



Ritual, Conscience, and Choice: Sartrean Ethics in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

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ABSTRACT

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965) stands as one of the most uncompromising critiques of ritual orthodoxy and caste-based ethics in modern Indian literature. This paper offers an existential reading of *Samskara* through Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, arguing that the novel dramatizes the ethical collapse of ritual morality when it becomes detached from conscience and responsibility. The Brahmin community's paralysis following Naranappa's death exemplifies Sartre's concept of bad faith, while Praneshacharya's inner crisis reflects existential anguish produced by radical freedom. By redefining *samskara* as ethical transformation rather than ritual completion, Ananthamurthy articulates an Indian form of existential humanism grounded in choice, accountability, and moral action. Situated within Kannada modernism and postcolonial ethical debates, *Samskara* emerges as a sustained interrogation of morality beyond ritual compliance.

Introduction: Ritual and the Crisis of Moral Authority

In traditional Brahminical ideology, ritual action (*karma*) is inseparable from ethical legitimacy. Correct performance of prescribed rites is assumed to guarantee moral order, social harmony, and spiritual purity.



Samskara radically unsettles this assumption by staging a moment in which ritual knowledge exists in abundance, yet ethical action becomes impossible.

The death of Naranappa—an openly transgressive Brahmin—does not produce ritual closure but moral paralysis. Although the agrahara is populated by learned men, the narrator observes with quiet irony:

“The learned men knew the texts, but no text told them what to do now” (Ananthamurthy 22).

This moment signals the collapse of ritual authority. The problem is not ignorance of rules, but the inability of rules to respond to ethical urgency. Read through Sartre’s existential philosophy, *Samskara* emerges as a sustained critique of moral systems that externalize responsibility and evade ethical choice.

Ritual, Caste, and the Social Production of Silence

Beyond its philosophical concerns, *Samskara* foregrounds ritual as a social technology that produces silence and compliance. The agrahara is not merely a religious space but a tightly regulated moral economy in which caste hierarchy determines who may speak, decide, and act. Ritual authority, in this sense, operates as a disciplinary mechanism that distributes ethical agency unevenly. While Brahmin men possess interpretive authority over scripture, women and lower-caste figures are excluded from ethical deliberation altogether.

The crisis following Naranappa’s death reveals how caste intensifies ethical paralysis. The fear of ritual pollution is inseparable from the fear of social contamination. To cremate Naranappa would require not only a ritual decision but a symbolic acknowledgement that caste boundaries are ethically negotiable. The Brahmins’ silence, therefore, is not passive but socially produced. It preserves hierarchical stability at the cost of moral action.

Ananthamurthy thus exposes how ritual orthodoxy sustains caste power by discouraging ethical risk. In this context, ethical introspection becomes a subversive act. By refusing to act, the Brahmins safeguard not dharma but privilege. *Samskara* reveals that ritual morality often protects social order rather than ethical truth.



***Samskara* and Kannada Literary Modernism**

As a foundational text of Kannada modernism, *Samskara* rejects both romantic idealism and reformist didacticism. Post-Independence Kannada modernism is marked by moral ambiguity, psychological depth, and an emphasis on ethical uncertainty rather than resolution. Ananthamurthy's narrative refuses closure: the uncremated corpse remains central, unresolved, and disturbing.

Rather than proposing alternative moral codes, the novel exposes the fragility of all ethical systems that refuse introspection. This modernist refusal of certainty aligns *Samskara* with global existential literature, while its social critique remains firmly grounded in caste-based Indian realities.

Comparative Modernism and Existential Narrative Form

Samskara participates in a global modernist impulse that privileges moral crisis over moral resolution. Like existential novels by Albert Camus and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ananthamurthy's narrative structure foregrounds ethical tension rather than closure. The absence of a decisive ending, Praneshacharya's unresolved wandering, mirrors existential modernism's resistance to moral finality.

Formally, the novel's restrained prose and limited interiority reinforce its ethical concerns. Silence, hesitation, and interruption structure the narrative as much as action. The frequent pauses in decision-making mirror the philosophical suspension at the heart of existential thought. Meaning emerges not through doctrinal clarity but through moments of crisis and confrontation.

Unlike Western existential texts, however, *Samskara* situates individual anguish within a collective social framework. The crisis is not purely psychological but deeply institutional. Ethical paralysis is produced not only by individual fear but by caste, ritual law, and communal surveillance. This fusion of existential inquiry with social critique marks *Samskara* as a distinctly Indian modernist text that extends existentialism beyond European individualism.

Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism*: Ethical Framework

In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), Jean-Paul Sartre rejects all forms of moral determinism. His central claim: "Existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22) denies the notion of a pre-given human nature or moral blueprint. Ethics, for Sartre, arises from action and choice rather than obedience to external authority.



Sartre further insists:

“Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (23).

This philosophy directly challenges ritual-based moral systems that locate ethical legitimacy outside the individual. Sartre’s concept of *bad faith* describes the tendency to deny freedom by hiding behind roles, rules, or institutions—a framework that proves especially illuminating for *Samskara*.

Sartre, Religion, and the Question of Moral Authority

Although Sartre’s existentialism is often positioned in opposition to religious ethics, its relevance to *Samskara* lies not in its atheism but in its critique of external moral guarantees. Sartre does not deny ethical seriousness; rather, he denies ethical comfort. His insistence that individuals cannot rely on divine law, tradition, or scripture to justify their actions parallels Ananthamurthy’s critique of ritual orthodoxy.

In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre argues that moral systems that promise certainty often enable ethical irresponsibility. When individuals believe that rules absolve them of choice, they surrender agency. This insight is crucial to understanding the agrahara’s crisis. The Brahmins’ reliance on scripture becomes a means of avoiding ethical risk rather than fulfilling ethical duty.

By placing Sartre’s philosophy alongside a deeply religious social world, *Samskara* complicates the relationship between existentialism and faith. The novel does not reject spirituality outright; instead, it exposes the danger of spiritual systems that refuse introspection. Sartrean ethics thus function in the novel not as an imported ideology but as an interpretive tool that clarifies the ethical consequences of ritual absolutism.

Ritual Compliance as Ethical Evasion

The Brahmin community’s response to Naranappa’s death exemplifies Sartrean bad faith. Each individual waits for another to decide, hoping responsibility will be displaced:

“Each one waited for the other to decide. Each one hoped the responsibility would fall elsewhere” (Ananthamurthy 34).

Ritual here does not guide action; it suspends it. Scriptural debate becomes a strategy of deferral rather than ethical engagement. Sartre’s warning is unequivocal:



“Not to choose is, in fact, to choose” (Sartre 38).

The refusal to cremate Naranappa is therefore an ethical choice—a choice for paralysis. The decaying corpse becomes a material symbol of moral stagnation, exposing the hollowness of ritual purity when severed from responsibility.

Praneshacharya: From Scriptural Authority to Existential Anguish

Initially presented as the moral centre of the agrahara, Praneshacharya embodies absolute faith in ritual discipline. His authority rests on the belief that dharma can be deduced from textual mastery. This certainty collapses after his sexual encounter with Chandri:

“Something had broken within him. The texts no longer spoke. His learning had turned mute” (Ananthamurthy 67).

This silence marks the onset of existential anguish. Sartre defines anguish as the recognition that no external system can justify one’s choices:

“In anguish, man becomes aware of his freedom” (Sartre 29).

Praneshacharya’s wandering at the novel’s end is not moral degeneration but ethical exposure. Stripped of guarantees, he confronts responsibility without refuge in ritual certainty. His unresolved state reflects Ananthamurthy’s refusal to offer false moral closure.

Masculinity, Asceticism, and Ethical Vulnerability

Praneshacharya’s crisis also exposes the gendered foundations of ritual authority. His ascetic masculinity defined by sexual restraint, intellectual mastery, and moral leadership is socially rewarded and ethically unquestioned. His authority depends on the suppression of bodily desire and emotional vulnerability.

The sexual encounter with Chandri destabilises not only his ethical certainty but his masculine identity. Desire, long excluded from ritual discourse, returns as a force that cannot be disciplined by scripture. This moment reveals the limits of ascetic morality, which equates ethical worth with denial rather than responsibility.

Praneshacharya’s subsequent wandering reflects a breakdown of patriarchal authority as much as spiritual certainty. Stripped of his role, he is forced into ethical vulnerability. This exposure aligns with



Sartre's insistence that ethical awareness begins when inherited identities collapse. Masculinity, like ritual, is revealed as a role that can mask ethical evasion.

Naranappa: Transgression Without Bad Faith

Naranappa's ethical significance lies not in virtue but in exposure. He violates ritual norms openly and without pretense:

“Naranappa had never pretended. He broke the rules openly” (Ananthamurthy 18).

In Sartrean terms, Naranappa refuses bad faith. His life destabilises the agrahara precisely because it reveals the hypocrisy underlying ritual morality. The community's inability to cremate his body symbolizes its inability to confront dissent without collapsing.

Chandri and the Ethics of Action

Excluded by caste and gender, Chandri performs the most ethically decisive act in the novel. When the Brahmins remain immobilized, she arranges Naranappa's cremation:

“Chandri did what the Brahmins could not bring themselves to do” (Ananthamurthy 82).

Her action embodies Sartre's insistence that ethics exists only in action:

“There is no reality except in action” (Sartre 41).

Chandri neither debates nor defers. She chooses, acts, and bears the consequences. Her ethical clarity exposes the irony that those excluded from ritual authority often demonstrate greater moral courage than those who guard it.

Subaltern Ethics and Moral Agency

Chandri's ethical action can be read as a form of subaltern morality that operates outside ritual legitimacy. Denied access to ethical discourse, she nonetheless demonstrates decisive moral agency. Her action challenges the assumption that ethical authority must be sanctioned by tradition.

Chandri's choice disrupts both caste hierarchy and gender norms. She does not seek recognition or validation; her ethics is pragmatic, embodied, and relational. In contrast to the Brahmins' abstract deliberation, her decision arises from lived responsibility.



This moment complicates Sartrean individualism by situating ethical action within relational care. Chandri's ethics is not heroic in the existential sense but quietly radical. Her action suggests that ethical clarity often emerges from marginal positions precisely because they are unprotected by institutional power.

Redefining *Samskara*: Ethical Becoming

Traditionally, *samskara* denotes ritual purification and social legitimacy. Ananthamurthy radically redefines the term as ethical transformation achieved through self-confrontation. In the novel, no ritual is completed; instead, characters undergo painful ethical awakenings.

This aligns with Sartre's belief that moral identity is never finished:

“Man defines himself by his choices” (Sartre 45).

Ethical life, therefore, is not a rite but an ongoing project of responsibility.

Postcolonial Ethics and Contemporary Relevance

Samskara remains deeply relevant in contemporary debates on religious authority, moral conformity, and social exclusion. In postcolonial societies, where tradition is often mobilised to assert cultural authenticity, the novel warns against uncritical reverence for inherited systems.

The ethical questions raised by *Samskara* is Who decides? Who acts? Who bears responsibility? This continues to resonate in discussions on caste violence, gender justice, and religious nationalism. Ananthamurthy's insistence on conscience over compliance challenges both conservative traditionalism and superficial reformism.

By foregrounding ethical responsibility rather than ideological allegiance, *Samskara* offers a framework for postcolonial moral inquiry that resists dogma in all its forms.

Conclusion: An Indian Sartrean Humanism

Samskara ultimately affirms Sartre's central ethical insight: morality begins not in rules, but in responsibility. Ritual without conscience produces paralysis; conscience without ritual enables action, though never without cost.



By interweaving caste, ritual, and existential freedom, Ananthamurthy articulates an Indian form of existential humanism—one that insists ethical life begins with the courage to choose. In doing so, *Samskara* remains one of the most rigorous literary interrogations of morality in modern Indian literature.

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