



Cadaverous Images of the Caste System: An Analysis of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Novella *Samskara* and Mahasweta Devi's Short Story "Douloti the Bountiful"

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Abstract

U.R. Ananthamurthy's novella *Samskara* and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful" both employ the image of the diseased body/corpse in their own significant ways to drive home the point that there is much that continues to ail the stagnant Indian society on the journey towards modernity and a more forward-thinking and more inclusive nation state. In *Samskara*, Ananthamurthy is concerned with the apparent reluctance and even failure of Indian society to rid itself from the shackles of the oppressive caste system and embrace the change/transformation that was sought after in the period leading up to (and directly after) Independence. Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful" located in the aftermath of Independence during the time when India was emerging as a nation state wherein all subjects ought to have been truly equal, underscores the point that this was in fact far from being the reality. This paper examines the ways in which both works employ the image of the rotting cadaver in their own varied ways to comment on the lack of progress in the Indian culture/society/nation and to call out for the dire need for a more inclusive, egalitarian society.

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INTRODUCTION

Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful" appearing in the collection *Imaginary Maps* (1995) ends with a searingly graphic description of twenty-seven year old "kamiya whore" Douloti's "tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease" after years of sexual exploitation, fittingly spread out over the map of India "filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas" (Devi, 1995, p. 93) on the very day of Independence itself. Postcolonial India that came to pride itself as a nation state, the very premise of which is equality amongst all its citizens, was nevertheless unable to rid itself from the shackles of bonded labour, the painful reminder of which lay in the form of young Douloti spread-eagled in a pool of blood over the freshly-drawn map of the Indian nation.

In U.R Ananthamurthy's novella *Samskara*, the renegade Brahmin Naranappa's rotting corpse lingers in its putrefying state till almost the very end, casting a pall of death over the entire Brahmin agrahara. He is a reprobate in the eyes of his fellow Brahmins for having cast off his Brahmin ways and rebelling against the status quo which results in all of them refusing to perform his last funeral rites and letting the cadaver fester away. This incident can be viewed as symbolizing Hindu Indian culture and its blatant refusal to change, the very culture that holds on

to caste distinctions with an iron fist since caste acts as the lifeblood of the rich and the powerful and the sole basis on which their oppression of the poor and the outcastes is justified.

Ananthamurthy's novella was originally published in Kannada in 1965 but according to A.K Ramanujan in the *Afterword* to his English translation:

"several details suggest that the time of action could be early '30s or '40s: references to older coins (*anna*), and to the then-popular daily *Tayinadu*, the rise of the Congress Party, etc." (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 128).

Mahasweta Devi's short story is set in post-Independence India; Douloti, most aptly and most tellingly, had been born the very year after India gained Independence. Nevertheless, it is apparent that in spite of the decades-long difference with regard to their temporal setting, there is not much of a difference in the way the moribund Indian culture/society is constructed in these two works.

Samskara can be viewed as a socio-political allegory of pre-Independence India, an India that was clinging on to its ancient ways, age-old practices and beliefs, refusing to give in to the waves of change brought in by the colonizers as well as by indigenous reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. The ideals sought after by these different and conflicting parties



may not have been the same but they all sought to affect one thing i.e. change and this was the very thing that conservative, moribund India was not willing to accept. Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful", despite being set in postcolonial post-Independence India, shows that bonded labour and the oppression of outcastes still permeate the Indian social structure in spite of India presenting itself/being perceived as a nation state that accepts all as its free and equal citizens and despite the allusion to change/transformation in the social setup at the end of *Samskara*

In this paper, emphasis is placed on the images of Naranappa's and Douloti's corpses to examine the ways in which they stand as symbols for the putrefying Indian society and culture, be it pre-Independence or post-Independence India, highlighting the caste-ridden Indian society's refusal to accept change and adopt a more progressive and more humane stance towards all human beings. The paper seeks to draw lines of comparison between the metaphor of the body in both works and the overall moribund body politic of Indian culture/nation to underscore the ways in which both works cry out for the dire need for transformation in the oppressively stagnant Indian culture/nation. In doing so, the trope of the body/cadaver is taken as a focal point and examined as a potent signifier/symbol of widespread socio-political ramifications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The significance of the body (life and lifeless) and the wider implications of the image/object of the body has been examined by several scholars in anthropological, sociological, historical, and political terms. Katherine Verdery (1999) in a riveting examination of political burials and reburials in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union tracing back to 1989 sheds light on the significance of "bodies as symbolic vehicles" (p. 27) that are able to transcend their corporeality/materiality and take on new meaning as political symbols. Verdery (1999) brings in the example of the popularity of relics during medieval times (i.e. the physical remains of saints) to drive home the point that "bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present" (p.27). New significance and new meaning (of the kind that were nonexistent when alive) can be infused into a dead body which thereafter becomes a symbol for the sociopolitical implications of the world it was a part of when alive.

Zoe Crossland (2009) in a paper anchored in the field of forensic anthropology draws upon the discourse of the exhumation and subsequent analysis of human remains and the wider implications of the said process. Crossland (2009) underscores the idea that agency is infused into human remains that are given "the ability to speak (truthfully) about their



histories" (p. 75) endowing them with a "life of [their] own" (p. 76). Michel Foucault (as cited in Crossland, 2009) in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) sheds light on the changing practices of physicians at the end of the eighteenth century and underscores the developments made by them in diagnosing illnesses based on the symptoms displayed by the body. Hence, the dead body became for these physicians, a valuable source of information/insight into the elusive origins of illnesses which in turn brought about a better understanding of the living (Crossland, 2009, p. 71).

Foucault (2003) in a lecture dated 17 March 1976 spoke of "techniques used to take control over bodies" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with "devices that were used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and their surveillance)" (p. 242) through institutions such as schools, hospitals, barracks, etc. Foucault identifies this seizure of power over the individual body as the essential first step with the second step following soon after in the form of mass scale population control through processes such as "the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on" (p. 243). Foucault (2003) further states that "death is beyond the reach of power, and power has a grip on it only in general, overall, or statistical terms" (p. 245). Hence, one can state that the body upon death takes on a newfound

power/agency by escaping the throes of the societal forces that had tried to claw at it when alive.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Analysis of U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

Death permeates the entirety of Ananthamurthy's novel and translator A.K Ramanujan in his *Afterword* to *Samskara* states, "The opening event is a death, an anti-brahminical brahmin's death and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answers...and the rebirth of one good Brahmin, Praneshacharya (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 123)". The term "rebirth" is significant in this context since it connotes the meaning of life after death. Praneshacharya, the highly respected Brahmin leader of the agrahara at Durvasapura, revered for miles around as the "Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning" (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 16), in the wake of Naranappa's death has a sexual encounter with Naranappa's outcaste mistress Chandri that shatters the whole of his existence and hitherto held worldviews. One may question whether Praneshacharya's "rebirth" following his sexual encounter with Chandri and the existential crisis that follows which forces him to shed his Brahminism altogether is a prefiguring of the "rebirth" of India, the new Indian "nation" that was expected to emerge following Independence from the shackles of British rule.



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At the very end of the book it is stated that “Pranesharya waited, anxious, expectant” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 113) as he sat in a cart on his way back to Durvasapura, uncertain how his transformation and transgression would be received by the other Brahmins. Can this be an allusion to the run up to Indian Independence? The tides were swiftly changing, the old order was shifting, and a new uncertainty had gripped the nation. As mentioned previously, the novella was originally published in 1965 and could thus also be seen as a commentary and a looking back at an independent nation state that had failed to live up to its promise.

According to Indubala Pandya (1987), Praneshacharya’s thoughts after he sleeps with Naranappa’s mistress are significant:

“[he] keeps comparing himself to Naranappa so often that it is clear that he identifies himself with that unorthodox Brahmin. It would not be an exaggeration, therefore, to say that the new Praneshacharya rises out of the dead Naranappa”. (p. 144)

Naranappa, the rogue Brahmin proudly and openly flouts all rules of orthodox Brahmin society and he is literally a plague on the agrahara in death just as he was in life:

“The dead body was reeking. The belly was swollen, the face of the

dead man was grisly, disfigured” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 61).

He wields just as much influence over the other Brahmins in death as he did in life, the stench of his bloated, decomposing corpse being what rings the death knell for the agrahara:

“*Ayyayyo*, look, look!” A vulture on the roof was an omen of death. Nothing like it had ever happened before...Garudacharya lifted his head and looked into the dazzling heat above. He saw vultures, vultures, vultures in the blue blue sky reeling, gliding, spiraling circle below circle, descending. (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 55)

Meenakshi Mukherjee’s comments (1994) are significant in this context:

“Naranappa’s death, instead of being his defeat, turns out to be a victory...the corpse of Naranappa seems to swell gradually and fill up the whole agrahara in a metaphorical as well as real sense” (p. 174).

Naranappa’s boldness, his unabashed assertion of his individualism and his disillusionment with the hypocrisy and barrenness of Brahmin society stand out and his rotting cadaver can be considered as symbolic of the cadaver of the Hindu Indian culture against which he rebelled.

Verdery (1999) underscores the following point about the dead body:



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“a body’s materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy...for instance, a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places” (p. 27).

This statement rings true in this instance since the mere presence of Naranappa’s body is sufficient to cause an upheaval in the agrahara. Crossland (2009) makes the statement that dead bodies possess a “life of [their] own” (p. 76) and that they are “active agents” (p. 76) in their own terms. This is nowhere more apparent than in the instance of Naranappa’s body being the instigator of all the woes heaped upon the Durvasapura Brahmins.

Furthermore, it is extremely telling that the news of the plague that Naranappa brings to the agrahara is announced in the *Tayinadu* newspaper since *Tayinadu*, means “Motherland” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 121):

“The *Tayinadu* newspaper that came yesterday, though a week old, had printed the news in a corner: ‘Plague in Shivamogge’. Naranappa did bring the plague into the agrahara, and plague spreads like wildfire” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 87).

When Praneshacharya once went to confront Naranappa about his wayward ways, Naranappa fired back at him:

“Your texts and rites don’t work anymore. The Congress Party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all outcastes” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 26).

Naranappa is receptive to the socio-political changes taking place outside the agrahara unlike his fellow Brahmins who have shut themselves off from the world. It is important to note that unlike his counterparts, he believes in an egalitarian casteless society and makes it a point to rebel against all those who prescribe otherwise. Thus, he casts aside his lawfully wedded Brahmin wife, gets himself an outcaste mistress, mingles with Muslims and other “low-castes” and goes out of his way to antagonize the Brahmins in order to show his disgust and disillusionment with the existing system:

“I’ll destroy brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there’s no brahminism really left to destroy in this place – except you” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 28).

V.S. Naipaul (1976) in *India: A Wounded Civilization* quotes Sudhir Kakar, an Indian psychiatrist according to whom, the Indian ego is “underdeveloped” (p. 102). This “underdeveloped ego”, according to Kakar, is created by the detailed social organization of Indian life and he goes on to state that,



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“caste and clan are more than brotherhoods; they define the individual completely. The individual is never on his own; he is always fundamentally a member of his group, with a complex apparatus of rules, rituals and taboos” (Naipaul, 1976, p. 102).

It is precisely Naranappa’s blatant refusal to accept this code and his bold assertion of his individualism that make him appear a reprobate in the eyes of his fellow Brahmins. Furthermore, it is Naranappa’s death, his ever-present corpse and the chain of events which follow that pave the way for Praneshacharya’s individualism to emerge. Hence, the story according to Mukherjee (1994):

“reflects the crisis of a civilization in which through a painful process a collective code is giving way to individual choice” (p. 169).

It is also important to note that this luxury of individual choice and the capability of asserting one’s individualism are limited to a certain privileged section of society only, in this context, to those of the privileged upper castes since both Naranappa and Praneshacharya belong to the Brahmin order. Douloti and the other kamiya labourers that feature in “Douloti the Bountiful” for example, are completely removed from this altogether.

With regard to the title *Samskara*, Ramanujan states that “*Samskara* refers

to a central concept of Hinduism” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 123). He goes on to state that it has many meanings: “A rite of passage or life cycle ceremony”, “forming well, making perfect”, “the realizing of past perceptions”, and “preparation, making ready” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 123) are just some of the meanings. Ramanujan then makes the following claim:

“In trying to resolve the dilemma of who, if any, should perform the heretic’s death-rite (a *samskara*), the Acharya begins a *samskara* (a transformation) for himself. A rite for the dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 123).

Thus, by extension, the question arises as to whether one can view Praneshacharya’s transgression, his “rebirth” (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 123) and him “[rising] out of the dead Naranappa” (Pandya, 1987, p. 144) as a foreshadowing of the *samskara* or transformation that many expected the Indian nation to go through after Independence but which did not materialize as will be made evident in the following discussion on “Douloti the Bountiful”.

Analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti the Bountiful”

When reading Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti the Bountiful” set almost three decades after Independence, one realizes that the transformation that



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was hoped for has not become a reality, at least for the subalterns of society. Spivak (1989) speaking of Mahasweta Devi states that she as a writer:

“lingers in postcoloniality, in the space of difference, in *decolonized terrain*. Her material often contains problematic representations of decolonization after a negotiated *political independence*” [emphasis given] (p. 105).

This “negotiated political independence” means nothing for the outcastes, the subalterns of society who do not figure in the “nation” that emerged in its aftermath. As Spivak (1989) goes on to state, “...the word “India” is sometimes a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity” (p. 108).

The words of Douloti’s father, Ganori are an apt indicator of this:

“When there was independence for you and the bosses, the boss fed everyone puffed and stuffed bread, had a big show, went to town. Douloti was born the year after that” (Devi, 1995, p. 44).

As an outcaste kamiya labourer whose entire life is spent in slavery and bondage, Independence means nothing to him. The outcastes as a whole are not included in such events of national importance signifying that they have literally been cast out from the nation state. Thus, “Mother India” (Devi, 1995, p. 41) means nothing to

them, their sole preoccupation in life being the struggle for survival.

Nandini Bhattacharya (2007) calls Bakha, the outcaste protagonist in Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable* “the alien within the nation” (p. xi). Similarly, Douloti and the others of her caste are all “aliens within the nation”. They do not even know what the nation/country is as is evidenced by Rajbi, the washerwoman’s exclamation:

“Oh Sadhuji, my place is Seora village. What do you call a country? I know *tahsil* [a pre-independence revenue collecting unit], I know station, I don’t know country” (Devi, 1995, p. 41).

In such a context, the normal practices of democracy are “counterintuitive” and “absurd” (Spivak, 1989, p. 118) and this is nowhere more apparent in the story than in the instances of the census and the general elections. Devi (1995) evokes how Bhuneswar, a kamiya labourer reacted to the polling booths in the election:

“What sort of thing is this that each person is put into an empty pigeonhole? How shall I put the mark on the paper or on my hand?” (p. 33).

Equally poignant are another’s comments during the 1961 census:

“You’ll write my age? Write, write, maybe ten, maybe twenty, eh? What? I have grandchildren, I can’t have so few years?... No, no, how



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can I be sixty? I have heard that our brave master is fifty? I am Ghasi by caste, and poor. How can I have more age than he?" (Devi, 1995, p. 32).

The census and the elections play an important role in the constitution and rehearsal of the nation state and their utter foreignness to the kamiya labourers simply underscores the gravity of their plight. Foucault's view (2003) of such forms of population control as a "seizure of power" that is directed "not at man[sic]-as-body but at man[sic]-as-species" (243) is significant in this instance. Foucault (2003) views such forms of control as regulatory mechanisms used to "establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis" (p. 246) in the society at large. In "Douloti the Bountiful", an India that was just starting to raise its head from the throes of British colonial power makes use of such mechanisms as the census and the elections in a bid to regain some of the control it had been denied as a nation for so long.

However, the point of origin for such mass scale control is the individual and by extension, the individual body and throughout the story Devi (1995) uses the metaphor of the body of the kamiya labourer as the ground on which sexual and economic exploitation at the hands of the privileged upper castes takes place:

"Ganori tries to lift the cart by the strength of his shoulders. Trying, he falls on his face. The axle sits

hard on him. Tohri hospital is eleven miles away. Bhuneswar and others take him there on a wood-and-rope cot. After three months he returns with his body broken and becomes Crook Nagesia" (p. 34).

For Douloti, the curse of her bonded prostitution (during which her body is ploughed and plundered) begins as a result of her father Ganori's injury which leaves his body broken and crooked. The responsibility of paying out the debt falls on Douloti's shoulders and as a "kamiya whore", her body is exploited, over and over again by sexual predators for whom she is nothing but an object to be made use of and discarded:

"Douloti has taken the yoke of Crook's bond-slavery on her shoulders. Now Latia is her client, her body is tight. Then going down and down Douloti will be as skeletal as Somni. She will repay the bond-slavery loan as a beggar (Devi, 199, p. 72).

The women in the brothel are not considered as humans beings; they are merely "kamiya whores" reduced to machines, automatons, mere tools existing only to gratify the base desires of the high caste men and churn out the money.

Rampiyari, the madam of the brothel sings:

"These are all Paramananda's kamiyas/ Douloti and Reoti and Somni /....The boss has turned



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them into land /The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop/They are all Paramananda's kamiya" (Devi, 1995, p. 59).

Their bodies have become land to be ploughed and made use of. Their situation in life as "kamiya whores" is such that they own absolutely nothing, not even their own bodies which are at the mercy of those with the power to own them and draw a profit out of them until they are drained of their very lifeblood:

"I'm a kamiya whore. I'll of course be kicked out when my carcass shrivels" (Devi, 1995, p. 68).

Ironically, not even the political "activists" who claim to make a case for tribals and outcastes actually do something for them. "What is to be done?" (Devi, 1995, p. 85) asks one Prasad Mahato several times and the white missionary, Father Bomfuller merely takes depositions from the women and claims he has started on a survey entitled "The Incidence of Bonded Labor" (Devi, 1995, p. 85) which is simply filed away in New Delhi and consigned to oblivion.

Only Bono Nagesia, Douloti's fellow villager, his heart aching at the sight of Douloti's shriveled form, understands the need for immediate action and bemoans the lack of it: "You will leave after hearing it all?" (Devi, 1995, p. 87), he asks and then makes the following poignant statement:

"Who will light the fire Prasadji? There is no one to light the fire...There are people for passing laws, there are people to ride jeeps, but no one to light the fire" (Devi, 1995, p. 88).

Ultimately, Douloti's plight is no different from the plight of Kalabati, her predecessor as Latia, the wealthy contractor's personal kamiya whore:

"He was much taken by Kalabati. She got a belly in two months. I dosed her. But the medicine was strong. On the third day passing blood like water. I ran to the medicine man. In the meantime Latia, dead drunk, entered Kalabati's room...The girl died. The police came. Latiaji gave money and arranged everything. (Devi, 1995, p. 61)

The story ends with the heart-wrenching image of Douloti's damaged body, brutalized by years of sexual exploitation and infected with venereal disease:

"...here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrified with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs...Douloti is all over India" (Devi, 1995, p. 93).

CONCLUSION

Both these stories are located in an India that is supposedly on the path towards change and modernity but the



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question arises as to whether the Indian social structure, specifically with regard to its oppressive caste stratification has changed for the better. In *Samskara*, there is a prefiguration of a transformation, an upheaval symbolized by Praneshacharya's transgression and the reverberations created in the community by the renegade Naranappa's death, the horrible reminder of which lay in the form of his lingering, rotting corpse. One may imagine that the Durvasapura agrahara symbolizes the whole of Hindu Indian culture and its need for rejuvenation and revitalization. Nevertheless, Douloti's story, set three decades after Independence, shows that this quest for change and equality has not been realized. In the case of Douloti, the nation moves on leaving her behind. Independence Day is celebrated with pomp and ceremony while her battered corpse, the painful reminder of the extent of the torture and exploitation she underwent, lies all over the map of India, the India that she was never really a part of. She is the forgotten, fallen woman and just one forgotten, fallen woman out of many others. Hence, in both works, the body, specifically, the decomposed, horrific cadaver is an apt metaphor/symbol for festering/moribund ideals and a calling out for the dire need for change and rejuvenation in the Indian nation and society.

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