

The "Fortunate Fall" in U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*

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U. R. Anantha Murthy is one of India's leading novelists today. Although he teaches English literature at the University of Mysore, he writes in Kannada, the language of Karnataka in south India. He has been an invitee to the International Writing Program directed by Paul Engle at the University of Iowa where he taught courses in Asian literature and society. Anantha Murthy has written poetry, criticism, and short stories, but he is primarily known as a writer of novels—*Samskara*, *Bharatipura*, and *Avasthe*.

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 (first edition 1976; second edition 1978). 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. When the novel opens, Naranappa has died, 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, being in the process 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" to go back to his village.

Ever since its publication, *Samskara* has been as controversial as it has been popular. It has been widely praised by the critics, but it has also been harshly attacked by fanatical brahmins who went so far as to try to block the release of the film. The novel is usually interpreted as a forceful portrayal of decadent brahminism in modern India. I wish to suggest that there is another and more important dimension to the novel which has not been noticed by the critics. From this viewpoint, the focus in the novel is not on orthodox brahminism as such but on the figure of Praneshacharya whose moral and spiritual growth through what might be called his "fortunate fall" defines the theme and controls the form.

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. 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. Far from being an unmitigated evil, his "fall" has certain beneficial consequences. Thus *Samskara* presents dramatically the paradox of *felix culpa* or the "fortunate fall."

In orthodox Christian theology, Adam's fall from Paradise is usually interpreted as fortunate because it provides an opportunity for a manifestation of God's redemptive grace greater than would have been possible if Adam had not erred. Thus in *Paradise Lost*, Adam, on being educated by Michael about the course of future events, bursts forth into a paean of praise and thanksgiving:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By mee done and occasion'd, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,
To God more glory, more good will to Men
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound. (XII, 11. 469-78)

Professor A. O. Lovejoy has traced the history and development of this idea in Western civilization, both in its theological and non-theological aspects. In non-theological terms, Adam's fall is from blissful innocence into a sinful world of experience, a fall which is accompanied by increased maturity and a capacity for moral discrimination. In other words, Adam's expulsion from Paradise makes him, to use a cliché, a wiser if sadder man.

Samskara, I suggest, is basically a dramatic enactment of the theme of the "fortunate fall." Although satire on brahminism is undoubtedly present in the novel, it is only one of its aspects, and perhaps not the major one. This satire, and it must be noticed that the novel does not satirize brahminism as such (as many people mistakenly assume) but only a decadent and perverted form of it, which is local and topical in nature, is subordinated to a deeper and more universal theme—the theme of the "fortunate fall" and the educative and humanizing effects of sin.

Arnold Toynbee argues that the "human protagonist's ordeal" is a transition from "Yin" to "Yang,"¹—from perfect and static innocence to full and dynamic knowledge through initiation into experience. Without this initiation, one does not attain one's full human stature, does not become completely human. It is this transition or transformation of Praneshacharya which is the central concern of Anantha Murthy's novel.

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

¹*The Study of History*, abridged by D. C. Somervell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 67.

platters.”² He enjoys a deference and an unquestioning loyalty rare even in such an orthodox community as his.

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. He has married an infirm woman deliberately and in full awareness of her disability, and for twenty years he has served her faithfully and well, tending her as one would tend a child, without taint of reproach or dissatisfaction. For himself he has carved out a routine which is as austere as it is unvarying in its monotony.

There are, however, some chinks even in Praneshacharya's armor. The writer has carefully prepared the reader for his subsequent fall and made it psychologically plausible by subtly hinting at some admixture of the earthly in his composition. Immeasurably superior as he is to other brahmins of his community, Praneshacharya is not altogether free from human weakness. Although he has practised rigorous self-denial all his life, he vicariously enjoys the sensuous beauty of heroines in poetry and drama. In fact, it is his glowing description of Shakuntala in Kalidasa's play which is indirectly responsible for Shripati's straying from the conventional path of virtue. Praneshacharya's motive in not excommunicating Naranappa is far from being entirely pure. It is not only his compassion but a “terrible” and “uncontrollable wilfulness” which makes him determined to force Naranappa to “walk the narrow path” (p. 46). “In such a resolve,” he asks himself, “how much was wilfulness, and how much the kindness in his bowels?” (p. 46). The vehemence of his involvement is aptly expressed by the violence of the imagery: “a desire welled up in the Acharya, a lust, to swoop on Naranappa like a sacred eagle, to shake him up, tear open the inward springs of ambrosia till they really flowed” (p. 22). Even his compassion for his ailing wife is a source of self-righteousness and pride to him. “He proudly swells a little at his lot, thinking, ‘By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready’” (p. 2).

Since Praneshacharya is trying to live up to an impossible ideal, it is not surprising that he should fail to sustain for ever his intolerable burden and succumb to Chandri's invitation in the forest. When he wakes up, he is understandably remorseful and feels that he has lost the worth and merit he had accumulated. He asks Chandri to tell the brahmins what has happened. He knows that he has lost his moral authority and is willing to do the funeral rites himself.

There is, however, another aspect of Praneshacharya's response which is equally important. 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” (p. 67). He is infused with warmth and vitality, like Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* after they have decided in the forest scene to suffer no longer and to follow the dictates of their passion.

For while from an orthodox standpoint he may have fallen, he has gained as a human being. 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

²U. R. Anantha Murthy, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, trans. A. K. Ramanujan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 6. All subsequent references to this edition will be incorporated into the text.

aloofness gradually wither away, and he begins to respond warmly to human affection. Impatient at and distrustful of Putta at first, he slowly warms to him and even begins to feel helpless without him.

Unsuspected depths of feeling and experience assail him on all sides, enriching him with new perspectives and levels of awareness he would not have been capable of in his original unfallen state. He recognizes, for example, the fact that all along he had subconsciously seen in Naranappa the figure of Mahabala, his old Kashi friend—"Unawares, I have seen Mahabala in Naranappa. To make up for my defeat there, I tried to win a victory here over Naranappa" (p. 100).

He also recognizes the fact of human interdependence more sharply than he had ever done before, the fact that "there's this deep relation between our decisions and the whole community. In every act we involve our forefathers, our gurus, our gods, our fellow humans" (p. 108). No man, he begins to understand, is an island: "I seem to involve everyone else in what I do. . . . Even when I slept with Chandri, unknown to everyone, I involved the life of the entire agrahara in my act" (p. 130). His mind now begins to brood over profound questions of human freedom and responsibility. He recognizes his "present ambiguity, this Trishanku-state." He knows that he will be "free from it only through a free deliberate wide-awake fully-willed act. Otherwise, a piece of string in the wind, a cloud taking on shapes according to the wind" (p. 109). From a "ghost"—rootless and disembodied—he has become a "demon"—involved in a human world of passion and experience. He does not readily accept or welcome the new experience but wonders whether his "dread" may not after all be only "the first pains of a rebirth" (p. 128). His dilemma now impinges upon his consciousness with a fierce intensity: "Unless I shed brahminhood altogether I cannot stand aside, liberated from all this. If I shed it, I'll fall into the tigerish world of cockfights, I'll burn like a worm. How shall I escape this state of neither-here-nor-there, this ghostliness?" (pp. 130-31).

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. Just as Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* gains in stature and insight from his sin and suffering, Praneshacharya's acceptance of Chandri ultimately makes him human, adding depth and breadth to his moral vision.

Nothing is farther from my intention than to suggest that the novelist devised the story of *Samskara* as a conscious and deliberate working of the *felix culpa* tradition. All that I wish to suggest is that the doctrine of the "fortunate fall" of the great Christian cultures enables the critic to get to the heart and substance of the novel and to interpret it with greater precision and insight than would otherwise be possible.

It is, I think, a mistake to interpret *Samskara* primarily, as critics often do, in terms of an assault upon brahminhood. It is equally a mistake to look upon the novel, as V. S. Naipaul does, as an illustration of the "complex apparatus of rules, rituals, taboos"³ which is responsible for the decay of Indian civilization. The novel interprets the orthodox theological doctrine of the "fortunate fall" on a human and universal plane and dramatizes it effectively through a delicate interplay of character and situation.

³India: A Wounded Civilization (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), p. 108.