



THE CRISIS OF BRAHMINICAL MASCULINITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S SAMSKARA

Prosenjit Adhikary

Faculty, Department of English, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya (Affiliated to University of Kalyani), Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal.

Abstract

U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara (1970) presents a compelling narrative set in the traditional Hindu society that interrogates the contours of Brahminical masculinity and religious identity. The novel, through its protagonist Praneshacharya, grapples with conflicting values: asceticism versus desire, orthodoxy versus selfhood. This paper intends to examine these multifaceted tensions by drawing upon interdisciplinary frameworks from gender studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory. In so doing, it elucidates how Ananthamurthy's narrative problematizes the idealized Brahmin masculine subject and exposes the fissures between spiritual discipline and human impulse.

Keywords: *Brahminical Masculinity, Religious Identity, Gender Studies, Psychoanalysis, and Postcolonial Theory.*

Introduction

The construction of Brahminical masculinity in Indian literature has long been characterized by an adherence to rigid religious and social codes that stress on purity, asceticism, and intellectual rigor. In *Samskara*, the protagonist, Praneshacharya, epitomizes an austere ideal that is soon undermined by the inescapable reality of human desire. His inner conflicts mirror the larger societal struggle as postcolonial India wrestles with the legacies of tradition, colonial modernity, and evolving gender dynamics. As the narrative unfolds, the tension between strict religious orthodoxy and the emergence of a subjective selfhood offers a deep critique of Brahminical ideology.

This research article explores the critical intersections of gender studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory in analyzing the crisis of Brahminical masculinity presented in *Samskara*. By methodically integrating these perspectives, the discussion seeks to illuminate how the internal dynamics of ascetic discipline and forbidden desire contribute to the deconstruction of a rigid identity model.

Gender Studies and Brahminical Masculinity

In the realm of gender studies, Brahminical masculinity is understood as an intricate construct imbued with cultural imperatives: purity, self-restraint, and elevated intellectual pursuits. The literature critiques this hyper-masculinity by arguing that such rigid ideals are inherently destabilizing when confronted with the full complexity of human emotion and desire. In *Samskara*, Praneshacharya's life of celibacy and spiritual dedication is emblematic of an ideal that ultimately fails to suppress the inherent human need for connection and affection.

By questioning the inflexibility and imposition of such gender norms, many scholars have unearthed how the strictures of Brahminical identity often serve as a mechanism of social control. The portrayal of Praneshacharya's inner turmoil underscores the contradictions embedded in an identity that is simultaneously revered and isolated. The narrative draws attention to the conflict between public performance of orthodoxy and the private experience of desire, ultimately problematizing the very possibility of an unyielding masculine identity.



Psychoanalysis: Unraveling the Inner Conflict

Psychoanalytic theory offers invaluable insights into the processes through which individuals negotiate dichotomies such as asceticism and desire. Freudian and Lacanian concepts provide a framework for understanding how repressed desires and internal conflicts emerge in Praneshacharya's psyche. As the protagonist wrestles with his attraction to low-caste Chandri, concubine of Naranappa, his mental state can be viewed as a battleground where the strict imperatives of religious duty clash with the surging forces of the unconscious.

Greedharry's work on the uneasy relationship between psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory (2005) suggests that repressed desires—often seen as anomalies within a strict socio-religious order—serve as indicators of deeper societal fractures. In this context, Praneshacharya's crisis is not merely an individual pathology but a reflection of the broader disjunction between a rigid ideological framework and the multifaceted nature of human subjectivity (Greedharry 87). This alignment of psychoanalytical thought with postcolonial critiques opens up avenues for rethinking the ways in which historical and cultural pressures shape the individual psyche.

Postcolonial Theory and the Crisis of Identity

The postcolonial theoretical perspective is particularly feasible here in understanding the clash between traditional Brahminical structures and emerging modern identities in post-independence India. Homi K. Bhabha's seminal text, *The Location of Culture*, argues that colonial and postcolonial contexts are characterized by hybridity and the negotiation of conflicting traditions (Bhabha 42). In *Samskara*, the protagonist's struggle to reconcile his religious orthodoxy with his unbidden desires creates a microcosm of the broader tensions inherent in postcolonial identity.

The nihilistic appraisal of rigid cultural codes under postcolonial critique is reflective of a growing awareness of the limitations imposed by tradition. The narrative, thus, becomes a site for contesting hegemonic power structures. Spivak's call for a deconstruction of representational hierarchies (Spivak 97) resonates through the text, as the conflict between asceticism and desire disrupts conventional modes of masculine identity. Through this lens, Praneshacharya's internal dissonance parallels the societal imperative to transcend outdated modes of thought, marking a pivotal moment in the re-articulation of selfhood.

Textual Analysis

At the heart of *Samskara* lies the character of Praneshacharya, a Brahmin scholar whose life is defined by an uncompromising commitment to asceticism. However, his encounter with the widow Chandri disrupts the perceived sanctity of his life, exposing vulnerabilities in his otherwise robust exterior. This encounter serves as a catalyst for the internal instability that has long been brewing within him.

Throughout the novel, Ananthamurthy uses symbolism and stark imagery to underline the inner conflict between ascetic rigor and the allure of desire. The practice of celibacy, intended as a pathway to spiritual liberation, becomes a source of deep-seated repression. Consequently, Praneshacharya's longing for the forbidden is both a rebellion against and affirmation of traditional Brahminical codes. His psychological turmoil is rendered palpable through vivid descriptions of internal agony and moments of self-reproach (Mitchell 115).



The text employs a series of flashbacks and introspective passages that reveal the layered dimensions of Praneshacharya's struggle. In one particularly evocative moment, the protagonist's gaze falls upon symbols of fertility and desire, juxtaposing the spiritual austerity he is meant to embody with the undeniable force of life itself. Such a moment encapsulates the essence of the textual conflict: the inescapable pull of the corporeal against the fealty to ascetic norms.

Analysis of these textual elements suggests that Ananthamurthy does not merely depict a personal crisis but rather an imminent challenge to the entire Brahminical order. The internal schism within Praneshacharya's character mirrors the external crisis engulfing traditional religious institutions in India. Furthermore, the narrative structure of *Samskara* intentionally destabilizes conventional genre boundaries. By incorporating elements of both psychological realism and social critique, Ananthamurthy creates a text that calls into question the very foundations of Brahminical identity. As the protagonist grapples with the dichotomy between his prescribed role and his emerging desires, the novel provides an incisive commentary on the fragility of constructed identities and the inevitable conflict between orthodoxy and selfhood.

Discussion

The central dilemma of *Samskara*—the tension between asceticism and desire—serves as a potent metaphor for the crisis of Brahminical masculinity. By espousing a life of strict discipline, Praneshacharya's identity is forged in opposition to the carnal and sensual. However, as Greedharay argues, such rigidity is inherently unsustainable in the face of inherent human impulses (Greedharay 64). Psychoanalytically, his internal conflict can be seen as a manifestation of repressed desires surfacing in moments of psychological vulnerability.

Moreover, the text's critique of orthodoxy extends into the realm of bio-political control. The Brahminical order, with its rigid codes and expectations, attempts to regulate not only behavior but also the very intimacies of thought and desire. The encounter with the widow is emblematic of the disruptive potential of the other: her presence challenges the boundary that separates the sacred from the profane, thereby questioning the very legitimacy of Brahminical masculinity. This conflict reflects broader themes in postcolonial theory, as articulated by Bhabha and Spivak, wherein the encounter with difference precipitates a crisis in traditional modes of representation and self-definition (Bhabha 58; Spivak 112).

The tension between orthodoxy and selfhood is further complicated by the layered nature of identity formation in a postcolonial context. On one hand, adherence to traditional codes promises continuity and community; on the other, the emergence of subjective selfhood requires the acknowledgment of individual desire and authenticity. As Mohanty contends in her decolonial feminist critique, the insistence on a singular, monolithic identity often marginalizes those expressions that deviate from the established norm (Mohanty 123). Thus, Praneshacharya's internal struggle is also a struggle for self-affirmation against an all-encompassing cultural expectation.

Within the framework of gender studies, the depiction of Praneshacharya underscores the inherent paradox of hyper-masculinity. It is precisely because the Brahminical ideal insists on a complete subjugation of personal desire that its practitioner becomes increasingly alienated from his own subjectivity. The inevitable dissonance between the idealized self and the lived experience culminates



in a psychological crisis—one that destabilizes the presumed superiority of ascetic discipline over natural human impulses.

Furthermore, Ananthamurthy's narrative structure lends itself to an examination of how modernity and tradition are in perpetual negotiation. The crisis of Brahminical masculinity depicted in *Samskara* is not an isolated incident but rather a symptomatic manifestation of the widespread cultural transformation occurring in postcolonial India. As the colonial legacy recedes, old structures of power and identity are increasingly questioned; hence, the narrative resonates with broader theoretical concerns regarding the transformation of gender, religion, and identity in a rapidly modernizing society.

In synthesizing insights from gender studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory, it becomes evident that Ananthamurthy's text cannot be reduced to a mere exploration of personal neurosis. Instead, the crisis of Praneshacharya is emblematic of a historical and cultural moment marked by the collision of inherited orthodoxy with emergent subjectivities. The interplay of repression, desire, and identity in *Samskara* ultimately provokes a reevaluation of what it means to be a man - particularly a Brahmin man - in a society that is in the midst of profound transformation.

Conclusion

The exploration of Brahminical masculinity in *Samskara* reveals the inherent instability of an identity built on extremes. Praneshacharya's descent into inner turmoil is not just a personal crisis but a symbolic rupture that questions the viability of an unyielding adherence to tradition.

By bringing together gender studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory, this article makes an attempt to trace the intricate pathways that lead from ascetic discipline to the re-emergence of desire, illustrating the enduring conflict between orthodoxy and selfhood.

The text emerges as a reflective commentary on the limitations of rigid masculine ideals, prompting readers to reconsider the role of desire and individuality in the face of overpowering religious and cultural mandates. In contemporary discourse, where debates over identity and tradition continue to evolve, *Samskara* remains a vital work that challenges both historical and modern assumptions about gender, power, and selfhood.

Ultimately, the crisis of Brahminical masculinity portrayed in *Samskara* invites a broader dialogue about the impact of cultural and religious dogmas on individual identity. As this article has argued, the internal battle between asceticism and desire is emblematic of the struggle for self-articulation in a world where traditions are simultaneously revered and questioned. The ongoing relevance of Ananthamurthy's exploration lies in its invitation to rethink the binaries of purity versus passion, strict orthodoxy versus authentic self-expression—a reconsideration that is as pertinent today as it was in postcolonial India.

In light of the interdisciplinary reflections offered herein, the narrative of *Samskara* continues to serve as a critical text through which the cultural, psychological, and political dimensions of Brahminical masculinity are interrogated. Ananthamurthy's nuanced portrayal of Praneshacharya's inner conflict compels scholars and readers alike to examine the broader implications of traditional masculinity and the transformative potential inherent in the embrace of human desire and individuality.



References

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
2. Exotic India Art. *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism (Past and Present Imaginings of India)*. Exotic India Art, n.d., <https://www.exoticindiaart.com/book/details/masculinity-asceticism-hinduism-past-and-present-imaginings-of-india-nah135/>.
3. Greedharry, M. *Psychoanalysis and Its Colonial Discontents: Rethinking Psychoanalytic Theory in Postcolonial Studies*. University of Victoria, 1999.
4. Greedharry, M. *Of Two Minds: The Uneasy Relationship Between Postcolonial Theory and Psychoanalysis*. Goldsmiths, University of London, 2005.
5. Mitchell, J. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women*. Pantheon Books, 1974.
6. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
7. Oxford Bibliographies. *India, Masculinity, Identity*. Oxford University Press, n.d., <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/abstract/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0291.xml>.
8. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Other Asias*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.