



Epiphany and self-realization in U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*

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Abstract

This paper examines U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) through the lens of epiphany, a concept central to modern fiction since James Joyce. Set in a Brahmin settlement, the novel explores the tension between orthodoxy and individual conscience, tradition and transformation. At the center is Praneshacharya, a revered scholar whose authority collapses when scriptures fail to resolve the question of Naranappa's funeral rites. His moral crisis deepens through an unexpected union with Chandri and culminates in his decision to abandon rigid ritualism for an uncertain journey of self-discovery. These turning points function as epiphanic moments—sudden awakenings that challenge inherited certainties and open new possibilities for truth. By connecting Murthy's narrative with the modernist idea of epiphany while situating it within the Indian cultural and religious context, this paper argues that *Samskara* redefines revelation not as divine miracle but as a profoundly human experience. The novel's epiphanic structure exposes the limits of ritual authority while affirming the power of lived experience in shaping morality and self-realization. Thus, Murthy's work stands as both a critique of Brahminical orthodoxy and a universal meditation on the search for truth in a changing society.

Keywords: Epiphany, Indian english literature, u.r. anantha murthy, *samskara*, tradition, self-realization

Introduction

U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) is one of the most powerful novels in modern Indian English literature. Set in a small Brahmin settlement, the novel deals with the tension between tradition and change, ritual and morality, purity and desire. At the core of the novel is Praneshacharya, a deeply orthodox scholar, whose moral and spiritual foundations are shaken when Naranappa—a defiant Brahmin who violated every religious code—dies without the performance of the last rites. The community looks to Praneshacharya for guidance, but the scriptures fail to give him an answer.

This silence of unanswered questions becomes the ground for what can be called epiphany—a sudden awakening or realization. In literature, epiphany refers to a moment when hidden truths become clear, changing the way a character sees the world. In *Samskara*, Praneshacharya's journey from strict ritualism to self-discovery reflects such epiphanic moments. His unexpected encounter with Chandri, his inner turmoil, and his decision to step away from the rigid structures of his past reveal how Murthy uses epiphany not as a divine miracle but as a human breakthrough or self-realization.

By examining these moments, this paper argues that Murthy presents epiphany as a turning point where personal experience challenges inherited tradition. In doing so, *Samskara* not only questions Brahminical orthodoxy but also opens up a larger debate about the meaning of dharma, morality, and the search for truth in a changing society.

Literature Review

Critical responses to U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* have often highlighted its social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. The novel has been widely read as a critique of Brahminical orthodoxy and the rigid structures of caste. Scholars such as A.K. Ramanujan (Murthy 1976), who

translated the work into English, emphasize how the novel exposes the conflict between tradition and individual conscience. Other critics view it as a text that mirrors India's struggle between ritualistic practices and the demands of modern ethical thought.

In broader literary studies, the concept of epiphany has been central to modern fiction, especially since James Joyce (1914), who used it to describe moments of sudden spiritual manifestation in ordinary life. Morris Beja's (1971) *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* discusses how such moments reveal hidden truths not through divine intervention but through a character's heightened perception. Applying this framework to *Samskara*, Praneshacharya's moments of realization—especially his inability to find answers in scriptures and his transformative encounter with Chandri—can be read as epiphanic experiences.

Several Indian critics, including K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and C.D. Narasimhaiah (1969), have pointed out how Murthy combines indigenous cultural contexts with universal existential questions. They argue that *Samskara* moves beyond being a mere social critique to becoming a narrative of inner awakening. This view aligns with the idea of epiphany, where revelation arises not from ritual authority but from lived human experience.

Thus, while earlier scholarship has focused on themes of caste, tradition, and reform, this paper positions itself within a literary-philosophical lens by exploring *Samskara* through the concept of epiphany. This approach allows us to see Praneshacharya's crisis not just as a social dilemma but as a deeply personal journey of self-discovery.

Methodology

The primary text for this study is U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965), in A.K. Ramanujan's English translation (1976). This novel forms the central material of analysis. In addition to the primary

text, critical essays, reviews, and scholarly discussions on *Samskara* and on the concept of epiphany in literature are used as secondary sources. Works by James Joyce and Morris Beja on epiphany, along with Indian literary criticism by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C.D. Narasimhaiah, and A.K. Ramanujan, provide a comparative and theoretical foundation.

The method applied is close reading—a careful analysis of the text to identify key moments of spiritual crisis and realization in the character of Praneshacharya. These passages are interpreted in light of the literary concept of epiphany, tracing how sudden insight or inner awakening shapes the character's journey. The study also employs a thematic approach, focusing on the conflict between ritual and morality, tradition and self-awareness, and how these conflicts lead to epiphanic moments.

A comparative framework is also used, connecting the idea of epiphany in Western modernist literature (such as Joyce) with Murthy's reworking of revelation in an Indian cultural and religious context. This helps highlight how *Samskara* universalizes the human experience of sudden realization while grounding it in local tradition.

Thus, by combining close textual reading, thematic analysis, and comparative literary approaches, the study aims to uncover how Murthy presents epiphany not as divine spectacle but as a deeply human experience of truth and self-discovery.

Discussion

The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, which means "appearance," "manifestation," or "showing forth." In Greek mythology, it referred to moments when gods revealed themselves to mortals. Over time, the term moved from describing divine appearances to describing any sudden realization or profound truth. Today, in literature, epiphany conveys a moment when hidden meaning emerges suddenly, often through crisis (Lalita 2025) Epiphany and Inner Conflict in *Samskara* U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* opens with the disruptive death of Naranappa—a Brahmin who openly defied the codes of his caste. He drank liquor, ate meat, associated with Muslims and lived with Chandri, a low-caste woman as his partner. For the orthodox Brahmins of the *agrahara* he embodied everything impure. Yet his death brings an urgent crisis: who will perform his cremation? According to Brahmin tradition a corpse must be ritually consigned to fire; if it remains uncremated it pollutes the entire community. But no one wishes to touch Naranappa's body. To cremate him seems like honoring a sinner while to leave him uncremated contaminates them all. This paradox creates a profound moral deadlock.

The *agrahara* looks to Praneshacharya, revered as the "crest-jewel of Vedic learning" (Murthy 16), a scholar esteemed for his strict discipline and profound knowledge. They expect him to provide the dharmic solution. Yet when he searches the scriptures he finds only silence. The texts give no answer to this unprecedented problem and he is left paralyzed. Murthy captures the crisis: "The books did not answer; they were only a mirror to his own uncertainty" (36). For a man who believed every dilemma could be resolved by sacred texts this silence is devastating. It marks the first crack in his authority and the beginning of his inner conflict. Naranappa's death therefore becomes not only a

physical event but also the death of Praneshacharya's unquestioning faith in scripture.

This tension deepens in the episode with Chandri. Until this point Praneshacharya has lived as a model Brahmin. He has cared for his sick wife, denied himself pleasures and embodied sacrifice and purity. But as the crisis of Naranappa's death lingers his faith in the power of ritual begins to falter. It is at this vulnerable moment that Chandri approaches him. She represents warmth, life and the body—everything he has avoided (Naik 1982). Praneshacharya's epiphany through Chandri reflects this — the "twice-born" experience is not just Brahminical, but also psychological: he is reborn after breaking orthodoxy. (Mukherjee 1971). When he yields to her the image of his holiness collapses: "In that moment, Praneshacharya lost the weight of his lifelong austerity" (78).

The encounter becomes an epiphany. He realizes that desire is not an outside temptation but an inner truth. Murthy presents this as the awakening of the "god of desire" (*Kama*) within him. For Praneshacharya the act is both shameful and liberating. He recognizes that his life of denial had been incomplete. "He was no longer the jewel of learning, but a man, weak and trembling" (80). The fall from purity is not simply sin; it becomes a revelation. True wisdom does not come from rigid texts but from confronting one's humanity.

Unable to return to the community after this act, Praneshacharya withdraws into the forest. In Hindu tradition the forest is a space of retreat where sages often seek ultimate truth. Yet here it symbolizes not detachment but confusion and searching. The Acharya is torn between his reputation as the "Crest-Jewel of Learning" and the knowledge of his own transgression. As he wanders he admits, "I don't know where my road will end" (120).

It is during this wandering that his second great epiphany takes place. He realizes that scriptures cannot resolve his crisis. All his life he had relied on sacred texts to decide right and wrong, but now no verse can guide him. "The books could not speak to his condition; they were only lifeless letters. The decision had to rise from within him." This recognition is painful but freeing. For the first time he understands that dharma is not imposed from outside but must be discovered within. If his encounter with Chandri revealed the force of desire, his time in the forest reveals the necessity of freedom and responsibility. Together they dismantle his old identity and prepare him for transformation.

The final stage of his epiphany unfolds in the novel's ending. After his wandering he returns to the *agrahara*, but he is no longer the leader who once commanded respect. Earlier he embodied purity and authority, yet now he returns as a man humbled by weakness. "He had thought himself the crest-jewel of learning, but now he saw the cracks in the jewel." His transformation can be seen in three ways. First, he sheds his false superiority and acknowledges that he is not beyond desire but human like everyone else. Second, he develops a new sense of dharma. It is no longer fixed in rules but alive and personal, demanding honest choices. Third, he approaches the community with humility. His return is not triumphal but honest, and that honesty becomes the basis of genuine leadership.

The epiphany of the ending lies not in the resolution of external problems—Naranappa's cremation, the

community's division and the caste question remain unsettled—but in Praneshacharya's inner realization. Life cannot be lived through rigid codes. Desire, weakness and doubt are not sins to be denied but truths to be faced. Dharma is not hiding behind scripture but taking responsibility with honesty. This recognition of his humanity is the appearance of truth within him, echoing the Greek idea of epiphaneia as revelation.

The novel closes without resolving the outward crisis. We do not know whether the community will accept him, whether he will confess, or whether he will continue to lead. This open ending stresses that epiphany is not a final solution but the beginning of awareness. Through Chandri, the forest and the return, Praneshacharya experiences three moments of revelation: the discovery of desire, the necessity of freedom and the acceptance of human weakness. Ananthamurthy thus redefines epiphany in the Indian context. Unlike the sudden flashes of Joyce's modernism, these insights are slow, painful and deeply social. When the Acharya falters, the entire agrahara must confront its rigidity, showing that the awakening of one individual can ripple through a whole community.

Samskara demonstrates that revelation emerges not in the rituals of death but in the living search for truth. For Ananthamurthy, it lies not in external authority but in the courage to face one's humanity. Praneshacharya's journey is therefore not a fall from holiness but an ascent into honesty.

Conclusion

U. R. Ananthamurthy's 'Samskara' is both a critique of caste ritual and a meditation on the human search for truth. Through Praneshacharya's crisis, the novel shows how epiphany arises when tradition fails and self-realization takes root. His first awakening comes with the silence of scripture, his second with the shattering of his self-image after union with Chandri, and his final insight in the forest where uncertainty itself becomes liberating. Epiphany here is not divine revelation but human awakening—the collapse of old certainties and the birth of new awareness. Murthy thus reimagines tradition not as rigidity but as renewal, urging both individual and community to embrace lived experience. In the end, Praneshacharya's transformation mirrors the reader's own, reminding us that the search for truth is the deepest 'Samskara'.

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