

**HYPOCRISY AND THE UNPLUMBED PENETRALIA:
AN EXAMINATION OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE
& U.R. ANANTHA MURTHY'S SAMSKARA**

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Shakespeare's Hamlet ironically chastises his adulteress mother Gertrude early in the play with a cryptic comment "seems, madam? Nay, it is," "I know not 'seems' (I, ii. 75-76). In King Lear the two selfish and evil older sisters of Cordelia convince their ageing father of the immense quantity of love in 'politically correct' expression, while Cordelia innocently, honestly, and sincerely expostulates that her true love is immeasurable, unquantifiable, and inexpressible with a cryptic and amorphous comment "nothing." The cold, calculating, consummate villain Iago is ironically addressed by all his victims as "honest." The real 'truth' is hidden and not easily known. Gloucester in King Lear unfortunately doesn't 'see' the reality of the true nature of his natural son Edgar nor the villainy of his bastard son Edmund. Hypocrisy is surely an acceptable norm in political, religious, social, cultural contexts. However, honesty is what is admired, cherished, and coveted. But dishonesty, insincerity, and hypocrisy are human traits that evidently prevail, perhaps temporarily though. Literary artists—to echo the views of the Victorian poet, sage, and critic Matthew Arnold "poetry is the criticism of life" and by extrapolation literature is criticism of life—exercising their imagination, their imaginative understanding, their creativity, their observations of human behavior and nature—have the uncanny ability to probe the unfathomable depths of unplumbed penetralia, exploring the dark recesses of the human mind tearing the glittering veils of hypocrisy.

Keeping the aforementioned general observations in mind, I wish to examine the Indian fiction writers in English of the 20th century with particular attention to the Hindu caste system and its practices which generally is considered by the westerners and the Indian intelligentsia as both the bane of the Hindu society and anachronistic in the context of post-modern world. In fact, Hindu caste system somehow seems to play a pivotal role in the creative imagination of most of the fiction writers in English in India; in certain works the caste system lurks in the background of the works of fiction. To cite a few: Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao—the grand patriarchs of Indian Writing in English;

specifically, in such works as Anand's *Untouchable*, Narayan's *The Guide*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Since the theme of the conference "The Secret and the Known" permits treatment of 'hypocrisy' by literary artists in their works, I have chosen to focus on Anand's *Untouchable* of 1930s and U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*, originally written in Kannada, a Dravidian language, of 1960s which was also made into "powerful, award-winning film in 1970." These two seminal novels representing the colonial and the post-colonial Indian milieu address deep-seated cultural, social, religious values, practices, concerns, and hypocrisies.

If we grant that literature critically exposes prejudices and bigotry in any given society, then we may conveniently assert with certitude that the two novels under examination represent the novelists' critical and astute observation of Hindu society's cultural, social, and religious practices that the average common Indian may wish to overlook or ignore. According to Richard Hoggart in his essay "Literature and Society," "properly read ... works of literature give an insight into the life of an age, a kind and intensity of insight, which no other source can give." (*The American Scholar*, 278). It is a journey from the known to the unknown; from the familiar toward and into the unfamiliar; into the unexplored region of the human heart; into the dark, secret chambers. Surely, then, we are reminded of Aristotle's justifiable claim that 'tragedy'—by extrapolation—literature is superior to history, philosophy, metaphysics, etc. Though disturbing, literature lifts the masks of secrecy and critically exposes our prejudices and unsavory side of our lives.

Mulk Raj Anand in his very first novel *Untouchable* (1935), according to E.M. Forster, takes the reader "a way down which no novelist has yet taken me." (Back cover of *Untouchable*, Penguin Twentieth Century Classics). It is a novel that conveys "with urgency and barely disguised fury, what it might feel like to be one of India's Untouchables."

Recalling the genesis of the novel, Anand admits that in the early Twenties he "came across a poignant story about a sweeper boy Uka by Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India*, written with the utmost simplicity. I showed this to the poet A.E. (George Russell) who said: 'Son, write like him about your hero-anti-hero. Gandhi says the struggle to free untouchables is equal to the struggle for freedom for India. Go to him.'" ("On the Genesis of *Untouchable*: A Note by Mulk Raj Anand," 94) In yet another article Anand chastises his critics who have written about his novels "have not that my fictions arose from the compulsions of life of lower depths, where the rejected in our country have been condemned to live." ("The Sources of Protest in My Novels, 45)... "The cruelty of this God-ordained system (varna-ashram, the Hindu caste-order) came home to me when Bakha, a sweeper boy, brought me home bruised in the

head by an accidental stone, and my mother scolded him for carrying me and touching me. She bathed me even though I was bleeding. This little incident was to remain in my conscious-unconscious, and became a passion for justice against the age-old fixtures of non-human discrimination against untouchables. This became the protest in my first published novel, *Untouchable*.” (“The Sources of Protest, 47) Anand further confesses that in his interview with Mahatma Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram in early 1927 that he wrote “a novel about a day in the life of Bakha—about how he is slapped on the face by a caste Hindu... . I feel I want to tell the story—as you have done in your story about the sweeper Uka.” (“On the Genesis...” 94) Upon Mahatma Gandhi’s suggestion and having been “converted to some sincerity, simplicity and truth and to the love of people,” (“On the Genesis...” 95), Anand retains only a hundred and twenty pages out of the two hundred and fifty pages of the original manuscript focusing on his ‘hero-anti-hero’ Bakha and “the orchestration, and the interplay of Bakha’s inner feelings and outer experience” which includes a minor but significant incident that demonstrates his “anger against the priest at the latter’s lust for his sister (Sohini).” It is this incident that particularly highlights in a sweeping broad stroke—a vignette at that—the barbaric treatment that Bakha receives from high caste Hindu and transparently demonstrates the hypocrisy of Brahmins, the highest caste in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. “Even as Bakha was absorbed on the temple step in his adoration of the Unknown Spirit, the cry of “polluted,” “polluted,” “polluted” disturbed him, and the shout rang through the air and completely unnerved him. At the same time another cry of “polluted” came piercing from a priest who made suggestions to his sister and molested her and in self-defence against her shouted ‘polluted.’ This barbaric shock came to her after hours of waiting at the well at the pleasure of caste Hindus for a mere pot of water: she, an untouchable, could not reach well-water directly. That would pollute the well for all time! We are now shown brother and sister suffering ignominy and shame, with the lie not in their hearts but in those who pretended to keep the truth of God, His abode and themselves in pristine purity. The untouchables, Anand’s art has made us see, are not Bakha and his sister but those others who called them so. But the hypocrisy goes on and the novelist lets us witness the cry of defilement, pollution, and a torrent of abuse greet Bakha as he goes out to beg the food for himself and his family...” (C.D. Narasimhaiah, “Mulk Raj Anand: The Novel of Human Centrality,” 22)

The protagonist Bakha “is a young man, a proud and even an attractive young man, but none the less he is an outcast in a system that is now only slowly changing and was then as cruel and debilitating as that of apartheid. Into this re-creation of one day in the life of Bakha, sweeper and latrine-cleaner, Anand poured a vitality, fire and richness of detail that have caused him to be

acclaimed as his country's Charles Dickens as well as this century's greatest revealer of the 'other' India." (Back cover of the novel). It is this 'other' India that Mulk Raj Anand explores, investigates.

Though the novel delineates Bakha's life—a typical one day of his usual life—, it does, however, represent the simmering, silent, suffering segment often complex Indian society and the rigid and complex Hindu caste system. To quote E. M. Forster from his Preface to the novel once again, "Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity... Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position... He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment, and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth."

Since the focus of this paper for the conference is to highlight hypocrisy among high caste Hindus such as Brahmins—I am myself a South Indian Brahmin—, I have explored a single incident in the novel; it is the incident where the Brahmin priest calls 'foul,' by shouting "polluted" as a self-defence when, in reality, he (Lachman) has just fondled Sohini. Ironically, it is a taboo for a high caste priest to have any kind of sexual contact with an untouchable. The incident brings out the gross hypocrisy practiced by high caste Brahmins. The evidence is Sohini's word against the Brahmin's. What can Sohini do? Is there any one to listen to her story of molestation? No! She can do very little except to share her story with her brother Bakha.:

'That man, that man,' she said, 'that man made suggestions to me, when I was Cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out Shouting that he had been defiled.' (Untouchable, 62)

... .

'He-e-e just teased me,' she at last yielded. 'And then when I was bending Down to work, he came and held me by my breasts.' (63)

Of the several humiliating incidents and episodes that Anand paints in one day's life of Bakha, the above essentially exposes blatantly the hypocritical postures of high caste Brahmins. While the very sight and shadow of 'untouchable' would defile or 'pollute' the high caste Brahmins, they yet tend to ignore such

taboos if they can derive 'sexual' gratification by engaging in molesting 'untouchable' women. Such incidents are usually swept under the rug.

In a more detailed fashion, U.R. Anantha Murthy in *Samskara*,⁹ subtitled "A Rite for a Dead Man—", a post-colonial novel of 1965—30 years after Mulk Raj Anand's colonial novel of 1935—in the Dravidian language Kannada, meticulously and elegantly translated by A.K. Ramanujan—considered "a novel of decadent Hinduism,"—"a religious novel about a decaying Brahmin colony in the south Indian village of Karnataka... a poetic study of a religious man—Praneshacharya—'acharya' the title 'spiritual guide,' 'learned 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." (back cover of the English translation of the novel). The title *Samskara* refers to a concept central to Hinduism; some of the denotations are: 'A rite of passage or life-cycle ceremony; making perfect; preparation, making ready.'" (Quoted from A Kannada-English dictionary by the Rev. F. Kittel, Mangalore, 1894, given in the English translation of the work) This novel too exposes the hypocrisy imbedded but explored occasional practices of Brahmins.

"Central to the novel's plot are three characters, clearly outside the pale of orthodox Brahminism, who force Praneshacharya, a pillar of his Brahmin community, to realize that orthodoxy has become a convenient way to repress his passion and retreat from life. When Praneshacharya determines to live with the outcaste woman, Chandri, he reveals his transgressions to the village. His spiritual power, and by extension that of Brahmin India, is channeled to the real world by his rejecting the inhumanity of orthodox Brahmanism." (Account given in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller, Columbia Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum).

Samskara insightfully and ironically explores the plights of Hinduism's highest caste—the Brahmin: Shripati, with his longing to "escape the Brahmin dump" and his adulterous relationship of the 'outcaste' Belli (*Samskara*, 36-37); Dasacharya's continual meals behind the backs of the fasting townfellows (55-57); Garuda's and Lakshmanacharya's lust for Chandri's gold. Even the agrahara's (the Brahmin hamlet) most dedicated Praneshacharya loses his self when he realizes the sexual touch of a woman for the first time (63-64). It is at this stage that Praneshacharya enters a new realm of understanding. Light is shed upon the indifferent attitudes towards Brahmanism viewed in his estranged friends Naranappa and Mahabala. As one who stood alone for so long, strong in his conviction of self and confused at the hypocritical and detesting attitudes toward Brahmanism found in nearly every one else he knows, Praneshacharya

struggles with the religion he embraces so closely for his entire life. He finds himself “caught in the play of opposites (115), soliciting away the person he once was piece by piece. He laments his sins, all his secrets and breaking of ritual to himself, one by one:

“I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust for my wife. I drank coffee in a common Shop in a fair. I went to see a cock-fight. I lusted after Padmavati. Even at a Time of mourning and pollution, I sat in a temple-line with Brahmins and ate a holy feast. I even invited a (lower-caste) Malera boy to come into the temple and join me. This is my truth...the truth of my inner life. (131-32)

New ideologies seem to mix, moving away from religious values to the allure of material and temporal satisfaction. The difficulties and influence of modernization and the allure of the city affects each of the Brahmins in some way. The novel ends as Praneshacharya, “a pillar of Durvasapura’s Brahman society, (who) has an illicit liaison with Chandri, an outcaste” (R. Parthasarathy, “Samskara: The Passing of the Brahman Tradition,” 191) stands at the “threshold” (147) standing between a return to his Brahmin devotion or a further journey into Naranappa and Mahabala’s world of release and instant gratification. Praneshacharya has an opportunity to escape his caste, to reinvent himself. He has a choice, more so than Bakha of Anand’s *Untouchable* to become someone else; whereas Bakha’s salvation will not necessarily appear in choice, but possibly the sewer system that will release from cleaning latrines and the stigma ‘dirt’—“They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt.” Verma asserts that “Bakha is a helpless victim of social and religious determinism and of a system from which he cannot escape. Nor can he rebel against the combined forces of religion and society.” (“Understanding Mulk Raj Anand: An Introduction.” 6) Whereas *Untouchable* could be meaningfully considered a ‘protest novel’ or a ‘social novel’ imbued with ‘deterministic philosophy’ laced with Brahmins’ hypocrisies, *Samskara*, on the other hand, is more than a “realistic novel dealing with a social problem” (Meenakshi Mukherjee, 166) Whereas *Untouchable* provides flashing vignettes of upper castes’ hypocrisies, *Samskara* transcends into a detailed exploration into a brahmin’s loss of identity by examining at length the orthodox Brahmin’s fall. Naranappa for whom the death rites needs to be performed according to Brahmanical traditions becomes the shadow figure. “The wicked Brahmin now dies of plague, and a crisis ensues.” “He drinks, he catches the sacred fish from the tank of a temple; he mixes with Moslems and keeps untouchable mistress (Chandri).” (Naipaul, 105). The spiritual leader Praneshacharya agonizes over his sexual adventure with the dead Naranappa’s untouchable mistress Chandri.

The renegade Naranappa disavows openly everything that Brahminism stands for—restraint, control and denial. “Both Naranappa and Acharya represent distortions of certain values—denial in one and abandonment to the senses in the other.” (Meenakshi Mukherjee, 175)

As the translator A.K. Ramanujan’s “Afterword” affirms, “the opening event is a death, an anti-brahminical brahmin’s death—and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answers, old answers that do not fit the new questions, and the rebirth of one good Brahmin, Praneshacharya. In trying to resolve the dilemma of who, if any should perform the heretic’s death-rite (a *samskara*—a transformation) for himself. A rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living.” “In life as in death, Naranappa questioned the Brahmins of the village, exposed their ‘*samskara*’ (refinement of spirit, maturation through many lives) or lack of it. He lived the life of a libertine in the heart of an exclusive orthodox colony—‘*agrahara*’—, broke every known taboo; drank liquor, ate flesh, caught fish with his Muslim friends in the holy temple-tank, and lived with a lowcaste woman. He had cast off his lawfully-wedded Brahmin wife, and antagonized his kin. Protected fully by modern secular laws, and even more fully by the brahmin’s own bad conscience, he lived defiantly in their midst. If they could exorcize him, they would have found in him a fitting scapegoat to carry their own inmost unspoken libidinous desires. He was their mocking anti-self and he knew it. Now that he is dead, they could punish him at least in death, by disowning him....Naranappa’s targets are the strait-laced village Brahmins who attend to the ‘rituals’ (‘*samskaras*’), but have not earned by any means their ‘refinement of spirit’ (‘*samskara*’). They are greedy, gluttonous, mean-spirited; they love gold, betray orphans and widows; they are jealous of Naranappa’s every forbidden pleasure. They turn for answers to Praneshacharya, Naranappa’s opposite number. But, ironically, in the very act of seeking the answer in the Books, and later in seeking a sign from Maruti the chaste Monkey-god, the Acharya abandons everything and becomes one with his opposite: contrary to all his ‘preparation’ he sleeps with Chandri, Naranappa’s lowcaste mistress. By what authority now can he judge Naranappa or advise his Brahmin followers?...His sudden sexual experience with the forbidden Chandri becomes an unorthodox ‘rite of initiation.’” (140-141)

As Parthasarathy observes, Anantha Murthy’s “writing itself can be viewed as a ‘*samskara*’—a rite of expiation, ‘*prayascitta*’—to atone for the oppressiveness of Brahmanism when its orthodoxies were being repeatedly questioned in the reformist climate of the 1930s and 40s. The novel, thus, is a serious contribution to the dialogue on the politics of religion in the Subcontinent.” (189)

The novel deals with the theme of 'initiation' perhaps similar to Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*.

Anand's *Untouchable* and Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* both explore the hypocrisy and the unplumbed penetralia. In some ways they are social, cultural, and religious journeys. Murthy's *Samskara* is a searching and a deeper analysis of the Brahminism of the South; Anand's study though focuses on 'untouchable' in general hints at rampant hypocrisy among sections of Brahmins. Both the novels, in the final analysis, reveal the 'hidden secrets.'

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Summary

HYPOCRISY AND THE UNPLUMBED PENETRALIA: AN EXAMINATION OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE & U.R. ANANTHA MURTHY'S SAMSKARA

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My paper focuses on Mulk Raj Anand's pre-colonial novel *Untouchable* (1935) and U.R. Anantha Murthy's post-colonial *Samskara* (1965), originally written in Kannada, a Dravidian language, translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan. These two seminal novels representing the colonial and post-colonial Indian milieu address deep-seated cultural, social, religious values, practices, concerns, and hypocrisies. They both explore the hypocrisy and the unplumbed penetralia.

Anand's novel though focuses on 'untouchable' in the hierarchy of Hindu caste system as such hints at rampant hypocritical practices among sections of the highest caste, Brahmins. On the other hand, Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* is a searching and a deeper analysis of the Brahmanism of South India.

The protagonist of Anand's *Untouchable* is Bakha, an 'untouchable' youth; his typical day's travails in the midst of caste-ridden society are realistically portrayed. One of the significant events that Bakha experiences is his becoming conscious about his sister being subjected to molestation by a temple Brahmin who, in turn, as a self-protective device screams that he has been 'polluted.' Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*'s protagonist Praneshacharya, a Vedic Brahmin, highly regarded for his knowledge and interpretation of scriptures by his fellow Brahmins, denying himself pleasures of life, ultimately reveals his dark secrets and desires by succumbing to a low caste woman Chandri's robust sexual charm.

My paper highlights the two significant instances because they, quintessentially, demonstrate an 'expose' of the high caste Brahmins' hypocrisy.