

**APPROPRIATION OF DALIT AGENCY: A CRITIQUE OF U R ANANTHA
MURTHY'S SAMSKARA**

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Abstract:

Indian fictional representations of caste and society are generally determined by cultural elitism. The aesthetic and ideological aspects of fiction in India are influenced by material conditions, cultural values and worldviews of caste. Writings that seek to represent the voice of the socio-cultural margins of caste are considered Dalit Literature. However, in Dalit Writings at least two different modes of narratives can be broadly identified - writings of the dalit writer as an "insider" writing about the dalit subject and the non-dalit "outsider's" discourse about the dalit subject. The former may be classified as 'Dalit' and the latter 'Dalitist' (Dalit+Elitist). This article attempts to analyse how Dalitist writers narrativize, textualize the identity, voice and agency of the caste subaltern and gendered caste subaltern taking U R Anantha Murthy's Samskara as a representative sample in order to foreground the caste politics involved. It is argued that Dalitist literary representations often appropriate and even misappropriate (assign to wrong use) the voice and agency of the caste subaltern and gendered caste subaltern.

Keywords: Elite, Subaltern, Dalit, Appropriation, Gendered caste subaltern

Today Dalit Literature has become a vibrant presence in most of the regional languages in India surpassing the dalit who still face atrocity, unteachability and deprivation. Dalit Literature has inscribed itself in the mind scape of readers and scholars churning time honoured assumptions and holy verdicts. With the 'subaltern speak', the long silence now seems broken with telling effect. However, in Dalit Writings at least two different modes of narratives can be broadly identified - writings of the dalit writer as an "insider" writing about the dalit subject and the non-dalit "outsider's" discourse about the dalit subject. The former may be classified as 'Dalit' and the latter 'Dalitist' (Dalit+Elitist). The pertinent question is who can speak as the other?

The term 'Dalit' means 'the spurned' and the term has acquired the sense of the marginalized, inferior, subordinate 'other', lacking all virtues and tastes. A product of the unjust

and inhuman caste system, this marginal object's utterances/creative expressions were also treated for long, as marginal, insignificant or even, nonexistent. Any cultural sphere is a reflex of the socio-political sphere it's born in to, and begets the fault lines of its power sometimes. However, in recent times there has been a spurt of Dalit creativity, and Dalit writings are appearing in all major genres: poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies . The erstwhile untouchables are using the weapons of literacy - traditionally denied to them - for exposing the wretched conditions of caste subordination imposed upon them by the votaries of Sanatana dharma.

Dalit writings confront Gayatri Spivak's contention that “the subaltern cannot speak”(110). The lived experiences of Dalits: caste violence, discrimination, untouchability, poverty and deprivation flame in to words in Dalit writing. Through their literary representations, dalit writers' assert their identities and pour forth their dissenting voices against the dehumanizing effects of caste. Dalit writings began as an offshoot of the general awakening of Dalit consciousness across the country as a result of Ambedkar's movement for Dalit emancipation in the twentieth century. It was after the movement of Ambedkar that established notions about history, politics, culture and aesthetics began to be questioned and reconstructed. Buttressing Ambedkar's crusade for dalits, the writing back from the peripheries began in the 1960's in Maharashtra, the epicentre of the Ambedkar's anti-caste campaigns.

However, Dalit Literature became a national movement only in the 1980's and 1990's making its vibrant presence felt in most of the regional languages. One of the reasons for the Dalit literary upsurge is the unshackling of Ambedkar's thought from the cultural prison his enemies had thrust it, with the publication of his complete works and its subsequent translation into regional languages. Later, the raging debate on caste reservation in the 90's sparked by the implementation of the Mandal commission recommendation and the nation-wide wave of political protest fuelled and aided the fissures further. The concerted anti-reservation move by elite castes, abetted by studied neutrality of the left-right combine, catalysed into the spontaneous consolidation of dalits as a marginalized category. Identity politics emerged as a major formation in some states. Ambedkar became the centre of Dalit mobilization, communal identity and intellectual debate. The critical appraisal of Ambedkar's legacy led to the rediscovery of Ambedkar as a national icon.

All the above factors led to a renewed interest on the caste question and gave a new vigour and relevance to Dalit writings. Instead of perceiving their identities through upper caste cultural representations and historical narratives, Dalits began to formulate their identities

through their own stories and histories using their indigenous representational modes. Dalit writers started questioning the way Dalit identities are constructed in upper caste writings, and found alternative ways of constructing their identities. It is in this context that one has to analyse of the problems of dalit representation and the issue of appropriation in elite representations of the caste subaltern.

There are several conflicting arguments regarding the role and scope of writers and intellectuals in the representation of subaltern consciousness. Fanon, for instance, has emphasized the role of native writers and intellectuals to speak for the colonized indigenous subalterns (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 166-199). Political theorists like Gramsci have spoken about the role of organic intellectual in articulating the concerns of the oppressed subaltern classes (*Prison Notebooks...*, xxi-xxiv). Subaltern historians like Ranajit Guha affirm the possibility of retrieving from history the consciousness of the subaltern agency (“the prose of Counter-Insurgency,” (1-40). Countering this, Spivak has demonstrated the impossibility of such theoretical ventures, especially, in the context of the gendered subaltern (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 28). It is in the trajectory of these conflicting theoretical positions and propositions that this study about the appropriation of dalit voice in elite literary representations like U R Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* becomes pertinent.

It is important to analyse the various issues such as the appropriation of subaltern identities in the representation of marginalization in narrative, the politics and aesthetics of such narratives in order to foreground their complicitous nature. There is always a tendency in the elite academic circles to consider select upper-caste writers as representing the voice of the caste subaltern. Thus, Dalitist writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Munshi Premchand, Mahesweta Devi, U. R. Anantha Murthy, Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy, to name a few, are often considered as representing the cause of the oppressed downtrodden castes and communities. Some of the books of these writers are mentioned in support of this claim. Hence, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, U.R. Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara*, Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gora*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and some of the works of Mahesweta Devi and Premchand are considered eloquent on the issues pertaining to the subaltern castes and classes. These texts have been complimented as realistic representations of subaltern consciousness. But a critical close reading of them would reveal how they tend to misrepresent and even misappropriate - assign to wrong use - the consciousness of the subaltern.

The Hindu society constructed the dalit as its “Other” by treating them “untouchables.” In its narratives, it always followed a policy of exclusion with regard to the representation of

the voice of this subaltern “Other,” corresponding to their social exclusion. However as opposed to classical literature, modern and contemporary Indian-Hindu-Brahmin literature often follow a strategy of containment. Rather than excluding the subaltern, the mainstream writers tend to subsume the voice and agency of the caste subaltern within the ideological frame of their narrative. Consequently, dalits even when they figure prominently in the narrative of non-dalit writings, are still denied their subjectivity. Deprived of their voice and agency dalit characters often emerge as objects of representation.

An important Dalitist work that candidly appropriates and misrepresents the identity of the caste subaltern and gendered caste subaltern is U. R. Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara*. The text has been hailed as an important cultural document that treats the degeneration of Hinduism because of its intrinsic system of caste (“Gender, Caste and Modernity: A Reading of U R Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara*” 154). Naranappa, a Brahmin convert, challenges Brahmanism and its sacred *samskara*’s i.e., rites and rituals. The rebel Brahmin is treated as an untouchable because he did all that is forbidden to a Brahmin and which the dalits generally indulge in: eating beef, drinking liquor, mingling with people below ones castes and so on. His most sinful act, however, was that of living with a low caste concubine, Chandri, abandoning his lawfully wedded Brahmin wife.

The Brahminical protagonist of *Samakara*, Praneshacharya, a learned priest ineffectually tries to win back Naranappa, the anti-hero, to Brahminism by trying to reform the outlaw. Finally, when Naranappa dies in his sinfulness he is denied his last rites as he is accused of having corrupted Brahmanism. Nevertheless, Praneshacharya, the Brahmin priest himself treads the sinful path of his rival Naranappa after his physical union with Chandri. After this incident, Praneshacharya flees the village for fear of shame. The rest of the novel highlights the importance of intermingling among various castes to transcend caste barriers. Anantha Murthy suggests that Brahminism should be re-constituted on modern democratic principles to humanize it and to steer it clear of its purity/pollution dialectics. However, the ending of the novel has displaced this sublime author function in a subtle way. Praneshacharya on his way back to Agrahara, after his worldly encounters, sees in the clear sky the constellation of the seven sages: “The sky was full of stars. The moon, a silver. A perfectly clear constellation of the Seven Sages...” (138). The ending signifies that he is going to lead the saintly life of a Brahmin as before. In other words, his fall from virtue and subsequent interaction with the untouchables has not impaired his Brahminical priesthood. Through Praneshacharya’s vision of the Seven Sages Anantha Murthy suggests that some of the sages

like Viswamitra themselves had fallen from grace because of beautiful temptresses like Menaka, and were still able to retain their sainthood. Agastya had mated with a low caste woman while crossing a river. Even Sankara, the founder of *Advaita Vedanta* had himself entered the body of a dead king to have sex with the queen in his quest for fullness of experience. Thus the vision of the seven sages suggests that Praneshacharya's holiness has not been lost in spite of his sinful acts and that he still retains his brahminic identity which is his birth right.

On the other hand, Praneshacharya's has become a worldly-wise Brahmin through his socialising experiences. The novelist through the character of his protagonist has set a paradigm for all Brahmins to follow. He emphasizes a radical change in their attitude towards the question of caste purity and demands that they stop all discriminatory practices towards the lower castes. This however, does not imply that they should forgo their high caste status or treat Dalits as their equals. Through *Samskara*, what U. R. Anantha Murthy attempts to do is to purge Brahmanism of its rigid customs, rituals, obsolete conventions and orthodoxical practises and to re-establish it firmly on a modern, liberal, democratic footing. A K Ramanujan, the poet translator of U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* into English has suggested this in his scholarly afterward to the novel, "In Premeshacharya, Brahmanism questions itself in a modern existential mode and the questioning leads him into new and ordinary worlds" (141-142). *Samskara*, emphasizes the necessity of Brahminism to change its attitude towards lower-castes at least for its own survival.

Samskara deals with the issue of caste only as part of its larger theme of antithetical relation between asceticism and eroticism both of which are part of the Hindu philosophical tradition (143). Pranashacharya and Naranappa represent these divergent paths that invariably lead to self-realization. However, after the death of Naranappa both these parallel philosophical paths meet and merge in the Acharya typically after his union with Chandri. Naranappa, in this respect can be considered as an alter ego of Acharaya himself since he personifies the brahmins 'inner most unspoken libidinous desires' (140). The author is more concerned about resolving the inner turmoil of his brahminical protagonist, which reflects the paradoxes of Hinduism itself, rather than resolving the issue of casteism. Anantha Murthy suggests a balanced view of life for brahminism to follow that would reconcile the contraries: the spiritual and the material planes and lead the brahmin to the fullness of experience.

Anantha Murthy wants the high castes to adopt a liberal, materialistic and secular view of life for their own good. This alone could save Brahmanism from its imminent decadence and the untouchable body of the gendered caste subaltern aid and abet the process of the transformation of the Brahmin hero to this end. It is this aspect that makes the untouchable body of Chandri touchable and once this goal was achieved Chandri's body is left behind as the Acharya returns to Agrahara. To put it differently the theme of Brahminism's modernization is worked out by the writer by making the untouchable accessible to touch. In other words, the exploitation of dalit woman's body and the subsequent desertion of the woman herself is mandated upon the achievement of high caste male's enlightenment

A serious fault line in the experiential world of caste subalterns represented in *Samskara* is that it does not include the people living outside the four Varnas. *Samskara's* world is characterized by its hierarchical structure that stretches from the Brahman to the Shudra following the Varna Ashrama Dharma of Hinduism. With the lowest *avarna* category of Shudra ends *Samskara's* worldview. This wipes out the very existence of the real majority of people, the dalit-Bahujans, on whose surplus labour the entire forte of "Brahminic system" survived. The "Chandals" and such other outcastes are literally annihilated from Brahmanism's cultural cartography of *Samskara*. Even the translator A. K. Ramanujan in his notes on *Samskara* has pointed out this limitation of the text (150). This shows that the space of the Dalit-bahujans, even in fictional representation done in almost two decades after independence is still outside the frames of culture.

Despite its delineation of the degenerate and decadent state of Brahmanical social order, the text of *Samskara* reiterates the notion of Brahman-centred village with Shudra footmen. The bahujans like "Chandals", denied of their human status are reduced to mere carcasses in the margin of Agraharas: "stinking carcasses". This deduction of the Dalit-bahujans, the majority of the people, to the sub-human status make *Samskara* just another hegemonic text of Brahminism. It also becomes a hegemonic text in that it reasserts the hierarchical core of the Brahmanic worldview, reflected in the character of the protagonist, Praneshacharya, the high priest of Brahmanism in the Agrahara. Although this character undergoes a series of transformations through socialisation in and outside his Agrahara, towards the end of the narrative, as we have already seen, it is the antidemocratic and antihuman tenets of the Brahmanic worldview that is being reiterated and reinstalled. Besides, in this process of transformation of the brahminical protagonist, the dalit women's body function as a fetish object.

Yet another serious flaw of *Samskara* is the vulgarization of Dalit woman's body. Dalit women are represented in the novel as an object of upper castes' erotic gaze as evident from the following passage in which Durgabhata's eyes contours chandri's anatomy.

For the first time his connoisseur eyes had the chance to appraise this precious object which did not normally stir out of the house, this choice object that Naranappa had brought from Kundapura. A real "Sharp" type exactly as described in Vatsyayana's manual of love – look at her, toes longer than the big toe, just as the love manual says, look at those breasts. In sex she is the type who sucks the male dry. Her eyes which should be fickle are now misty with grief and fear, but she looks good that way. Like Matsyagandhi, the fisher woman in the Ravivarma print hung up in Durgabhata's bedroom, shyly trying to hide her breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari. The same eyes and nose: no wonder Naranappa threw away the worship stone for her, ate taboo meat and drank taboo liquor. One wonders at his daring. One remembers Jagannatha the Brahmin poet who married the Muslim girl, and his verses about the alien's breasts. If Praneshacharya were not present, if Naranappa wasn't lying dead right there, he would have happily quoted the stanza and expanded on it even to these barren Brahmins. 'To the lustful' that is Naranappa and his like – 'there is no fear, no shame' as the saying goes (8-9).

References to classical texts, in the passage, fulfill an ideological function. The *Matsyagandhi* episode from *Mahabharata*, the reference to *Kamasutra* are all used to legitimize the sexual exploitation of the dalit female. The text is replete with similar instances of fetishizing of the dalit women's body by brahminical patriarchy. Shripati, a Brahmin youth wonders,

Which brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her things are full. When she is with him she twists like a snake coupling with another, writhing in the sand, She would have bathed by now in water heated in mud pots outside her hut; she would have drunk her father's sour toddy, she would be warm and ready like a tuned-up drum. Not utterly black skinned, nor pale white, her body is the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun (40).

Here the dalit woman is reduced to her body without self or soul. She has no identity outside her sexuality. Having denied of her selfhood, she becomes a mere sex object for the visual pleasure and sexual fantasy of upper caste male. Although her body is considered polluting in the day, it is an object of pleasure at night, a commodity for upper castes consumption as shown by Shripati's night visits to Belli's hut.

All dalit women in *Samskara* are invariably depicted as sex-steriotypes catering to the upper caste male's gaze. Even Praneshacharya the high priest of brahminism views the lower caste female merely as a sex object. Note for instance how he registers Patmavati's bodily statistics

Acharya stood up and looked at Padmavati, long hair, not yet oiled after a bath, plump fleshy thighs, buttocks, breasts, tall, long limbed. A gleam in the eyes an expectation. A waiting. Must have a ritual bath in the river after her period. Breasts rise and fall as she breaths in and out. They will harden at the tips if caressed in the dark (124-25).

A strategy for enjoying the untouchable's body without fear of pollution is fetishizing it by comparing the subaltern woman to Hindu goddesses and beautiful women of classics. Hence, Shripati's fancy glides from the eroticized body of Belli to goddess Lakshmi and then to Menaka, the temptress. His erotic gaze also transforms the outcaste to classical heroines like Shakuntala: "Belli was carrying a pitcher of water on her head, the rag on her body has slipped, and she stood in the moon light bouncing her breasts, the colour of the earth-she'd look like Shakuntala herself" (39). To justify the upper caste's lust for the dalit women, the brahmin women's sexual inefficiency is emphasized "Which Brahmin girl was equal to Belli?" (ibid). What is negated in the narration of sexual encounters involving upper caste male and the dalit female is the caste identity of the gendered subaltern. For the duration of the sexual act, at least, the caste of the dalit female is obliterated. Dalit woman, denied of her caste, become just a female body to be enjoyed by the upper caste male without any guilt feeling. Such encounters are also made to appear, as natural and normal by employing suitable nature imagery: "She has always been like ripe ears of corn bending before the falling rain" (40). It is considered natural for dalit woman to yield to the sexual advances the upper caste male. Both land and dalit woman's body are meant for satisfying the upper castes' greed. Dalit woman's sexual exploitation by upper caste men have been historically justified by invoking caste norms. *Samskara* as a hegemonic text re-enacts and reiterates the historical violation of dalit women's bodies.

What is also denied in the felicity of the narrative act is the perspective of the gendered caste subaltern. Nowhere in the narrative is registered the mute cry and silent protest of dalit women who can't withstand the rape attempts of the upper caste men. The scene in which Shripati under the heat of Achary's erotic description of Shakuntala, runs out and rapes Belli who was then bathing in the river is narrated from a typical male perspective. The authorial narrative perspective, by invoking apt nature imagery, underlines the willful surrendering of

the dalit female to the sexual assault of the upper caste male, “She has always been like ripe ears of corn bending before the falling rain” (ibid). What is denied by the author function here is the voice and agency of the gendered caste subaltern. Thus, the natural setting and imagery used to eroticize the subaltern female body and her sexual union with the high caste male serve a narrative purpose.

The explicitness and naturalness with which Acharya’s sexual encounter with Chandri in the wet forest is treated is intended to convey the sex, rebirth theme of the novel. Acharya is being born again in the womb of the Earth-women–mother, Chandri. Mother image is evoked to erase the caste mark of the female subaltern body to advance the theme of Brahmin’s ‘Dvija’- twice born: “The Acharya’s hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, Amma ! Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him” (82). The narration deliberately acquires an air of naturalness and ease in such scenes. In the coolness of the wet earth and in the warmth of the low caste woman’s body the brahmin priest’s regeneration is effected. His transformative regeneration is clearly hinted by the novelist:

Something occurred to him and he got up. Like an animal with his snout to the ground, he entered the woods where he made love to Chandri....he pulled out the blades of grass and smelled them. He had come from the stench of Agrahara; the smell of grassroots smeared with wet earth held him in its power like an addition (83)

He now begins to feel one with nature, perceives nature with the freshness of a child. It marks the beginning of Acharya’s second birth. He discovers the organic and natural way of living leaving behind his invalid wife and rotting Agrahara. But in this transformative process of the brahman protagonist, the lower caste woman’s body serves merely as a catalytic agent.

Samskara fetishizes dalit woman’s body for upper caste male’s spiritual transformation. The text legitimizes the historic wrongs upper castes committed against dalit woman. Besides being sex stereotypes catering to upper caste’s erotic gaze and objects for their sexual gratification, the novelist can’t accord any significant space for the dalit female in *Samskara*. This is explicitly expressed through the words of Sripati, “Belly was all right for sleeping with. She was no good for talk....” (41). While Dalit woman’s body is idealized, her intellection is negated. While emphasizing dalit women’s sexual potential, brahmin women are portrayed as sexless objects. Thus, *Samskara* can also be termed as an anti-feminist novel that depicts dalit women as insipid and upper caste women as devoid of sexual feeling.

Dalit women exist as shadowy figures on the margins of Dalitist representations to be historically assaulted and violated. In the novel, they literally exist on the margins of Agrahara, catering to upper castes' selective sexual desires and disappear from the narrative afterwards. Hence, in terms of the politics of narration they are the real subalterns. Their silent cries or voices of protest never get articulated. As Spivak has pointed out "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" ("On the New Subaltern" 333).

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