of time, mankind has also witnessed the lives of those few who have tried to
live upholding their inner truth, in the course violating the codes of the society.
Repeatedly, they have been called heretics, lunatics, criminals and offenders of the
law. Such adherents of the inner truth chose not to be hypocritical, and attached
greater value to their integrity instead of maintaining an outer veneer of respectability
and honour.

Over the centuries philosophers and thinkers have defined morality in various
ways. However, none can actually give a single point of view with regard to moral
behavior. The first perspective considers that thing or behavior to be moral which the
community sanctions. Breaking of these standards by the members of the society
incurs the hostility of the people at large. These rules have their foundation in religion,
economics, politics and also the power structures of the society. The second
dimension of morality takes into consideration the individual’s point of view. Here,
morality is determined by the conscience of the individual and not the diktats of the
society. The voice of the conscience is given foremost importance with even personal
advantages and disadvantages not given any regard. The paper adopts the stance that
individual morality is a superior and a higher value as compared to communal
that it is quite possible that while the members of the society follow the
commandments of the societal authorities, they may not be conscientious individuals.
Also, it is possible that a community with lesser rigid social and moral confines
consists of greater moral individuals. The stance adopted in the paper draws on the
idea that strict and rigid moral laws of a society may lead to hypocritical behavior
within a society, leading to greater amount of hidden deviant behaviour.

Lionel Trilling equates individual morality with the word sincerity. He gives an
account of Professor Henri Peyre, who in his *Literature and Sincerity*, writes that
sincerity is primarily a French concept and in French literature, sincerity is being what
one is really before oneself and others. Being true to oneself is also deeply connected
with the ‘being’ of a person. This is what Trilling calls ‘authenticity’ and he is of the
opinion that the claims of the society on the individuals destroy this authenticity. In
his analysis of the last part of Wordsworth’s ‘Michael’ (1800), Trilling explicates on
the idea of authenticity – to be oneself. In the last lines of the poem we see Michael,
who has lost his son, building the sheepfold that was left incomplete by his son. His
neighbours say that sometimes he just sits without doing anything and does not
express anything. Thus, this becoming one- of him and his sadness- according to
Trilling connotes authenticity. The idea of upholding one’s inner truth is in
synchronization with individualism and against absolutism. Pepita Hazrahi observes
that “there is something immoral in the very notion of an absolute value or end, an
absolute ideal, inasmuch as it ultimately denies our freedom of choice”(61).

Morality as a social code and convention is usually determined by two authorities –
the religious and the legal. The legal is more often than not contingent upon the
religious because morality is primarily associated with the soul, which is a concern of
religion. However, the moral directions given by such authorities deal with the
‘ought’ rather than the ‘is’ of human behavior. Often, as George F. McLean opines,
things are not forbidden because they are bad, but they are bad because they are
forbidden. Hence, morality becomes “arbitrary” and “authoritarian”(215). Also, the
basis of most moral rules is the apprehension of coerciveness associated with them.
People carry out such behavior due to fear and in such a case, “an action has no moral
value at all if it is the product of constraint resulting from fear alone (Fries 204-5).
Added to this,
The morality of the public life can only be utilitarian; All and everyone becomes a means for profit and power. Morality done in these terms becomes the radically immoral reduction and abuse of the human person who in truth is the image of God. (McLean 217)

It is in light of such ideas championing the morality of the individual that the paper seeks to analyze U.R. Ananthmoorthy’s novel Sanskara. The study primarily deals with the sexual transgression in the novel. It endeavours to bring to fore the idea that the protagonist Praneshacharya is an individual who exhibits individual morality flouting the tenets of communal morality. In his commitment towards individual morality that he would rather leave a place where he is greatly revered (to wander in anonymity) than be a hypocrite. Transgression in the present context can be most appropriately defined in the words of Bataille, “the prophet of transgression”(Jenks 88). For him, transgression meant an “inner experience” in which an individual went beyond the rational behavior, which pertained to “profit, productivity or self-preservation”(Suleiman 75).

Anantmoorthy’s Sanskara is seen as a vicious indictment of the orthodoxy of the rigid brahminical system. However, another perspective that pervades beyond this one and adds to the depth of the novel is the issue of the conflict between the flesh and the soul. The novel puts forth the challenges faced by the aspiring ascetic Praneshacharya who tries to rise above his bodily fetters. However, in a deluge of unforeseen circumstances, he is carried away from his spiritual practices, to explore grave questions about life and its meaning. It is not only the sexual act itself that threatens Praneshacharya’s tapas but also the fact that it is an act of transgression.

Praneshacharya, the ‘crest-jewel of Vedanta is a revered leader of a Brahmin community. He is engaged in serious spiritual endeavours to achieve that which he desires most – salvation. A great scholar of the community, his life is full of outstanding achievements professionally.

He knows all about alliances and misalliances, has studied it all in Kashi, he knows all the scriptures, earned the title Crest-Jewel of Vedic learning...our Acharya has won all sorts of arguments with all the super-pundits, your and
ours, won honours of every seat of learning in the South, fifteen lace shawls and silver platters (Samskara 6).

Personally too, he seeks no pleasure from his wife as he deliberately married an invalid woman, unable to give him any pleasure or children. This selfless service of his wife is another austerity that he pursues in order to strengthen his claim to salvation.

Living within the boundaries of the agrahara, Praneshacharya is largely distinguished from other Brahmins of the agrahara in his compassionate and austere nature. His life is forever caught in the denial mode where he chooses a life of celibacy and chastity in spite of being an expert narrator of erotic descriptions of the Puranas. It is important to take note of the fact here that Praneshacharya’s strict discipline and self-restraint is not baseless. Celibacy was of prime value in one’s education and realization of life in the Vedic culture. For a student of Vedanta brhamcharya was a regulation which promised great spiritual benefits. As Carl Olson opines, “The classical Hindu attitude towards celibacy is captured nicely in the Apastamba Dharmasutra, where it affirms that those practicing celibacy attain immortality and acquire superhuman powers on earth” (Olson 14). In Sacred and Profane: Dimensions of love as exemplified in the Gitagovind of Jayadev, Lee Siegel writes that Vatsyayana composed the Kamasutra only after observing strict celibacy. As Siegel elucidates, passionlessness remained the goal even in the sexual science, the art and science of love had to applied with restraint, with the senses under control (Jitendriyah), never with excessive passion (atiraga). Also, sexual behaviour is seen by Vatsyayana as a means to forward other aims of life, not as an act in itself. Moreover, his fidelity to the cause of celibacy was consolidated after Praneshacharya witnesses the fall of his friend Mahabala who got lured by the pleasures of the flesh while he was still studying.

Praneshacharya’s association and commitment towards asceticism is untouched with any experience of the samsara. However, struggling with the scriptures to derive an answer about the cremation of Naranappa, he undergoes an experience that challenges all his austerity and scholasticism. All his life trying to oppose Naranappapa’s hedonistic way of living, Praneshacharya, suddenly after a sexual encounter (ironically with Naranappapa’s concubine) is shaken and pulled into a vortex of
conflicting emotions. Involved in deep austerity, hungry to please god Maruti, he unites with Chandri

His body’s tigerish lust, talking on a form of pity and compassion, tamed by a righteousness, which had brought him this far – it could be nothing else. At the touch of Chandri’s…the animal leaped to its natural self and bared its teeth (Sanskara 81).

Sura P. Rath highlights the effect of this encounter on Praneshacharya, seeing Chandri as the agent of destiny which opens the door of newer revelations to him.

She punctuates his blindness towards his repressed desires, in the process bringing him an insight he was incapable of on his own… he learns what Naranappa knew all along, that breaking social taboos and challenging communal superstitions does not lead to all hell breaking loose upon the violator, that fear is often a culture’s tool of repression (Baral 107).

Praneshacharya represented in the agrahara the orthodox form of brahminism in its concentrated form. He was the only one who practiced such great austerity in Durvasapur, otherwise populated by lustful, greedy and gluttonous Brahmins. However, it is this new experience now that consumes his loyalty to the cause of salvation. At the pinnacle of his life as a scholar and as an aspirant of salvation he realizes the void in his life, a sense of lack which, when fulfilled has a rejuvenating effect on him. Being bound by duty his whole life, Rath asserts, he discovers the pleasures of spontaneity.

This act of his can be seen as a transgression in two ways. Firstly, it is an act of transgression as a married man and secondly because he, the ‘Crest -jewel of Vedanta’, has slept with a low-caste, meat-eating prostitute. However, for Praneshacharya this act brings release from a self-imposed asceticism. Like the prison house of The Scarlet Letter, Praneshacharya is caught in the prison-house of the agrahara, with its redundant and constraining Brahminical system. But here also like the rose bush in Hawthorne’s novel, there is the night-queen, which symbolizes the fragrance of nature as opposed to the society. Earlier detached and dispassionate, now the acharya wants a share of every pleasure for himself. Now he is no longer the epitome of purity, chastity and virtuosity, as now he has the desire to “tell lies, to hide
things, to think of one’s own welfare”, wanting to live fearlessly and openly like Naranappa. He is unable to resolve this dilemma till the end. However, Praneshacharya’s morality is proved by the fact that he soon becomes aware of the battle waged on the arena of his mind. Mukherjee says about this combat,

During his introspection a Sanskrit verse about man’s sinfulness comes to his mind. He rejects because he does not think that what he has done is sinful. Readymade words and verses will not do for him anymore, yet this desire to free himself from self-deception conflicts with his inability to tell the truth to the community (Baral 91).

Praneshacharya now falls in the category of a transgressor who is right by himself but would be labeled a sinner by the community. His behavior is also not totally outrageous to the readers because the agrahara is populated by hypocritical Brahmins who indulge in same transgressive behavior with prostitutes or lower-caste women. Hence, to the readers as well as to Praneshacharya himself, the question that assumes colossal dimensions is as to what is moral and what is immoral.

Praneshacharya wishes to free himself from his duties and obligations to the community as deceiving the other Brahmins would be against his inner truth. Not wanting to do so he chooses to walk away. Tirumalesh rightly says here that Praneshacharya till now existed in a past, not the present (Baral 81). When he is jolted in the present world through this encounter with Chandri, he realizes that he is nowhere. He, in order to be moral prepares himself for the scourge of infamy and humiliation. He wishes to confess before the whole agrahara that their much-revered leader is also an ordinary human being, driven by inner desires.

Chandri, get up. Let’s go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we’ll say this happened. You tell them yourself. As for my authority to decide for the agrahara, I have ...lost it. I’m ready to do the funeral rites for myself. I’ve no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that’s all (Samskara 68).

This need to be true to his self is so ardent that he realizes that the Brahminism he upheld till now was only the outer layer- this layer, now striped off, makes him search for his true self. The word samskara also means reformatory method, and hence the protagonist’s outlook towards himself and the world is reformed in the course of the
novel. Compared to his fellow Brahmins, he is at least ready to confess his deeds. He acknowledges that his morality consists of his inner truth, which he cannot ignore. He knows he has done an act, gained unprecedented pleasure and he wants to own up his mistake totally aware of its immensity. He, one who preached staunch austerity, was ashamed to acknowledge before everybody that he had also experienced the pleasures, which Naranappa relished. As Mukherjee suggests, “the priest is the repository of collectives values of a community; hence his violation of these values appears to have momentous significance”(Baral 92). However, he could not gather enough courage to reveal before the community that their venerable religious leader has indulged in guilty pleasure. He wondered if it was “pity, self-preservation, habit, inertia, sheer hypocrisy?” and finds the answer that “even if he had left desire, desire had not left him”.

Hinduism insists that a human being must go through all the four ashramas in order to attain moksha- brahcharya, grihasta, vanprastha and sanyasa. However, in Praneshacharya’s life we see the desire to pass from brahcharya to the third stage, without experiencing pleasures of a householder and thus, this experience is lacking in his strivings for moksha. He is not beyond bodily pleasures; he has just not known what it means to have sexual pleasure. Thus, his denial is more of a wish to please himself rather than being a wholehearted giving up of pleasures. Siegel cites John Woodroffe, who in his study of the Mahanirvana Tantra, sheds light on how bhoga opposed to asceticism can also pave a way towards spiritual upliftment. He was against the view that yoga only liberates while bhoga only ensnares. He mentioned the Bengal Sakta worshippers who regarded that body can also facilitate and need not be a stumbling block in the way to attain moksha. Natural functions are not anti-thetical to spiritual endeavours. Thus, one can conquer them by experiencing them. The heroic man, Woodroffe opines, is one who does not turn his face away from the worldly pleasure but one who experiences and moves ahead with the desire fulfilled.

As Praneshacharya returns to the agrahara, he leaves the task of revealing his newfound experience before the whole community to Chandri, who, in turn, leaves the village. Praneshacharya cannot bear the burden of this secret guilt and leaves Durvasapur too to find answers to his dilemmas. He cannot bear to act with the veneer
of respectability and deceive the people. Though none remains in the village who knows of Praneshacharya, yet he stands by his individual morality and chooses to discover the solution to his predicament – to give any importance to his experience to Chandri or to revert his commitment to brahminism.

But if I don’t tell the agrahara Brahmans...I cannot escape fear. If I decide to live with Chandri without telling anyone, the decision is not complete, not fearless. I must now come to a final decision. All things indirect must become direct...But it is agony either way...Have I the authority to include another’s life in my decision? The pain of it, the cowardice of it (Sanskara 132).

It is imperative to note here that a fact that adds to Praneshacharya’s morality is that he does not adhere to either strict brahminism or sexual pleasure until he is convinced that he is fully submitting himself to the cause. The agonizing disharmony that he experiences within himself shows that he has the capacity to acknowledge that hidden guilt is not something he can carry within for long. Suresh Raval insists that he “never indulges in any kind of self-incrimination, never considers himself irredeemably lost and fallen”(Baral 120). His misery is motivated by a desire to find something moral and intellectually clear and coherent,

When I tell them about myself, there should be no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner. If not, I cannot go beyond conflict and dualities...only the form we forge for ourselves in our innermost will is ours without question (Sanskara 135).

He looks for a middle path, which can mediate between his tradition and experience.

The question whether Praneshacharya is moral or not becomes all the more debatable in context of the community to which he belongs. V.S. Naipaul observes that Anantmoorthy knowingly or unknowingly describes a barbaric society that has lost appreciation of anything deeper and sensitive (Baral 79). It is primarily motivated by greed and materialism covered with the veneer of decadent brahminism. Moreover, the decadence that pervades the village in the form of plague also characterizes the life-denying nature of the agrahara. Except for the act of transgression, nothing appears to be life-affirming. Hence, the act of transgression here assumes greater importance when contrasted with tradition and orthodoxy. In the course of his
transgressive act, “the protagonist becomes something of a witness and a testifier to a kind of demythologization and deconstruction of that tradition” (Baral 125). This act of transgression also arouses some hope towards the foundation of a new community as Praneshacharya displays “a capacity for honesty and a commitment to values that imply a struggle for forging a relation between tradition and modernity” (Baral 125). It is also noteworthy how the so-called low caste prostitute Chandri is more sensible and morally superior compared to the avaricious Brahmins and their wives. This becomes evident in the detached manner in which Chandri gives her gold jewelry to Praneshacharya for cremation while all the Brahmin wives claim their share in it. Also, while it is Praneshacharya who embodies restraint and thoughtfulness, it is Naranappa and Chandri who have the capacity to act decisively, whatever their course of actions be. It is Chandri, a low-caste, uneducated woman who solves the problem that Praneshacharya, the great Vedic scholar is unable to solve. After returning from the forest, she, with the assistance of her Muslim friend cremates Naranappa’s fast rotting body. The biggest problem at the core of the novel is solved in the most ironic way and all the concern about ‘samskara’—the technicalities—is thrown to the winds.

Also, the daily stagnant way of life lived in the agrahara is largely decadent. Mukherjee points out how in the very first chapter we see that the word ‘routine’ is repeated three times. The houses in the agrahara are characterized by a homogeneity that is squalid with “cockroaches in the buttermilk shelves, fat rats in the store”. Such arrangement, as Mukherjee suggests though called ‘smooth’ by the author is ironical in its smothering nature. Age-old codes are functional in the agrahara that do not have a hint of progressiveness about them and border on the illogical at times, such as a Brahmin living with a prostitute may be forgiven, but not if he has eaten food cooked by her. When Praneshacharya receives his revelation through his transgressive act, then he realizes how far he has come from that life-stifling ambience of the agrahara.

After Praneshacharya leaves and tries to find a solution for himself, during his quest he finds that Putta and Chandri belong to a different world. This world is in dvandva with the rigid confines of orthodox Brahminism. Hence, the disorder of the world of instinct also finds no merit with Praneshacharya and his intrinsic morality forbids him from associating with this chaotic discovery. While he is at the temple, the conscientious person that he is. Praneshacharya is disturbed due to his fears. As
Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, he fears that he would pollute the other Brahmins. Secondly, he fears that if anyone recognizes the ‘Crest-jewel of Vedanta’ in a disgraceful state, he would hurt everyone leading to the cancellation of the chariot festival. While he is still questioning whether he has any right to disturb the lives of so many people, someone recognizes him and flees away sensing danger to the whole affair. Still, he is uncertain of the solution to his dilemmas. He cannot decide if he should confess his deed and what should he live as after he also admits of sharing the same pleasure due to which Naranappa was declared an outcaste.

The study tries to affirm Praneshacharya’s morality through it all raising various questions – Can the laws of community hold true for an exceptional case like his? Will the community label him as a sinner for the single time he gave way to his inner desires? And is the community (here consisting of lustful and lecherous Brahmins) at all entitled to call Praneshacharya a sinner? The analysis tries to reach a conclusion in light of statements given by particularists in ethics such as Jonathan Dancy who maintains that, “basic moral facts are contingent and not necessary, not universal in form”(Puri 2). Thus, morality cannot be pinned down to a few commandments because it evolves in a struggle between reasons and inclinations. Moral laws do not stem totally from what the society upholds as the society may be fundamentally hypocritical, seen in the case of Durvasapur. It should rather be seen as stemming from an individual’s sense of justice and conscientiousness. Praneshacharya’s case is also endorsed by Xie Dikun who cites Hegel’s views on morality. Hegel regarded that “morality is the reversion of the will to itself and something purely spiritual. For this reason morality is simply subjective and assumes no binding duty towards family, society and state”(Puri 90). Seeing in the context of these ideas one cannot doubt that the morality that is seen in Praneshacharya’s life is commendable and upholds the voice of the conscience. As Jenks opines about Nietzsche’s views on morality, in context of a situation like Durvasapur’s, the only hope left for life affirmation is in the rise of the individual spirit, “the affirmation of the new triumphalist”(Jenks 70), seen here in Praneshacharya.

**Works Cited and Consulted**


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