



Pandemic and Superstitions: Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* as a Testimony to Fragile Society

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Abstract— *With the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a heightened interest in pandemic literature and epidemic narratives, as the everyday lives of individuals undergo significant transformations in response to the arrival of such a pandemic, reflecting a growing curiosity about how literature explores and elucidates these challenging experiences. It is widely acknowledged that there has been no shortage of pandemic literature and related material in world literature, including Indian vernacular literature, available in both its original languages and translated forms, underscoring the richness and diversity of perspectives on pandemics across different literary traditions. What is particularly intriguing is that socially conscious and perceptive writers often use epidemics or pandemics as a lens through which to critically examine and delve into the intricate layers of India's caste-based hierarchical social structure, offering a unique perspective to dissect and reflect upon the dynamics of this deeply entrenched societal framework. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* as a pandemic narrative that brilliantly captures the vignettes of the reality of superstition-ridden society at times of crisis and emergency. The paper also endeavours to investigate how literature seeks to provide solace during moments of necessity and hardship by offering an insightful account of various events that occur during pandemics, illustrating how the portrayal of pandemics in literature often serves as a source of inspiration for humanity, highlighting the capacity of literature to offer guidance and motivation in challenging times.*



Keywords— *Superstitions, epidemics, pandemics, covid-19, society*

I. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of various detrimental diseases, such as plague, cholera, malaria, and smallpox, is not a recent development in the annals of human history, for their presence on the earth dates back to the very inception of civilisation itself. With the world on the cusp of a new normal due to the ongoing pandemic, there is a heightened curiosity among individuals to delve into pandemic literature, particularly in light of the recent global eruption of Covid-19, as it shapes and reshapes the fabric of daily human existence. The advent of an epidemic has the power to completely reshape the entire spectrum of human existence, leaving its indelible impacts felt in nearly every corner of the world. In rural areas, a multitude of superstitious beliefs and unscientific attitudes entrenched

within the social fabric become conspicuously evident, underscoring the need for educational and cultural interventions to foster more rational perspectives. During any pandemic, the pivotal role played by scientists and physicians in both advancing medical treatments to combat illness and dispelling superstitions through evidence-based knowledge becomes paramount in shaping effective responses and promoting public health. As the recent Covid-19 pandemic initially unfurled, there was a global anticipation of widespread panic and upheaval across various facets of society, prompting heightened concern among writers and observers regarding the collective reactions and responses of people to these unprecedented circumstances. In his book *Culture of Fear*, Frank Furedi, a Professor of Sociology, elucidates his core objective by

stating: "I was mainly concerned with the way that society encouraged a panic-like reaction in relation to health, the environment, technology, new products and personal security" (2002, p. xiv), highlighting his keen interest in examining how society promotes heightened anxiety responses across various aspects of life.

Originally published in Kannada in 1965 and subsequently translated into English in 1976, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* is a noteworthy Kannada novel authored by U. R. Anantha Murthy, a prominent and influential figure in the literary landscape of post-independence India. Since its publication, this work has undergone extensive scrutiny from various angles, encompassing an exploration of its depiction of declining Brahminism during a pivotal era in South Indian history, an analysis of the evolving social, cultural, and political dynamics of the period, an examination of the clash between divergent worldviews and life philosophies, and an assessment of its portrayal of gender roles and representations etc. What has largely eluded the scrutiny of critics regarding the novel is its profound exploration of the profound impact of the bubonic plague, which serves as the catalyst propelling the narrative forward. There is a noticeable scarcity of studies that endeavour to underscore the sheer magnitude of an epidemic's force and to place it within the broader context of the human predicament. While critically evaluating the novel, the aspect of the epidemic serving as an imperceptible yet profoundly influential force in shaping the human condition has largely been overlooked and underexplored. Here the upper-caste Brahmins residing in the Karnataka village of Agraphara become ensnared in the clutches of an epidemic, compelling them to confront a series of challenging experiences and dilemmas. Despite the immediate need to cremate a deceased body, the villagers, especially the upper-caste Hindu Brahmins, find themselves preoccupied and hindered by an array of entrenched superstitious beliefs and customs that cast a shadow over their actions. The unfolding incident serves as a catalyst, laying bare the stark class disparities within the community, and in doing so, it manifests as a socio-spiritual conflict intertwined with deeply rooted superstitions, offering a representative portrayal of the broader societal tensions. Thus, it effectively underscores the striking parallels between the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic and historical plague outbreaks, illuminating how the persistence of superstitions among society's populace consistently emerges as a central concern during the throes of pandemics.

II. EPIDEMIC NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the centuries, numerous renowned authors, including Albert Camus, Jack London, Giovanni Boccaccio, Alessandro Manzoni, and Daniel Defoe, have skilfully woven narratives that delve into the harrowing experiences of deadly infectious diseases, such as plagues and cholera, providing literary insights into the human condition in the face of epidemics. Writers have contributed a substantial body of work over the years, comprising both novels and short stories, that explore the theme of pandemics, offering diverse perspectives and narratives that delve into the complexities of such global health crises. Several profoundly influential literary works on the subject of pandemics, including Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1827), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988), and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), stand as enduring testaments to the exploration of epidemics in literature. The rich tapestry of Indian literature in diverse regional languages has also yielded a substantial body of stories centred on pandemics, reflecting the depth and diversity of the country's literary exploration of epidemic themes. In the literary contributions of Indian luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, Ahmed Ali, Munshi Premchand, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Phanishwar Nath Renu, and many others, the portrayal of a pandemic emerges as a profoundly significant theme, weaving through their narratives with compelling depth and insight. In the literary creations of these authors, epidemics prominently inhabit the writer's consciousness, serving as a lens through which they articulate their deep-seated concerns and reflections about society. At times, literature has used plagues or epidemics as a metaphorical representation to depict devastating diseases as a punitive consequence for human transgressions and moral failings. In the novel *Samskara*, the outbreak of a plague epidemic serves as a stark catalyst, laying bare the intricate web of class disparities and entrenched superstitions within society in an unfiltered and brutally revealing manner.

Numerous literary works serve as poignant reminders that pandemics, similar to the novel coronavirus, are not recent phenomena, but rather, the depiction of such outbreaks in literature has been a recurring theme for centuries, emphasising the enduring relevance of these narratives. Written in 1895, Rabindranath Tagore's "Purantan Bhritya" ("An Old Servant"), a narrative poem, intricately weaves the tale of an elderly servant grappling with the affliction of smallpox, exploring themes of human compassion, suffering, and societal attitudes towards

illness. "Eidgah" (1933), hailed as one of Munshi Premchand's finest short stories, narrates the poignant tale of Hamid, a five-year-old boy who tragically loses his father to cholera, showcasing the emotional and social complexities surrounding the loss in a rural Indian setting. Ahmed Ali's novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) vividly portrays the harrowing impact of the Spanish Flu, a deadly pandemic, on the lives of numerous individuals, offering a haunting depiction of the epidemic's devastation within the context of Delhi during that era:

How deadly this fever is,
Everyone is dying of it.
Men become lame with it
And go out in dolis.
The hospitals are gay and bright,
But sorry is men's plight. (p. 171)

In G. V. Kakkadan's acclaimed novel *Vasoori* (1968), a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award, the narrative skilfully recounts the outbreak of smallpox in a remote region of central Kerala, offering a compelling exploration of the human condition in the face of a deadly epidemic. Fakir Mohan Senapati's renowned story "Rebati" (1898) poignantly depicts how cholera claims the lives of several individuals, illuminating the profound impact of the epidemic on the characters and their community. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe meticulously chronicles the devastating outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1665, famously known as the Great Plague of London, vividly capturing the chaos, fear, and societal upheaval that engulfed the city during that tumultuous period. Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *A Ballad of Remittent Fever* (2020), skilfully translated into English by Arunava Sinha from the original Bengali title "Abiram Jwarer Roopkatha," offers a vivid portrayal of the plague-stricken Bengal region during the 18th and 19th centuries, capturing the historical and societal ramifications of the epidemic. Phanishwar Nath Renu's renowned Hindi short story "Pahalwan Ki Dholak" (1944), set in North India, intricately paints a sombre picture of a winter night overshadowed by the haunting presence of a cholera outbreak in the rural landscape, skilfully capturing the grim atmosphere and its impact on the characters. Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu short story "Quarantine" (1940) provides a compelling narrative that delves into the experiences and challenges faced by people residing in quarantine shelters in India during the 1890s bubonic plague outbreak, offering a poignant glimpse into the historical context and human predicaments of the time. In Edgar Allan Poe's iconic short story "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), authorities' futile attempts to evade

and isolate themselves from a deadly epidemic serve as a haunting allegory for the inevitable consequences of ignoring and failing to address the pervasive threat of contagion. Likewise, in Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara*, the Brahmins in positions of authority prove incapable of effectively addressing the epidemic, as they are ensnared by their obsolete religious doctrines and deep-seated superstitions, rendering them impotent in the face of the crisis. The recurring theme of the conflict between deeply entrenched superstitions and stark reality in society, particularly during times of dire emergencies such as pandemics, serves as a pervasive and thought-provoking concern woven throughout these pandemic narratives.

III. CONFLICT BETWEEN SUPERSTITIONS AND REALITY ON SOCIAL DYNAMICS

The novel *Samskara* is ingeniously set in an Agrahara named Durvasapur, which carries an ironic twist as 'Durvasa' signifies one who deeply embodies the principles of dharma and religious discipline, underscoring the complex moral and ethical dilemmas explored within the narrative. It commences with the death of Naranappa due to plague, a pivotal event that triggers the emergence of numerous superstitions among the villagers concerning the proper conduct of his cremation ceremony, setting the stage for a profound exploration of tradition, belief, and societal upheaval. At the outset of the novel, the conservative Brahmin community residing in the secluded village of Durvasapura in Karnataka finds itself grappling with an unexpected crisis in the form of an epidemic, setting the stage for a profound examination of tradition, belief, and societal turmoil. The century-old religious beliefs and practices of the conservative Brahmins have to prove their mettle on the ground as the chief priest of the village, Praneshacharya, a spiritual seeker, a devout and diehard austere figure, and a knowledgeable person has to solve the problem of performing the last rites of a heretic Brahmin Naranappa who has maintained a deeply hedonistic lifestyle transgressing all social norms and practices of conservative Brahmin community.

The novel masterfully presents an allegorical depiction of a deteriorating Brahmin colony in a vividly realistic manner, serving as a potent reflection of societal decay and moral erosion. The powerlessness of those in positions of authority to make the correct decisions leads to a maelstrom of dilemmas, superstitions, and controversy that engulf the situation, starkly exposing the vulnerable underbelly of a fragile society in disarray. The Brahmins' inability to reach a productive resolution leaves the villagers bewildered as they grapple with a web of

superstitious beliefs and foreboding omens, adding to the atmosphere of uncertainty and apprehension. The unsettling image of rats dying and littering the streets in the novel evokes powerful parallels with Albert Camus' *The Plague*, where a similar description of streets strewn with dead rats and the outbreak of bubonic plague in the city of Oran, Algeria, serves as a haunting motif symbolising the relentless advance of an insidious epidemic. A portentous sign is luminously depicted in the novel as vultures ominously circle over the house of Naranappa, a Brahmin who openly rejects and criticises the contrived practices of Brahminism; his death from plague at the story's outset takes on a haunting presence, dominating the narrative as if he were a living character, symbolising the conflict between tradition and dissent that persists throughout the entire tale. The entire village is engulfed in the pernicious grip of the plague, with the menacing threat of the epidemic casting a pervasive shadow over every aspect of community life. As time progresses, the village witnesses a rising death toll, with its residents succumbing to the relentless advance of the epidemic. With the advent of the new plague, the current landscape of the village undergoes a profound transformation as the relentless epidemic persistently claims one life after another, reshaping the community's existence. As the Brahmins are denied permission to consume any sustenance until Naranappa's cremation is finalised, an unsettling and bizarre atmosphere envelops the entire village, exacerbating the already strained circumstances. The repercussions of this deprivation disrupt their daily routines, plunging the village into a state of harrowing alarm and frenzied panic.

The central question pertains to whether the orthodox Brahmin community in the remote village of Durvasapur in Karnataka should be responsible for performing his last rites. The villagers' deep immersion in superstitions and rituals leads them to fear that touching the deceased body, even as it begins to decay inside the house, may incur the wrath of God. Faced with their predicament, the villagers earnestly implore Praneshacharya to intervene and help them navigate this challenging situation by seeking his guidance in finding a viable solution. Even though he holds the status of an upper-caste Brahmin, his mindset is imbued with the same superstitious beliefs as those of the other villagers. Rather than actively seeking practical solutions, Praneshacharya becomes deeply entangled in his own web of superstitions, immersing himself in the profound wisdom of the Holy Scriptures and fervently engaging in prayer to God within the temple. Repulsed and horrified by the ghastly and repugnant sight of the dead rat, he musters the courage to grasp it by the tail and hurls it towards a vulture. His action is motivated by his belief

that the incident is profoundly inauspicious, stemming from the fact that the rat has met its demise within the sacred confines of the god's room, compelling him to expel the unfortunate omen from the holy space: "when he went to the gods' room, he saw to his disgust a rat reeling auspiciously counter-clockwise, fall on its back and die. He picked it by its tail and threw it to a vulture outside" (Murthy, 1978, p. 81).

IV. PANDEMIC, EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, AND CASTE QUESTION

The novel serves as an emblematic portrayal of the profound existential turmoil experienced both by an individual and society at large, brought about by the relentless onslaught of a pandemic, capturing the multifaceted challenges, uncertainties, and moral dilemmas that arise in the face of such a crisis. Through its narrative, the story vividly portrays the intense desperation and relentless struggle of humanity when confronted with adversity and natural calamity, while also illuminating the myriad ways in which individuals and communities strive to struggle with and adapt to the unfolding crisis. Furthermore, it can be contended that under such catastrophic circumstances, the established class and caste hierarchies are destabilised, creating an environment in which a more equitable arena emerges, allowing for a re-evaluation of societal structures and power dynamics. In the wake of Praneshacharya's inability to provide a resolution to the predicament despite consulting religious scriptures and adhering to injunctions, the ominous plague inexorably tightens its grip on the village, gradually enveloping it in a suffocating atmosphere of despair and affliction. With each passing day, the situation spirals further out of control, marked by the macabre spectacle of thousands of rats succumbing to death and an escalating death toll among the villagers in the relentless grip of the epidemic, rendering any semblance of containment or resolution increasingly elusive. The funeral ritual or 'antimsamskar' of Naranappa stands as a central and contentious theme in the novel, yet nobody is willing to shoulder the responsibility for conducting his last rites, primarily due to his lifelong condemnation and mockery of Brahminical ideologies, illogical formalities, and religious superstitions, thereby creating a profound moral and societal dilemma. As the delay in conducting Naranappa's last rites persists, it serves as an unmistakable and foreboding harbinger of the plague's unrelenting spread within the village, manifesting itself in the relentless and successive deaths of its residents, intensifying the sense of impending catastrophe. The Brahmin women, sensing the escalating urgency and dire consequences of the delayed

performance of Naranappa's last rites, become increasingly anxious and warn their husbands about the imperative need to address this critical matter, heightening the atmosphere of apprehension and tension in the community:

'Don't be in a hurry. Wait till Praneshacharya gives you a decision. Don't agree too quickly to perform the rites. You may do the wrong thing. The guru will excommunicate you.' (Murthy, 1978, p. 4)

Chandri, who, despite her lower-caste origins and status as Naranappa's concubine, is deeply troubled by the decaying state of the body and is earnestly concerned about ensuring its timely cremation before it deteriorates further, revealing her profound sense of responsibility and pragmatism amidst the prevailing crisis. In her determined effort to expedite the burial of Naranappa's remains, Chandri goes to the extent of selflessly offering to relinquish all her precious jewellery to Praneshacharya, successfully persuading him to take the necessary steps for the proper interment, showcasing both her emotional investment in the matter and her resolve to overcome the prevailing obstacles. Despite being acutely aware of the strict prohibition against dalits entering the Brahmin colony, Chandri earnestly implores him to navigate this sensitive issue and devise a suitable solution, showcasing her determination to overcome societal barriers for the sake of Naranappa's dignified last rites. However, Praneshacharya, instead of offering a solution to the problem at hand, becomes entangled in an irresistible situation where his sexual encounter with Chandri fundamentally alters the trajectory of his lifelong ascetic existence, prompting a profound realisation about the hollowness and futility of his rigidly ritualistic and austere life. In the wake of his transformative experience with Chandri and the ensuing awakening, he undergoes a profound shift in his perspective, ultimately learning to redefine and reinterpret the concepts of *dharma* (duty or righteousness) and *karma* (action and its consequences) within the unique and challenging circumstances he finds himself in, transcending the dogmatic boundaries of tradition to arrive at a more compassionate and humane understanding of his role in the world. The recognition and appreciation of the simple and everyday joys and pleasures in life serve as a crucial stepping stone towards attaining a deeper and more profound realisation of the divine, as they illuminate the interconnectedness of the human experience with the spiritual realm, emphasising that divinity can be found not only in the transcendent but also in the immanent aspects of existence:

The erotic has always plagued and tempted the ascetic, so Naranappa plagues Praneshacharya like Menaka tempting Vishwamitra. Just as Shiva combines the paradox of the erotic and the ascetic, the mahayogi and the mahabhogi, it is in Chandri that this paradox is reconciled. It is in her we find a vital sense of life, an awareness which comes upon Praneshacharya in his encounter with Chandri. (Kaul et al., 1982, pp. 102-103)

In the 'Afterword' to *Samskara*, A. K. Ramanujan asserts, "All the battles and defiance, asceticism and sensuality, the meaning and meaninglessness of ritual, dharma as nature and law, *kama* (desire) and *moksha* (salvation) have now become internal to Praneshacharya. The arena shifts from a Hindu village community to the body and the spirit of the protagonist" (Murthy, 1978, p. 141). Burdened by an overwhelming sense of shame and remorse, Praneshacharya quietly departs from the village under the veil of darkness, his heart heavy with the weight of his transformative experiences and the profound realisations that have forever altered the course of his life. Ultimately, driven by her hapless and desperate situation, Chandri reaches out to a sympathetic Muslim merchant, a trusted friend, who heeds her distress call and, with her assistance, undertakes the sombre task of removing the decomposing body and conducting its cremation, marking a poignant resolution to the long-pending predicament. Indeed, it becomes abundantly clear that the Brahmins of the village have established an intricate web of regulations and restrictions, ostensibly under the banner of religion and caste, which serve to constrict and control the lives of the common people in society, thereby reinforcing a rigid social hierarchy and exerting authority over various aspects of daily existence. As Virender Pal writes: "The cremation rituals for Brahmins are very complex where nobody can eat while the dead body is lying in the *agrahara*. Then there are rules about ascertaining about who is fit to be cremated as a Brahmin" (2017, p. 185).

V. HYPOCRISY, VORACITY AND JEALOUSY IN THE FORM OF DEMOCRATISATION

Initially, the human response to outbreaks, such as plague, cholera, and novel coronavirus, has consistently exhibited a characteristic pattern of denial, wherein individuals and societies tend to downplay the severity of the situation, resist acknowledging the true extent of the crisis, and often underestimate the potential consequences, creating significant challenges for effective response and containment measures. However, people tend to react with a sense of dread and urgency at a later stage when they

realise that there is no alternative but to exercise caution, as the gravity of the situation becomes increasingly evident, emphasising the importance of proactive measures and preparedness in addressing such outbreaks. These types of diseases like plague and Covid-19 are “wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatisation; it is mobilised to critique regimes, dictators or minority groups” (Cooke, 2009, p. 2). In the novel, during times of crisis and emergency, the central theme of hypocrisy and greed among the Brahmins, camouflaged under the guise of religious practices, assumes a fundamental and prevailing role, highlighting how the pursuit of personal gain often supersedes the true principles of faith and morality within the community. Their indifference towards conducting Naranappa's funeral rites stands in stark contrast to their overwhelming preoccupation with the prospect of acquiring Chandri's jewellery, making the latter's possessions the primary focus of their attention and highlighting the extent to which their self-interest and greed eclipse their supposed religious and moral obligations in times of crisis.

The plague, stemming from the presence of a decaying body and exacerbated by the entrenched caste system, particularly among the upper-caste Hindu Brahmins who perpetuate superstitions under the guise of religious practices, generates pervasive fear of an imminent epidemic among the villagers, serving as a powerful commentary on the social and cultural factors that contribute to their apprehension and vulnerability in the narrative. Naranappa's death precipitates a harrowing and dire situation that casts a dark shadow over the entire area, subjecting the villagers to an exceedingly uncomfortable and distressing circumstance, underscoring the far-reaching consequences of his demise on the community's well-being and stability:

The news of death spread like a fire to the other ten houses of the agrahara. Doors and windows were shut, with children inside. By god's grace, no brahmin had yet eaten. Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa's death, not even women and children. Still in everyone's heart an obscure fear, an unclean anxiety. Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance. (Murthy, 1978, p. 3)

The Brahmins of the village find themselves in a state of helplessness and perplexity, unable to effectively navigate and address the ongoing pandemic situation, reflecting the complexity and unanticipated challenges posed by the crisis that leaves them without clear solutions or strategies for response. Their adherence to deep-rooted

superstitions has rendered it exceedingly challenging for them to make rational and informed decisions to extricate themselves from the current dire situation, emphasising the profound impact of traditional beliefs and practices on their ability to respond effectively to the crisis at hand. Dasacharya, one of the village Brahmins, raises a pertinent point that holds undeniable relevance in the context of the present alarming scenario, highlighting the significance of his perspective amid the unfolding crisis. While Dasacharya's commentary on Naranappa's last rites demonstrates a degree of wisdom, it is also evident that his judgment remains clouded by prevailing superstitions and entrenched religious beliefs, highlighting the complex interplay between traditional convictions and rational thinking within the context of the narrative. He complains:

As you all know, we let him stay in our agrahara, so for two whole years we didn't get calls for any meal or banquet. If we do the rites for him now or anything rash like that, no one will ever invite us for a brahmin meal. But then we can't keep his dead body uncremated here in the agrahara either, and fast for ever. This is a terrible dilemma. (Murthy, 1978, p. 8)

VI. RELIGIOUS DOCTRINES AND SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS

Historical and cultural narratives of past pandemics reveal how human behaviour and responses have been shaped by these events, with a recurring pattern of seeking solace and understanding in religious and medical texts during times of pandemic-induced devastation: “The historical and cultural narratives around past pandemics reflect human behaviour and nature. It is also observed that whenever people's lives were ravaged and devastated by pandemics, humans took refuge in religious and medical texts that gave them insight into occurrences of pestilences” (Khan and Parvez, 2022, p. 26). In the novel, the villagers' profound superstitions lead them to firmly “believe that anyone who catches the sacred fish will vomit blood and die” (Murthy, 1978, p. 11), exemplifying the pervasive influence of irrational beliefs on their actions and perceptions. In an attempt to appease the demon and secure the well-being of their afflicted relatives, the villagers engage in the ritualistic act of sacrificing a cock, with a solemn commitment to offer a sheep as an additional sacrifice during the upcoming new moon, illustrating their deep-rooted reliance on religious practices and offerings as a means of seeking protection and reprieve from disease. Upon hearing the news of Naranappa's death from Chandri, Praneshacharya urgently cautions Garudacharya, one of the Brahmins of the village,

advising him against consuming food with the solemn words, “don’t eat. I hear Naranappa is dead” (Murthy, 1978, p. 3), reflecting the immediate impact of the news and the sense of unease it instils in the village. Without judging anything, Garudacharya “threw down the mixed rice in his hand on the leaf before him, took a gulp of consecrated water and rose from his seat” (Murthy, 1978, p. 3).

The dire circumstances faced by women in the novel serve as a poignant reminder of the challenges and hardships experienced by individuals in times of crisis, drawing parallels with the portrayal of similar themes in Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, showcasing the universality of the human experience in the face of pandemics and disasters across different literary works and historical contexts: “A woman gave three frightful screeches, and then cried, ‘Oh! death, death, death!’” but the street was still empty “For people had no curiosity now in any case” (1876, p. 107). The Brahmins find themselves paralysed in making sound decisions during this time of crisis due to the mental constraints imposed by a multitude of religious doctrines and deeply ingrained superstitious beliefs, underscoring the profound influence of traditional ideologies on their ability to navigate the challenges they face. They are consistently constrained by their rigidly stereotyped ideas and entrenched dogmas, highlighting the inflexibility of their beliefs and the challenges this poses in adapting to new and unexpected circumstances. Their inability to take action leaves the entire village enveloped in a dreadful and unsettling silence, characterised by a palpable sense of apprehension and uncertainty that pervades the community:

The women were scared that Naranappa’s ghost now roaming the streets would touch their children. So, the unwilling urchins had to be spanked, pushed in and the doors had to be shut. Never before had they shut a door in broad daylight like this. There were no sacred designs to bless and decorate the threshold, nor any sprinkling of cowdung water for the yard without them. The agrahara didn’t feel that morning had dawned yet. Things looked empty, desolate. *Bikoooo!* they seemed to cry. It felt as if there was a dead body in every house, in some dark room. The brahmins sat in the village hall, their heads in their hands, not knowing what to do next. (Murthy, 1978, p. 51)

At the initial stage, as Naranappa’s funeral rite is not performed due to a number of superstitious beliefs and logic of the villagers, his body begins to rot inside the house without last rights, and when vultures are seen over

the houses, the people think that “...Naranappa’s spirit is calling out these vultures” (Murthy, 1978, p. 61). The eerie presence of vultures hovering above the village rooftops, coupled with sporadic deaths in the agrahara and the widespread demise of rats in various locations, collectively cast a chilling and terrifying atmosphere over the village, instilling an overwhelming sense of dread and foreboding in the community. The villagers remain perplexed and unable to discern the underlying cause behind these unsettling occurrences, even as the looming spectre of an impending disaster, taking the form of a devastating plague, threatens to engulf the entire area, creating an atmosphere of impending doom and desperation among the inhabitants. The entire agrahara, gripped by an ominous and precarious situation, becomes a source of grave concern not only for its residents but also for the neighbouring villages, as the escalating crisis extends its menacing reach, posing a collective threat that transcends the boundaries of the community and engenders alarm among all those in the vicinity. The succession of deaths occurring in rapid succession serves as a clear and compelling indication that an epidemic has taken hold within the village, underscoring the gravity of the situation and the urgency of the crisis that confronts the community. The dire and distressing state of affairs in the village becomes a matter of concern for Manjayya, a wealthy Smarta Brahmin residing in Parijatapura, highlighting the far-reaching impact of the crisis on individuals and communities beyond the immediate confines of the affected village: “Naranappa first, then Dasacharya, then Praneshacharya’s wife. It meant only one thing, an epidemic” (Murthy, 1978, p. 103). Thus, the novel meticulously unfolds the apprehensive contemplation surrounding the unfolding events within a specific geographical region, painting a vivid picture of the characters’ anxious conjectures and uncertainties.

VII. PANDEMIC NARRATIVES AND LITERATURE AS A MIRROR TO CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Pandemics indeed have a devastating and indiscriminate impact, cutting across all religious, ideological, and political boundaries, as they afflict humanity at large without regard for any distinctions, underscoring the universal vulnerability of individuals in the face of such global health crises. Literature, through its perceptive portrayal of diverse events during pandemics, endeavours to provide solace and insight during times of adversity and hardship, serving as a source of comfort, reflection, and understanding amid the challenges posed by such crises. The depiction of pandemics in literature often

serves as a source of inspiration for humanity, offering valuable insights, resilience, and the potential for growth and enlightenment in the face of adversity. During times of pandemics, a crucial aspect is educating people about personal hygiene and encouraging them to incorporate these practices into their daily lives, emphasising the importance of proactive measures to safeguard public health and prevent the spread of disease. Literature indeed imparts the lesson of collective resilience and unity in the face of societal challenges, including the outbreak of pandemics like Covid-19, underscoring the importance of coming together as a community to combat and overcome such adversities. By transcending superstitions and emphasising unity, literature conveys the crucial lesson that collective action and solidarity are essential to prevent the devastating consequences of pandemics from consuming society as a whole. The influence of literature in shaping our understanding of and response to significant events like pandemics is indeed pronounced in the following quotation by Harish Trivedi, a Professor in the Department of English, Delhi University, from an article published by Avijit Ghosh in *The Times of India* in March 2020:

Literature regards each individual with compassion and goes deeper than what statistics or historical records can tell us. Literature may not explain away or fight off things such as pandemics, even as modern science sometimes can't, but it does become a source of consolation, a way of sharing our common humanist concerns, and, in its own way, provides the deepest and most insightful record of the events. (Ghosh, 2020)

At the onset of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, an almost similar perception is also echoed by Abhik Roy in an article published in *The Statesman* in September 2020:

As we are confined within the four walls of our homes under lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helps break the barriers, connecting us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, encouraging us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic. (Roy, 2020)

The presence of an epidemic serves as a compelling tool for writers to convey their profound engagement with a diverse range of socio-cultural matters and recounts a

concrete thematic foundation within literary works. In this context, Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* stands as a powerful testament to the undeniable verity that literature can effectively bear witness to profound human truths, as it delves into intricate themes, moral dilemmas, and existential questions, ultimately serving as a thought-provoking exploration of the human condition. Indeed, an epidemic narrative, much like *Samskara*, holds the capacity to serve as a powerful medium for enriching our comprehension of human resilience when confronted with adversity, the intricacies of the human predicament, and the remarkable capacity to display resistance in the midst of a crisis, ultimately serving as a catalyst for fortifying human determination and willpower in the face of profound challenges. The allegorical and multi-layered meaning embedded in the narrative of the novel assumes growing significance as it intensely illustrates the inherent fragility and vulnerability of social systems when confronted with a crisis, offering a profound commentary on the intricate dynamics of human society and the profound impact that external challenges can have on its stability and structure. It powerfully exposes the stark framework of a society fragmented and divided by the entrenched barriers of caste and religion, and resoundingly champions the triumph of humanism, underscoring the enduring significance of compassion, empathy, and shared humanity in bridging these divisions and fostering unity and understanding among individuals. A prominent and striking aspect of the novel is its portrayal of how the devastating impact of an epidemic or plague has the remarkable ability to dismantle and erode all the rigid structures of class, caste, and religious hierarchies in their most brutal forms, shining a poignant spotlight on the imperative for a collective experience of anguish and shared concern among humanity in times of distress and, in doing so, it highlights the universality of human suffering and the necessity for solidarity and empathy in the face of harsh conditions. Indeed, literature serves as an invaluable teacher, offering a profound lesson in the importance of eschewing superstition and irrationality when confronting pandemics, and instead encouraging us to confront crises with resolute determination rooted in a realistic and pragmatic approach, thereby providing valuable guidance on how to craft more rational and effective responses during periods of adversity.

In the novel, a character named Manjayya stands out as a beacon of sincerity and logic, serving as a stark contrast to the prevailing superstitious beliefs held by the other villagers, exemplifying the enduring theme of rationality amidst a backdrop of superstition and thereby highlighting the clash of worldviews in the story. Manjayya's ability to recognise the symptoms of the

plague as it relentlessly claims the lives of villagers one after another underscores his astute observation and knowledge, positioning him as a pivotal figure in the narrative who plays a crucial role in addressing the crisis with a practical and informed approach. In his role as the leader of the Smarta Brahmin, Manjayya not only demonstrates his courage but also exhibits forward-thinking and proactive leadership qualities by promptly considering the implementation of essential measures such as seeking medical assistance, vaccinations, rat extermination, and the evacuation of people from the infected area, thereby exemplifying his commitment to the well-being of the community and his ability to respond to the crisis with practical solutions and a clear-headed approach:

Naranappa did bring the plague into the agrahara, and plague spreads like wildfire. Being inert all this while, bound to some blind belief and not doing the dead man's last rites—was like drawing a slab of stone over one's own head. Fools. Even he had been an idiot. Standing in the front yard, he suddenly called out, 'Fix the carts, at once!' Can't waste a minute. The plague will cross the river and come to our agrahara. It's enough if a crow or vulture brings in its beak a single plague rat and drops it—everything will be finished here.' (Murthy, 1978, p. 104)

VIII. CONCLUSION

It is a common phenomenon that during times of pandemics, superstitions, nebulous beliefs, prejudices, and illogical ideas deeply ingrained in the social fabric often come to the forefront and become more visible, serving as a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities in our collective understanding and the need for critical thinking and rationality to address public health crises effectively. At the onset of an epidemic, the losses experienced by individuals and communities can be magnified on multiple fronts, encompassing physical, psychological, and economic dimensions, as the crisis takes a toll on health, well-being, and livelihoods, underlining the multifaceted and profound impact of such events on society. Drawing from various literary texts, literature imparts the profound lesson that the experience of a pandemic underscores the necessity of recognising shared grief and struggles, ultimately calling for a collective response and concerted action, emphasising the importance of unity and empathy in navigating through challenging times. In times of pandemic, given the prevailing situation of panic and helplessness among the people, it is imperative for the government to take proactive and necessary steps to

mitigate the crisis and safeguard the well-being of its citizens. This includes measures such as providing accurate information, mobilising resources for healthcare, ensuring access to medical facilities, implementing public health guidelines, and offering support to those in need, all of which play a crucial role in managing and eventually overcoming the challenges posed by a pandemic.

Various measures like quarantine and isolation are integral components of pandemic preparedness and response plans, playing a crucial role in mitigating the impact of infectious disease outbreaks on communities and populations: "Quarantine and isolation are long-standing tools in the legal armory for responding to pandemics" (Moore, 2007, p. 59). The government's responsibility during a pandemic is to instil confidence in the public, enabling them to make informed decisions based on factual information and thereby dissuading them from succumbing to superstitious beliefs and irrational practices. Ensuring that the public remains unburdened by worry, raising awareness, and promoting education are among the most effective strategies to alleviate and overcome challenging circumstances. In the novel, when an epidemic strikes agrahara, the neighbouring villages collectively take action to mitigate and control the situation, illustrating the significance of communal cooperation and solidarity in times of crisis:

A town-crier. Beating his tom-tom, he announced in his loud town-crier voice: 'There's a plague in Shivamogge! The epidemic of Mari! Anyone going to Shivamogge should stop at Tirthahalli and get an inoculation! That's the order of the Municipality!' (Murthy, 1978, p. 126)

Considering the profound impact of the pandemic on people's lives, it is imperative for political authorities to prioritise the restoration of well-being by implementing a range of public welfare schemes once the crisis subsides, recognising the long-term societal and economic repercussions that require sustained support and recovery efforts: "Free peoples, when they temporarily surrender freedom, will expect to see their inheritance restored to them when the storm is over. There will be two anxious questions – how large must that surrender be and how soon will the restoration come?" (Gross, 2006, p. 43).

Literature has often utilised the portrayal of dreadful diseases, such as plagues and other ailments, as a metaphorical tool to symbolise and highlight humanity's moral failings and wicked deeds, employing these afflictions as allegorical representations of the consequences of immoral behaviour and evil actions. Time and again, literature has revealed the overarching human

ego, demonstrating that it can lead us to believe we are impervious to pandemic situations, even as these crises underscore our vulnerability and the need for humility and cooperation in the face of formidable challenges. Pandemics play a pivotal role in reshaping the lifestyles of human beings, with public health concerns taking centre stage in driving these transformative changes, as societies adapt and respond to the imperative of safeguarding public health and well-being. The proposition of the paper holds significant relevance in the current context, as its inquiry is centred on a specific subject matter that has become exceptionally pertinent during recent pandemics, particularly in light of the recent Covid-19 situation, highlighting the timeliness and importance of its research focus. The paper endeavours to shed light on the prevalence of superstitions related to diseases and the societal reactions and responses to them, using a thematic analysis of the novel *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* as a lens through which to examine these phenomena. By referencing various literary texts, the paper subtly suggests that these works can offer valuable insights when read in the context of the current societal scenario, implying that literature has the capacity to provide relevant commentary and perspectives on contemporary issues and challenges. Therefore, the paper holds potential utility for scholars and academicians interested in exploring the field of pandemic literature, offering a valuable resource and reference point for further research and analysis in this area of study.

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