

Posthumanism and the Politics of the Corpse in U.R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

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Abstract

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* occupies a significant position in Indian English literary studies because of its powerful critique of caste orthodoxy and ritualistic rigidity. While most critical readings focus on caste conflict, existential crisis, and social reform, the novel also offers possibilities for a posthumanist interpretation. This paper examines the political and symbolic role of Naranappa's corpse and argues that the dead body functions as a non-human agent that destabilizes Brahminical authority. Through the decaying corpse, Ananthamurthy challenges the boundaries between purity and pollution, human and non-human, life and death. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe, the paper explores how materiality, decay, disease, and corporeality reshape social relations within the agrahara. The study demonstrates that the corpse is not merely an object of ritual concern but a disruptive force that exposes the fragility of religious power and anthropocentric assumptions. Ultimately, *Samskara* reveals how non-human matter participates in social transformation and ethical reconfiguration.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Corpse Politics, Materiality, Brahminical ideology, transformations

Samskara by U. R. Ananthamurthy remains one of the most influential novels in modern Indian literature. It was published in 1965 and translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan. The novel depicts a decaying Brahmin settlement whose social and religious structures are thrown into crisis following the death of Naranappa. The central question of the narrative concerns who should perform the funeral rites of a man who openly violated Brahminical codes throughout his life.

Most scholarly discussions have examined the novel through the lenses of caste politics, existentialism, religious orthodoxy, and social reform. However, contemporary posthumanist theory enables a fresh understanding of the text by shifting attention from human subjects to material agencies. Rather than treating Naranappa's corpse as a passive object, a posthumanist reading recognizes it as an active force that reorganizes social relations and destabilizes institutional authority.

According to Cary Wolfe, posthumanism challenges "the discourse of species superiority" and questions the assumption that humans occupy the center of meaning-making processes. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti argues that posthumanism seeks to rethink human identity through interconnected networks of bodies, matter, and environments. Such perspectives are useful for understanding *Samskara*, where the corpse acquires an agency that exceeds human control. This present paper argues that Naranappa's dead body becomes a political actor

whose material presence dismantles religious certainty, exposes caste contradictions, and transforms the consciousness of those around it. Through the politics of decay, Ananthamurthy demonstrates how non-human matter can shape history, ethics, and social organization.

The Corpse as a Posthuman Presence

The narrative of *Samskara* begins with death, yet the corpse refuses to remain silent. Naranappa's body occupies the center of the village and gradually becomes the focal point around which all social interactions revolve. Instead of being disposed of according to ritual norms, the corpse remains exposed, decomposing under the tropical heat.

From a posthumanist perspective, the corpse is not merely a symbol but a material entity exerting influence upon human actors. The Brahmins, who ordinarily define social order through religious authority, find themselves controlled by a body that no longer possesses consciousness. The irony is profound: the dead man exercises greater power after death than he did while alive.

As Rosi Braidotti observes, "matter is intelligent and self-organizing." Although Naranappa is biologically dead, the material processes of decomposition continue to generate consequences within the social world. The corpse produces odors, attracts animals, spreads fear, and ultimately contributes to the outbreak of disease. The body thus participates in shaping human decisions. The Brahmins' inability to cremate the corpse reveals the collapse of anthropocentric authority. Ritual expertise, scriptural knowledge, and social hierarchy become ineffective before the stubborn reality of decaying flesh. The corpse emerges as a posthuman agent that interrupts established structures of meaning.

Decay, Materiality, and the Breakdown of Ritual Authority

One of the central concerns of posthumanist thought is the recognition of material agency. Matter is not passive; it interacts with and transforms human systems. In *Samskara*, decomposition functions as a material process that resists religious categorization. The Brahmins seek answers within sacred texts, yet no scripture adequately resolves Naranappa's case. Their dependence upon textual authority contrasts sharply with the physical reality of the rotting corpse. While they debate metaphysical questions, the body continues to decay.

Ananthamurthy repeatedly emphasizes sensory details associated with death. The smell of decomposition becomes impossible to ignore. Vultures circle overhead. Rats and insects appear. Such images challenge the notion that social reality can be organized exclusively through abstract religious principles. Donna Haraway argues that humans exist within networks of interdependence involving animals, environments, and material processes. The world of *Samskara* vividly illustrates this interconnectedness. The corpse attracts scavengers and becomes entangled with ecological systems that transcend human control. The boundaries separating human life from animal life begin to dissolve.

The agrahara, which imagines itself as a space of ritual purity, is invaded by the material realities it seeks to exclude. Decay reveals that all bodies, regardless of caste status, ultimately become biological matter. Consequently, the corpse exposes the fragility of purity-based social hierarchies.

The Politics of the Corpse and Caste Contradictions

Naranappa's corpse acquires political significance because it reveals contradictions within Brahminical ideology. During his lifetime, Naranappa challenged caste norms by eating meat, drinking alcohol, and associating with lower-caste communities. After death, his body continues this rebellion. The Brahmins cannot determine whether he belongs within or outside their community. If he is acknowledged as a Brahmin, he deserves funeral rites. If he is excluded, their social system risks admitting its inability to define identity consistently.

Manish Prasad observes that *Samskara* critiques caste-based inequality and exposes the social tensions embedded within traditional structures. The corpse becomes the site where these tensions are dramatized most visibly. The political power of the corpse lies in its refusal to fit existing categories. It is simultaneously sacred and polluted, human and non-human, present and absent. Such ambiguity destabilizes binary thinking.

Posthumanist theorists frequently challenge rigid classifications that separate subjects from objects. Naranappa's corpse embodies this challenge. Though technically an object, it acts upon society. Though lifeless, it generates social movement. Though silent, it produces intense debate. The corpse therefore functions as what posthumanist thinkers describe as an assemblage—a node where biological, cultural, ecological, and political forces intersect. Its significance cannot be reduced to symbolic representation alone.

Disease, Non-Human Agency, and Social Transformation

Another crucial aspect of the novel is the relationship between the corpse and disease. As the body decomposes, plague begins to spread throughout the settlement. The outbreak further undermines Brahminical confidence and reveals the limitations of ritual knowledge. A critical study of cadaverous imagery in *Samskara* argues that the rotting body symbolizes a society unable to free itself from oppressive traditions and stagnant structures. Yet the disease does more than symbolize social decay; it demonstrates the agency of biological processes.

Posthumanism emphasizes that humans coexist with forces they cannot fully control. Microbes, viruses, ecosystems, and environmental conditions participate in shaping human history. The plague in *Samskara* illustrates this principle vividly. The Brahmins initially interpret events through religious categories of sin and pollution. However, disease follows biological rather than ritual logic. Sacred status offers no immunity. The outbreak exposes the vulnerability shared by all bodies. This realization weakens caste distinctions founded upon notions of bodily purity. The biological reality of infection renders hierarchical classifications increasingly meaningless. Human beings become part of a broader network of material existence where vulnerability is universal.

The plague thus functions as a non-human actor that accelerates social transformation. It compels characters to confront realities that transcend theological explanations and anthropocentric assumptions.

Praneshacharya and Posthuman Ethics

Praneshacharya's transformation constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of the novel. Initially regarded as the spiritual leader of the community, he believes that scriptural

knowledge can resolve every moral dilemma. Yet the corpse confronts him with uncertainties that religious doctrine cannot answer. The crisis generated by Naranappa's death eventually destabilizes his identity. His encounter with Chandri and subsequent moral confusion force him to reconsider his understanding of selfhood and virtue.

From a posthumanist perspective, Praneshacharya's journey represents a movement away from rigid humanist ideals. Traditional humanism often assumes a coherent, rational, autonomous subject. By contrast, posthumanism recognizes subjectivity as fluid, relational, and embodied. The Acharya gradually discovers that human beings are shaped by desire, materiality, vulnerability, and contingency. His spiritual authority collapses because it depends upon an illusion of separation from bodily existence. Naranappa's corpse indirectly facilitates this transformation. The dead body initiates a chain of events that dismantles the Acharya's certainty and opens possibilities for ethical self-reflection.

The novel therefore suggests that ethical growth emerges not from transcending material existence but from acknowledging one's entanglement with it. Such a position resonates strongly with contemporary posthumanist thought.

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Animals, Matter, and Ecology

The recurring presence of vultures, crows, rats, and insects further strengthens the novel's posthuman dimensions. These creatures are not merely background details; they participate actively in the unfolding drama. Traditional literary criticism often privileges human characters while treating animals and environments as secondary. Posthumanist criticism rejects this hierarchy by emphasizing multispecies interactions.

The scavenging birds hovering above Naranappa's corpse symbolize more than death. They remind readers that human bodies are part of ecological cycles. The distinction between human superiority and animal existence becomes increasingly unstable. Haraway's concept of "companion species" highlights the interconnectedness of life forms. Although *Samskara* predates posthumanist theory, its narrative demonstrates similar insights. Human beings, animals, disease organisms, and material processes collectively shape the world of the novel. The corpse serves as the point where these different forms of life intersect. Through decomposition, the body re-enters ecological circulation and challenges anthropocentric assumptions about human uniqueness.

A posthumanist reading of *Samskara* reveals dimensions of the novel that extend beyond conventional discussions of caste and religion. Naranappa's corpse functions as more than a narrative device or symbolic representation; it becomes a material force capable of reorganizing social relations and exposing ideological contradictions. Through the politics of the corpse, Ananthamurthy demonstrates that non-human matter possesses transformative power. Decay, disease, animals, and ecological processes participate in shaping human experience. The Brahmins' inability to control the corpse exposes the limits of religious authority and anthropocentric thinking.

The novel ultimately challenges the assumption that humans occupy the center of social and ethical life. Instead, it presents a world in which bodies, environments, and material forces continually interact to produce meaning and change. By foregrounding the agency of the

corpse, *Samskara* anticipates many concerns of contemporary posthumanist theory and remains remarkably relevant to current debates about embodiment, materiality, and power.

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