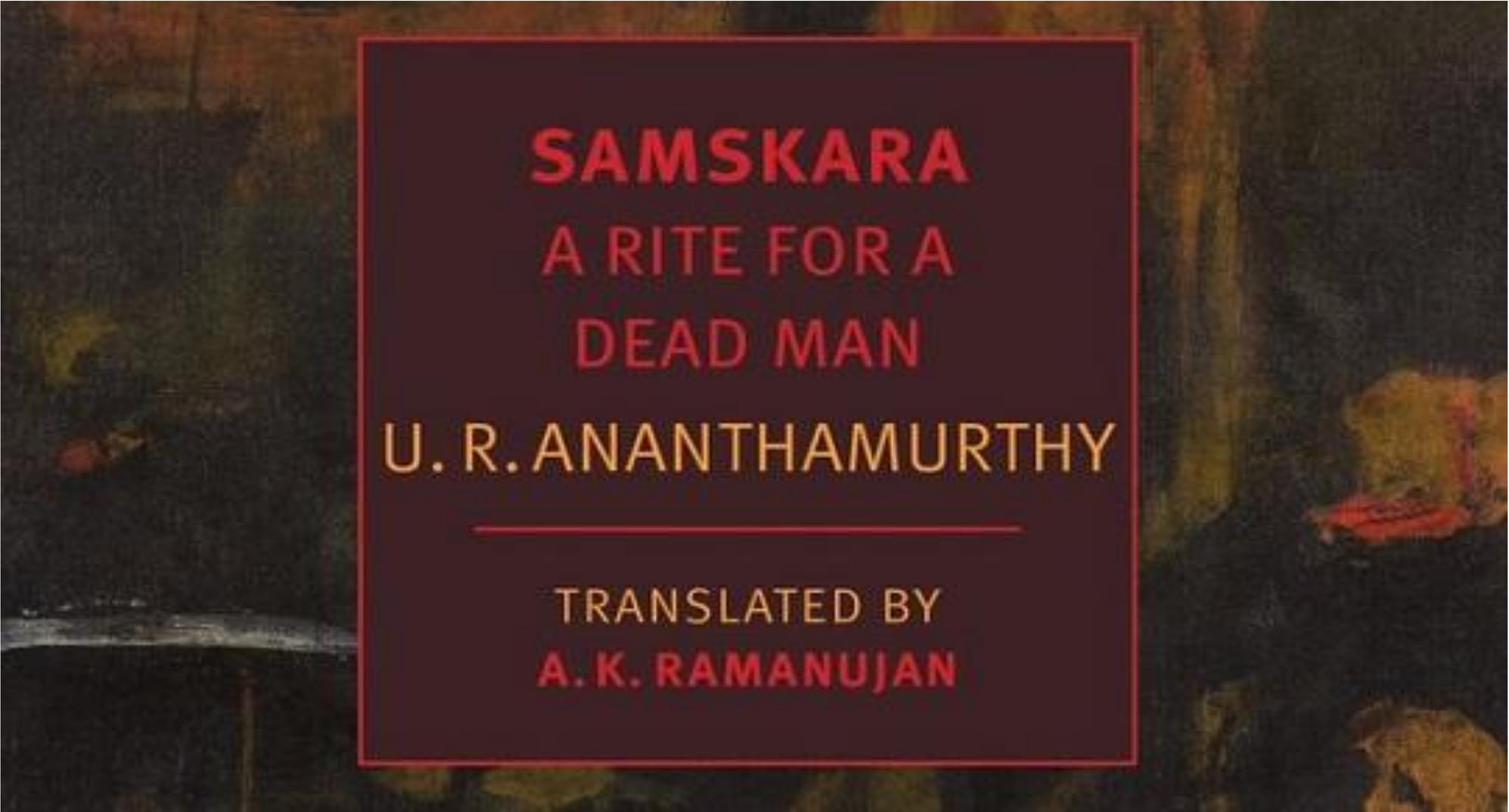


SAMSKARA AS A JOURNEY OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION FOR PRANESHACHARYA

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SAMSKARA

A RITE FOR A
DEAD MAN

U. R. ANANTHAMURTHY

TRANSLATED BY
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SAMASKARA INTRODUCTION

Samskara, Anantha Murthy's masterpiece, was published in 1965. In 1970 it was made into a nationally acclaimed, award-winning, but highly controversial, film. It was translated into English by Professor A. K. Ramanujan of the University of Chicago and published by Oxford University Press in 1976.

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Anantha Murthy's Samskara is a religious novel. It attacks the traditional and orthodox principles of the Hindu religion. The novel exposes the conservative life style of the Kannada Brahmins. The Brahmins of Durvasapura agrahara lead a dull, sterile and passive life by suppressing their sexual desire.

The novel dramatizes a conflict between two extreme ways of life, the ascetic and the hedonistic; the former is represented by the orthodox brahmins led by Praneshacharya, the latter by their defiant and contemptuous opponent, the pleasure-loving and anti-brahminical brahmin Naranappa.

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When the novel opens, Naranappa is dead, leaving behind him the thorny problem of whether a heretic could receive the death rites due to a brahmin. Samskara is basically structured around the attempt to solve this dilemma. In his attempt to find an orthodox solution to the ticklish problem, Praneshacharya moves from one place to another, in the process he is exposed to a variety of novel experiences including a sexual encounter in the forest with Chandri, the lowcaste woman who had been Naranappa's mistress. The novel ends inconclusively, with Praneshacharya waiting "anxious, expectant" while being driven back to Durvasapura, unable to make a choice which would free him completely and commit him firmly to a "demoniac" world. There can be no doubt, however, that his transition, unfortunate from an orthodox standpoint, has been fortunate from a human one.

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Praneshacharya, whose very name implies "life," is, when the novel opens, ironically enough committed to a complete denial of life through renunciation. He is uncomfortably perched on the high pedestal on which his own learning and the esteem of his fellow brahmins has placed him. He has studied in Kashi and knows all the scriptures. He has earned the title "Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning" and has won "all sorts of arguments with all the super-pundits," won "honours at every seat of learning in the South, fifteen lace shawls and silver platters." He enjoys a deference and an unquestioning loyalty rare even in such an orthodox community as his. He is the 'crest jewel of Agrahara'.

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Praneshacharya's personal conduct is also loftily idealistic. He has based his life on extreme asceticism and sacrifice, eschewing in the process large areas of vital human experience. Bhagirathi the invalid wife of Praneshacharya, feels that she is a burden to her husband and often advises Praneshacharya to marry a healthy and fruitful woman. As a scholar of Vedanta, Praneshacharya thinks his marriage to an invalid will lead to his salvation. The name Bhagirathi offer an interesting contrast, in mythology, Bhagirathi is the river goddess Ganga, a symbol of fertility and wild energy but Acharya's wife Bhagirathi is sterile and invalid. For himself he has carved out a routine which is as austere as it is unvarying in its monotony.

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Praneshacharya's knowledge has no application in practical sphere. He proves to be weak in his resolution. He runs away after cremating his wife. He was very scared to face the members of his community. There is an epidemic in the village but he being guilty of his sexual intimacy with Chandri, goes away unthinking about the people there. In contrast to Praneshacharya's Manjayya, the leader of neighboring village Shivamogge, on the suspicion of plague in the aghrahara contemplates upon the measures and decides that he should immediately inform the municipality to remove the dead body, arrange vaccinations for everybody, to use rat exterminators and if necessary to evacuate the aghrahara.

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The novel begins with admirable aspect of Praneshacharya's personality. But very soon he falls in our esteem for he is not able to take any decision regarding the burial of Naranappa. As the spiritual leader of the Durvasapara Village, it is his duty to guide the Brahmins in this crucial juncture. But he simply goes through the holy books for umpteen times without reaching at a solution.

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During his preachings, Pranesacharya glorifies the amorous sexual charms of legendary Shakuntala and admires Kalidasa for creating such a wonderful and captivating paragon of beauty. Like other orthodox Brahmins of the Agrahara, Pranesacharya fails to admire real beauty in flesh and blood. Pranesacharya is a contrast to the characters like Naranappa and Shripati, who admire the beauty of low caste women Chandri and Belli. After his sexual experience with Chandri, Pranesacharya contrasts the ugliness of wife Bhagirathi to the beauty of Chandri.

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In Samskara Anantha Murthy writes:

For the first time his eyes were beginning to see the beautiful and the ugly. He had not so far desired any of the beauty he'd read about in the classics. All earthly fragrance was like the flowers that go only to adorn the god's hair. All female beauty was the beauty of Goddess Lakshmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna's when he stole the bathing cowgirls' garments, and left them naked in the water. Now he wanted for himself a share of all that. He wiped the water off his wife's body, laid her on the bed he'd made, and came out again. The din of conch and gong abruptly stopped; his ears seemed to drown in a sudden depth of silent water. 'Why did I come here? Did I come looking for Chandri? But Chandri isn't here'. This bedridden woman, and that other woman who suddenly pressed his hand to her breast- what if both should leave him? For the first time, a desolation, a feeling of being orphaned, entered his in most sense.

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To his encounter with Chandri in the forest, Praneshacharya responds with contradictory emotions. The feeling of having sinned and fallen is predictably there, but it does not quite supplant a sense of release from an oppressive burden or the exaltation which comes from a liberating and fully realized experience. Steeped in the orthodoxies of his creed, Praneshacharya accepts the conventional judgment that through his act he has lost his virtue.

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At the same time, however, he has an irresistible sense of having attained through his experience not only physical and emotional fulfillment but also an increased moral awareness as well as a broadening and refining of his human perceptions. On waking up, he feels "as though he'd turned over and fallen into his childhood, lying in his mother's lap and finding rest there after great fatigue." As he looks about "wonderingly," he sees "a night of undying stars, spread out like a peacock's tail," and "his eyes were filled with the sights, his ears with the sounds all around him". He is infused with warmth and vitality. For while from an orthodox standpoint he may have fallen, he has gained as a human being.

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A sense of elation and fulfilment comes to him, the like of which he had not experienced before. He who had lived at a majestic distance from his fellow brahmins now feels that he has come down to their level. His coldness and aloofness gradually wither away, and he begins to respond warmly to human affection.

His encounter with the socio-religious issues like untouchability, leave him perplexed. He fails both as a traditional priest and a modernist. He allows his personality to unfold, by playing despot to his own tradition or even his own modernity.

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Praneshacharya tries to maintain traditional Brahminical purity while still managing the proper burial of a reprobate, and then escalates into how he can transform his sterile erudition into living faith. The Acharya's crisis is how to achieve an authentic self despite the entanglements of his thoroughly defined and relatively privileged position as a respected and holy Brahmin priest.

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Through the character of Praneshacharya, Anantha Murthy presents the intricacies of tradition and modernity. He faces the conflict between the living implications of a cultural past and the modernist or present perceptions and several instincts of his contemporary time. Anantha Murthy creates the individuals like Acharya as an ‘individual-self’ defining himself through his professional and personal achievements rather than through his actualization of his self – consciousness or scriptural precepts.

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In the company of Putta, Pranesacharya experiences the latter three stages of life- the life of a house holder, the life of a *sanyasi* and that the life of a forest-dweller and wanderer, within a narrow span of time. Far from being an unmitigated evil, his "fall" has certain beneficial consequences. Thus, Samskara presents dramatically the paradox *felix culpa* or the "fortunate fall" of Pranescharya leading to his self -transformation

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