



# Preoccupation and Absence of Desire: Voyeurism and Caste in *Samskara* and *Kusumabale*

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**Abstract**— *The paper explores the different forms of desires in the novels Samskara (1976) and Kusumabale (2015). In Samskara, there is a preoccupation with the theme of desire and the form and narration of the novel imbibe a voyeuristic male gaze. The valorisation of inter-caste relations is performed through this voyeuristic male gaze where desires of upper caste men are manifested through women, they either become the objects of desire or disgust. Their wives, the upper caste women, are portrayed as unattractive while the lower caste women are objects of the upper caste men's erotic fascination. Through the feminist lens of Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze, I analyse how women lack any conscious agency in the novel as they are limited to their bodies, and caste determines the desirability or the lack of it. In comparison, the portrayal of inter-caste relations in Kusumabale does not involve any explicit articulation of desire and the narrative does not cater to any form of voyeuristic gaze. Instead, the novel portrays the deadly consequences of inter-caste relations which often leads to violence. The novel becomes the exact inverse to everything that Samskara tries to achieve be it through form, thematic style, or narration.*



**Keywords**— *caste, gender, desire, voyeurism, male gaze.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Desire is one of the crucial manifestations of an individual's interiority. It manifests itself in different forms be it lust, greed, or gluttony. Attempts at fulfilling or discarding it, has been one of the biggest motives in philosophy as well as literature. There is a general notion that desire is a vice and should be repressed. This notion of desire has been one of the major driving forces of many religions as well. U.R Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara*<sup>1</sup> (1976) deals primarily with this question of desire and its consequences. The novel is set in the fictitious village Durvasapura where the death of the rebellious Brahmin, Naranappa creates a crisis in the community. The Agrahara gets divided on the question of who would perform the final rites of Naranappa, and even questions the dead man's 'Brahminhood'. Life comes to a standstill for the

community and the protagonist Praneshacharya, perceived as the epitome of Brahmin virtues, who is entrusted with the task of finding solution for the problem and eventually ends up questioning himself. His mortal self undergoes a tumultuous transformation and through it surfaces his repressed desires. With the help of different critical essays, I look at how the novel's narration is preoccupied with the theme of desire, focusing on how the inter-caste sexual relations bring about a modern subjectivity. I also explore the portrayal of women in the novel as objects which either fulfil or weaken desire. The valorisation of inter-caste sexual relations is presupposed in the absence of any conscious agency for women who are involved. The form and genre of the novel also pinpoints this preoccupation and the mode of invisibility it gives to caste and gender issues, which is distinct from Devanoora Mahadeva's novel *Kusumabale*<sup>2</sup> (2015) which defies the form that Murthy

<sup>1</sup> Tr. from Kannada by A.K Ramanujan. OUP, Delhi, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Tr. from Kannada by Susan Daniel.

develops in his novel. *Kusumabale* resembles a folk narrative style, with its setting in a village where the story unfolds in episodes through the explication of relationship dynamics between the upper-castes and lower-castes. The plot spans through three generations of an upper-caste family while parallelly accounts a lower caste narration where the relation between Kusuma, an upper-caste woman and a Dalit youth Channa that eventually leads to his murder. Although this plot is not exactly narrated, this sets the basic frame for the whole novel. Being a complex novel, with plethora of characters and nuances involved, it is very difficult to summarise the novel in a single summary. In comparison with *Samskara*, what makes it interesting is the fact that, as far as the form, theme, and narration are concerned, *Kusumabale* is the exact inverse. And from this comparison, it can be ascertained how, in *Samskara*, desire is permeated through the power structures and the narrative becomes voyeuristic as a result.

## II. PREOCCUPATION OF DESIRE IN SANSKARA

Anantha Murthy faced many criticisms after publishing the novel as he was accused of portraying Brahminism in disparaging light. The work emerged as a realistic novel for its close portrayal of a realistic caste society and its problems. In the translator's note to the novel, A.K Ramanujan calls it a "religious novella about a decaying Brahmin colony in a Karnataka village, an allegory rich in realistic detail" (ix). Ramanujan deliberately emphasises the novel as allegorical to reduce the effects of controversies surrounding the realistic portrayal and bring in the right perspective to read the novel (Mukherjee 166). Ramanujan further explains in the 'Afterword' that although the novel has a realistic setting and satisfies the social setting of the time and delves into the mundane life of the inhabitants of the Durvasapura Agrahara, however, it does not wholly retain the form of realism (143). He opines that the major dilemma regarding the cremation of Naranappa could be easily solved by ritual modifications and offerings, and that the novel exaggerates on this part. The vultures and crows would never touch a plague-ridden rat as depicted in the story. This is the reason why he makes the distinction of placing the novel somewhere between the coordinates of realism and allegory. Mukherjee also agrees upon this argument that the novel does not exactly satisfy the criteria for realism and finds it as "an illustration of the kind of mutation that a western form has undergone in India" (167). While the

novel partially becomes realistic, it also partially criticises the caste system.

The novel is set in three parts which is further divided into minor sections. It starts with the news of Naranappa's death and how the Agrahara depends on Praneshacharya—the protagonist of the novel and the most revered Vedic scholar amongst the brahmins—to decide who would cremate the departed. The overall narrative is easily comprehensible and the narration is mostly in third person but intercuts to first person when a character's subjectivity needs to be established. This becomes common when the novel becomes complex from the middle portion. Pandya calls this as Free Indirect Discourse<sup>3</sup> where the third person narration goes back and forth between character's consciousness:

The kind of free indirect discourse used in these passages with a third-person narrator who is really another self of the first person allows the novelist the facility to present his character's thoughts without using awkward narrative devices like monologues or the omniscient author's narration of the characters in innermost thought (141).

This can be prominently seen when Praneshacharya's dilemma is depicted in the last part where he undergoes self-catharsis. This technique also allows more freedom from conventional structuring, which often restricts the narrative flow, and enhances the readability of the narrative, allowing the reader to understand the character's mind without any distraction of double quotes or paragraph breaks. Characters are developed in the narrative through detailed descriptions and flashbacks, so that the reader is acquainted with an overall picture of the character's behaviour and attitude. It also familiarises the reader with the settings. The narrative becomes voyeuristic as various manifestations of desire erupt in the form of avarice, lust, and gluttony. For instance: when Chandri, the lower-caste mistress of Naranappa, keeps her gold for the cost of the rituals, Garudacharya, Lakshmanacharya, and their wives are consumed by greed and desire to possess it (Murthy 9). Dasacharya, the hungry Brahmin represents the greed for food who would not miss any meal free of cost. He is described as: "What was lust to Naranappa, hunger was to Dasacharya" (34). He even breaks the ritual code, to not eat until cremation, as he was unable to keep his hunger and runs off to the Parijathapura where Manjayya serves him delicious *uppittu*. Another noticeable thread is the choice of words which underline the sexual overtones in the

<sup>3</sup> The author borrows the term from J.P Houston

novel. This is particularly seen in the descriptions of Brahmin houses in the Agrahara and Naranappa's house. While the other houses in the Agrahara uses flowers such as parijata, jasmine, ember, mandara etc. for rituals, the latter grew strong fragrant night queen bush which attracted snakes and the flowers blooming out of it found place on the knots of Chandri's hair: "As if that weren't provocative enough, right in front yard [Naranappa's] grew a bush, a favourite of snakes, flower unfit for any god's crown—the night-queen bush. In the darkness of night like some raging lust, pouring forth its nocturnal fragrance. The Agrahara writhed in its hold as in the grip of a magic serpent-binding spell" (14). Words like 'provocative', 'night', 'snake', 'serpent', 'darkness', 'forest', 'magic', 'lust', and 'writhe' create a tension in the narrative which predicts the events to happen. Not only does the descriptions confine to distinguishing particulars of the surroundings but it also demarcates the characters to categories as well. The first instance of voyeurism occurs when Durghabhata's ogle at Chandri and his imaginations score to his wildest fetishes of descriptions from Vatsyayana's manual of love to the Matsyagandhi in Ravi Varma's painting (8).

Women characters are clearly put into two distinct categories: lower caste, and upper-caste brahmin women. While the Brahmin women are described as unattractive, weak, barren, and sexually inactive, the lower caste women are described as attractive, sensual, and fertile and even compared to 'warm earth' due to their dusky complexion. These gestures try to differentiate the women in terms of their physical attributes and sexual drive. Shripathi is a person who tries to emulate the rebellious Naranappa and he distinguishes how both women differ:

Which brahmin girl, cheek sunken, breast withered, stinking of lentil soups, which brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her thighs are full, when she is with him she twists like a snake coupling with another writhing in the sands. [...] Not utterly black-skinned, nor pale white—her body the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun (36).

The words 'cheek sunken', 'breast withered', 'pale white' and 'full', 'colour of earth', 'fertile' etc. indicate how women are categorised as objects which either fail or satisfy the affects of pleasure. The words 'snake' and 'writhe' recur in these descriptions. These words imply even Praneshyacharya's relationship with his wife Bhagirathi and the lower-caste mistress Chandri suggesting two forms of desire. Bhagirathi is an 'invalid' woman who is paralysed and needs assistance with even daily tasks. Acharya marries

her deliberately as an act of renouncing worldly pleasures: "This invalid wife is the sacrificial altar for my sacrifice" (74). The marriage, for him, becomes an act for attaining *moksha*<sup>4</sup> by rejecting all forms of pleasure in an unconsumable relationship. The desire here is to achieve goodness and is identified as *shreyas* of the Katha Upanishid concept (Pillai 142), and Acharya brims with compassion serving his ailing wife and repressing his physical needs. While Chandri can be seen as the desire for pleasure, known as *preyas*, and intercourse with her fulfils and triggers all the hidden desires in him and thus unveils a new world. There is tension between both forms of desires. Praneshacharya saw himself as a person of high moral status as opposed to Naranappa or his former friend Mahabala, who live by the principles of pleasure. He has a desire to control Naranappa and to bring him to the right path when he recalls a past conversation with him. He does not excommunicate Naranappa as he took it as a challenge to reform him instead. Eventually, he realises that his desire to control Naranappa comes from his disappointment with his former friend Mahabala who abandoned his studies to visit a brothel instead (98). Even his desire for goodness stems from his egotistical notion to not be like Mahabala. However, his sexual encounter with Chandri breaks his ambition and he faces a dilemma.

The sexual encounter between Praneshacharya and Chandri towards the end of the first part of the novel becomes a crucial turning point for the story. The author constantly builds the narrative to this climatic point. The events before and after the encounter becomes clearly defined. Pandya talks about how the encounter is placed in the novel and the effects it yields: "The past and the future are arranged on either side of this incident so neatly that it is raised into one of the most well-moulded climactic points in all fiction. Before this, Praneshacharya was a sedate, self-respecting, self-satisfied Acharya. After this, the very foundation of all that he was and all that he stood for becomes questionable" (139). The narrative and the time changes around this event, and the author deliberately creates it, precisely to point out the significance attached to the incident when an ascetic breaks his pledge and gives into the world of pleasure. As Pandya points out, Praneshacharya is a transformed man and can no longer go back to his ascetic lifestyle. The third part of the novel perfectly captures his state of mind. The process of his change, his dilemma, and his constant questioning of what he stood for in the past, he is overwhelmed by a sudden influx of emotions and thoughts. Through the sexual encounter, his senses are triggered and he gains a renewed understanding of the sensory world. When he comes back

<sup>4</sup> Salvation

and tends to his wife, for the first time he feels disgusted by her figure: "...he noticed her sunken breasts, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid and they disgusted him" (74). His perception of beauty changes and he exhibits an ability to distinguish between what is considered as beautiful and what is deemed as unattractive. Thus, he uses Bhagirathi and Chandri as objects through which he attains the desires of goodness and pleasure respectively. All the women characters in the novel are denied of a conscious agency and become mere tools through which men access their desired values.

Another manifestation of desire is Praneshacharya's recital of erotic puranas which is popular and eagerly received among the young brahmins of the Agradhara. His way of narrating the stories with perfect enunciation and tone causes the young men's fantasies to grow abound and they are consumed by the adrenaline rush for desire. It can be also observed that Praneshacharya's endeavour is to limit his repressed sexuality within the boundaries of texts. In a past conversation with a drunk Naranappa, Praneshacharya remembers how he was accused of inciting a young man into adultery: Shripathi's intercourse with Belli, the outcaste woman, after he is aroused by desire, hearing Acharya's recital of the beauty of Kalidasa's Shakunthala. He sees her by the river and the rest is left to be assumed by the reader. This assumption is what Sharon Pillai finds in her essay as problematic where the woman's consent is predetermined by her caste and her body: "The inconsequentiality of Belli's volition in what transpired on the riverbank to Shripati, to Naranappa, and indeed to Praneshacharya, underlines her complete invisibility as an autonomous subject within the worldview of the novel" (137). Her speech is also curtailed by Shripati who merely sees her as an object of sexual pleasure. When Belli talks about her fear of her neighbours dying and rats coming to her hut, she fears about demons possessing the people. Shripathi does not utter a single word and keeps quiet, his thoughts are open to the reader: "Belli was alright for sleeping with, she was no good for talk" (Murthy 40). Shripati even treats Belli as his own possession and hopes that he only possess her, but, however, Praneshacharya's eyes had somewhere in the past fell upon her breasts and she is recalled in one of his feverish fantasies (79). Belli and Chandri represent the lower-caste women subjected to the whims of the upper caste men. According to Mukherjee, the depiction of low caste women as sexual objects is a common trait in Indian novels:

Chastity, satitva, and penance for widows cannot be the values of a class that does not have the economic means to enforce them, and apparently this freedom adds to the

uninhibited naturalness of the lower-caste women. But the formation of a stereotype is

not a simple process. The easy availability of lower-caste women may also have imbued them with a greater erotic aura in the male imagination (172).

Pillai calls this 'easy availability' as a euphemised term for institutionalised sexual exploitation of lower-caste women by upper-caste men (136). In *Samskara*, the lower caste women are represented as objects which fulfil the upper-caste man's desire. Women also becomes the entry point to their modern subjectivity and a tool to break free from the rigidities of tradition. The novel as a form gives access to the effects of eroticism strategically placing sexually 'available' lower-caste women as its objects. Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze helps to understand how women are viewed as passive but erotic objects of male phantasy, where through camera lens voyeuristic gaze is projected to the audience in cinema (11). Similarly, the narration in the text, like that of the camera lens, portrays a voyeuristic male gaze where the women characters are perceived as passive objects of male desire or disgust, where caste defines the desirability or the lack of it. The choice of words used to describe the women's body further accentuates the lecherous male gaze.

### III. ABSENCE OF DESIRE IN KUSUMABALE

In comparison, the novel *Kusumbale* becomes an inversion of all that *Samskara* stands for in terms of form, structure, narration, and theme. When it comes to the form, *Kusumbale* aligns close to the folk narrative where there is a lack of temporal framework, or a sense of narrator as there is an infusion of folk tales. It is difficult to place the novel in a historical context but it narrates the story of three generations of a family. A plot summary is given in the first chapter and the rest is revealed through discontinuous episodes. The novel as a form dissociates itself from a modernist realist novel like *Samskara*. Reality is blurred as inanimate objects are personified, for example: the narrative starts with the gossip of the lamp spirits or *jothammas* from each house (Mahadeva 7). There is also a cot which is given an autobiographical voice and speaks to Somappa, an upper-caste man (13). Another comparison is the description of women's characters where there are only brief descriptions of women's bodies and there are no explicit details and sexualisations as observed in *Samskara*. There is a description of Kusuma sleeping: "Every now and then beads of sweat on her forehead would break and drop from her face. Glued to all the sweat her hair, it too didn't move" (12). The description omits any explicit sexual connotations. Another description is of Kempri, an



untouchable who is ogled by men on a march called by Dalit Sangh: "...her saree hitched above her knee, her peacock-lace petticoat showing; and wearing a toe ring so pretty you could kiss it with your eyes! Looking at the body gleaming with turmeric paste, a few men in the march gave themselves away" (103). Even though Kempfi's description has a sexual undertone, which also captures the subtle notions of the male gaze, unlike in *Samskara*, the account falls short of becoming voyeuristic. The novel does not differentiate the bodily appearance in terms of caste as depicted in *Samskara* nor does it have any explicit articulation of desire as well. There is no site where sexual desire is consumed or depicted. The inter-caste relation between the untouchable Channa and upper-caste Kusuma, daughter of Somappa, is only revealed to the reader through the form of rumours of Jothammas; there is no scene where they interact at all in the narrative and there are no indications of a romantic relationship. However, it suggests an inversion of the sexual relation depicted in *Samskara*, between the upper-caste men and the lower-caste women, with no direct depiction. The roles of gender and caste interchange here. When the jothamma of the fisherman's house possesses the body of Kuriayya, an untouchable man, during the meeting of the Dalit Sangh, he rants on explaining why caste oppression is justified as the result of the history of untouchable men taking upper-caste men's wives and daughters (97). Somappa's father Yaada itself is rumoured to be fathered by a bonded labourer which is the reason why he and his mother is kicked out of the Brahmin's house. This sort of inversion becomes a retelling of bastard culture created by upper-caste men exploiting lower-caste women, a common theme recurring in modern novels. However, it is through the object of women that defines action for men. The least manifestation of desire that occurs in the novels is when the Brahmin woman Bhagavathy gets repelled and aroused when seeing Amasa, an untouchable thief who steals women's sarees during the menstrual days (81). Even though her body gets aroused thinking of being in Amasa's embrace, it is an involuntary reaction than a feeling of sexual desire. Nagaraj talks about the difference between the two novels' depiction of inter-caste relation: "Like *Samskara*, this novel too argues the belief that the contact between the sexes is the only effective way of destroying the caste system. The consequences of such contact are socially more real here, and they result in a ghastly murder [Channa's]" (228). Sexual relations are crucial in dissolving the criteria of caste as it is a result of a sexual act between two persons belonging to a homogenous community. In a way, caste controls the life of the individual and identity is determined at birth and the person has no choice as it is pre-given. Nagaraj opines that *Samskara* is more preoccupied with metaphysical part of

breaking the tradition while *Kusumabale* reflects the reality of such events. He says realism can only deal with untouchability as a theme. The life of untouchables however remains outside the purview of realism. Mahadeva, in an interview with Peter Nazareth, distinguishes the differences between the subject in *Kusumabale* as Dalits but it is not necessarily about them (Namma Banavasi & Mahadeva, 2015). He attempts to convey their presence in the novel without overtly addressing them. He wants the characters in the story to assert their own voices rather than manipulating the characters to articulate something he desires. This is evident from his writing style where it is visible that any forms of interpretations, feelings of sympathy or romance is difficult to sustain.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*Kusumabale* becomes a challenge to modernist novels like *Samskara*. In *Samskara*, The primary focus centres around the decadence of Brahminism which inspires to go beyond the confines of the rigid traditions. However, it conveniently overlooks the oppressions created by the system towards the lower castes. The novel is caught between the eroticism of inter-caste sexual relations and metaphysical dilemma that the upper-caste protagonist achieves from it, thus blurring out the crucial problems of caste and gender structures operating in a caste society. While *Kusumabale* omits any voyeuristic gaze and does not feature any explicit articulation of desire, even though it portrays a jarring account to the realities of inter-caste relations that often lead to fatal repercussions to the people involved.

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