



**NARRATIVE AUTHORITY, DISCURSIVE SPACE AND THE AUTHOR
FUNCTION: A FOUCAULDIAN–ARENDTIAN READING OF THE
OMNISCIENT NARRATOR IN SAMSKARA: A RITE FOR A DEAD MAN**

Dr. Victor Vaz E.

Assistant Professor in English, Pompei College, Aikala Mangalore, Karnataka, India

Abstract

This paper examines the role of narrative authority in Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's concept of the author function and Hannah Arendt's idea of the space of appearance. While traditional literary criticism locates narrative authority in the intentional presence of the author, Foucauldian discourse theory reconceptualizes authorship as a discursive principle that organizes the circulation and interpretation of texts. Building on this premise, the paper argues that the omniscient narrator of Samskara functions not as a transparent extension of authorial intention but as a discursive mediator that structures the ideological tensions within the narrative. At the same time, Arendt's notion of the space of appearance helps illuminate how the narrative voice creates a public arena in which competing discourses of caste hierarchy, religious authority and moral responsibility become visible. Through close textual analysis of key narrative moments, such as the crisis surrounding Naranappa's corpse, the collapse of Praneshacharya's spiritual authority and Chandri's ethical intervention, the study demonstrates how the narrator organizes multiple voices within the agrahara community of Durvasapura. The paper thereby shows that the omniscient narrator in Samskara simultaneously operates as an author function and as a narrative space where ideological conflicts within Brahminical society are critically exposed.

Keywords

Author Function, Narrative Authority, Discursive Space, Caste Discourse, Samskara, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The question of authorship has undergone a profound transformation in twentieth-century literary theory. Classical literary criticism largely treated the author as the primary source of meaning in a text. Interpretation therefore depended on reconstructing the author's intention, biography, and intellectual worldview. Literary meaning was assumed to originate in the consciousness of the writer, and the task of criticism was to uncover this underlying intention. Such a model implicitly positioned the author as the sovereign authority behind the text.

Structuralist and poststructuralist thought challenged this assumption by shifting attention away from authorial intention toward the structures of language and discourse that produce meaning. Roland Barthes famously argued that the traditional notion of the author must be abandoned in favor of a view in which meaning arises from the interplay of linguistic systems rather than the will of a single creator. In his influential essay "The Death of the Author," Barthes asserts that writing is "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes, 142). Meaning emerges through the act of reading rather than through authorial intention.

Michel Foucault further complicated the question of authorship through his concept of the author function. In his essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault proposes that the author should not be



understood simply as a historical individual but as a discursive principle that organizes the circulation of texts within culture. The author's name functions as a classificatory marker that regulates interpretation and determines how discourse is received and legitimized (Foucault, 113). In this sense, the author becomes less a source of meaning than a structural position within discourse.

Subsequent theorists have elaborated and critiqued this reconfiguration of authorship. Sean Burke observes that the "death of the author" did not eliminate the author entirely but transformed the author into a theoretical problem within literary criticism (Burke, 22). Similarly, Jonathan Culler emphasizes that literary meaning is produced within interpretive conventions that operate independently of the author's intentions (Culler, 54). These theoretical developments collectively shift critical attention from authorial psychology toward the discursive and institutional structures through which texts acquire meaning.

While Foucauldian discourse theory illuminates the structural dimension of authorship, the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt offers a complementary perspective for understanding narrative authority. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt introduces the concept of the space of appearance, a domain in which individuals reveal themselves through speech and action before others. Human plurality becomes visible only within such spaces, where actions disclose identity and generate ethical and political meaning (Arendt, 198).

When considered together, Foucauldian discourse theory and Arendtian spatial philosophy provide a productive framework for examining narrative voice in literature. Narrative authority may be understood simultaneously as a discursive function that structures interpretation and as a space of appearance in which ideological conflicts become visible.

This framework is particularly relevant for reading *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, the celebrated Kannada novel by U. R. Ananthamurthy. Published in 1965 and translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan, the novel portrays a Brahmin settlement confronted with a moral and ritual crisis following the death of the rebellious Naranappa (Ananthamurthy). The debate over who should perform his funeral rites exposes deep tensions within the caste hierarchy and the religious structures governing the agrahara.

Ananthamurthy occupies a central position within the Kannada Navya literary movement, which sought to engage critically with tradition while addressing the ethical dilemmas of modern Indian society. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, his writing interrogates the contradictions embedded within it. Scholars such as Sindhu note that Ananthamurthy's fiction repeatedly explores the conflict between individual conscience and the rigid expectations of social institutions (Sindhu, 4). Similarly, Parvathy observes that *Samskara* dramatizes the moral stagnation of a society trapped within ritual formalism (Parvathy, 62).

Within this narrative, the omniscient narrator plays a crucial role in revealing ideological contradictions. The narrative voice moves fluidly between characters, exposing their internal conflicts and moral uncertainties. Rather than presenting a unified moral authority, the narrator constructs a discursive space in which competing interpretations of duty, purity, and responsibility emerge.

This article therefore argues that the omniscient narrator in *Samskara* functions not merely as a traditional narrative authority but as a discursive organizer and a space of ideological revelation. Through a Foucauldian–Arendtian framework, the narrative voice can be understood as the site where the contradictions of caste discourse, religious authority, and moral responsibility become visible.

Narrative Space and Discursive Crisis:



The narrative crisis of *Samskara* begins with the death of Naranappa, a Brahmin who had openly rejected the social and religious norms of the agrahara. Throughout his life he defied caste regulations, associating with non-Brahmins, consuming prohibited foods, and living with Chandri outside the framework of ritual marriage. His actions destabilized the symbolic order of the settlement long before his death.

When Naranappa dies, the Brahmin community confronts a dilemma that it cannot easily resolve. Because he violated caste rules, performing his funeral rites may bring ritual pollution. Yet failing to perform them contradicts religious duty. The narrator captures this paralysis: “None of them dared to touch the corpse” (Ananthamurthy, 9). The corpse thus becomes the focal point of communal anxiety.

The Brahmins gather to debate scriptural injunctions and ritual obligations. Yet their discussions produce no clear resolution. Instead, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the community’s uncertainty: “The body lay there, untouched, while the village waited for a decision” (Ananthamurthy, 14). The corpse becomes more than a physical object; it functions as a symbolic site where competing discourses intersect.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this situation reveals how social power operates through systems of knowledge and discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that power functions through the internalization of norms that regulate behavior (Foucault, 194). Individuals act according to these norms even without external coercion. The Brahmins’ hesitation before the corpse illustrates precisely such disciplinary power. Their fear of ritual contamination reflects the internalized authority of caste discourse.

The narrative perspective exposes the contradictions within this system. The omniscient narrator moves between characters, revealing their doubts and anxieties. This narrative movement creates what may be described as a discursive arena in which the ideological foundations of the agrahara become visible.

Here Hannah Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance becomes particularly relevant. Arendt argues that political life emerges in spaces where individuals reveal themselves through speech and action (Arendt, 198). In *Samskara*, the debates surrounding Naranappa’s corpse create precisely such a space. The Brahmins publicly negotiate questions of duty, purity, and authority, exposing the fragile foundations of their social order.

The narrator records the central question that haunts the community: “Who will take responsibility?” (Ananthamurthy, 18). This question transforms the corpse into a moral problem rather than merely a ritual one. The agrahara thus becomes a stage upon which the ideological contradictions of caste society unfold.

Scriptural Authority and the Fragility of Power

The moral order of the agrahara rests upon the authority of scriptural knowledge. Sacred texts define ritual practice and regulate social relations. Within this system, the interpretation of scripture becomes a source of power.

At the center of this structure stands Praneshacharya, the most respected scholar of the settlement. The narrator describes him as a man who has “conquered the senses through years of austerity” (Ananthamurthy, 14). His ascetic life and devotion to his invalid wife reinforce the perception that he embodies spiritual discipline.

The villagers therefore turn to him for guidance during the crisis. “Only the Acharya can decide this,” they insist (Ananthamurthy, 21). His authority derives not from political power but from his reputation as a custodian of sacred knowledge.

Yet the narrative gradually reveals the fragility of this authority. When Praneshacharya consults the scriptures to determine the proper course of action, he encounters an unexpected



obstacle. The sacred texts offer no clear answer. The narrator observes with quiet irony: “The scriptures were silent on this matter” (Ananthamurthy, 38).

This silence destabilizes the Acharya’s authority. If scriptural discourse cannot resolve the dilemma, the interpretive framework sustaining his authority begins to collapse. The community continues to look toward him for guidance—“They all looked toward the Acharya for judgment” (Ananthamurthy, 39)—but he finds himself unable to provide it.

Foucault’s theory of discourse offers insight into this moment. Authority within a society emerges from regimes of knowledge that determine what counts as truth (Foucault, 119). Praneshacharya’s power depends on his ability to interpret sacred texts. When the texts fail to provide guidance, the discursive structure supporting his authority becomes unstable.

Judith Butler similarly argues that power operates through the internalization of social norms that shape individual identity (Butler, 2). Praneshacharya’s identity as a spiritual authority is produced through such norms: celibacy, discipline, and scriptural study. His authority therefore depends upon the continuous performance of these practices.

The crisis surrounding Naranappa’s corpse reveals the precariousness of this arrangement. The silence of the scriptures exposes the interpretive gap within the system of knowledge sustaining Brahminical authority. As Timothy Clark notes, literary narratives often reveal the instability of ideological structures by dramatizing moments when established forms of authority fail (Clark, 91).

In *Samskara*, this failure becomes the central narrative tension. The agrahara’s moral order appears stable only so long as its interpretive structures remain intact. When those structures falter, the foundations of authority begin to fracture.

Naranappa and the Disruption of Caste Space:

Naranappa functions as the primary agent of disruption within the narrative. Even after his death, the memory of his rebellious actions continues to destabilize the agrahara. The narrator repeatedly recalls his defiance of caste norms, suggesting that his significance lies not merely in his behaviour but in the ideological crisis it provokes.

One of his most provocative declarations captures the nature of this rebellion: “I will make the Brahmins eat fish” (Ananthamurthy, 21). Within the Brahminical order, dietary discipline functions as a visible marker of caste identity. Naranappa’s statement therefore threatens the symbolic boundary separating purity from pollution.

The scandal surrounding his actions illustrates how caste operates through everyday practices. His association with non-Brahmins, his drinking, and his refusal to participate in ritual observances challenge the disciplinary logic of the agrahara.

Yet the community cannot simply expel him. Because he was born a Brahmin, he remains tied to the structure he rejects. This contradiction produces the central crisis of the novel.

From an Arendtian perspective, Naranappa’s rebellion represents a form of political action. Arendt argues that action reveals individuality by disrupting established conventions (Arendt 180). Naranappa’s defiance forces the community to confront the contradictions embedded within its social order.

Giorgio Agamben suggests that authorship itself can be understood as a gesture that reveals the limits of institutional structures (Agamben, 69). In a similar way, Naranappa’s actions function as gestures that expose the fragility of caste authority.

The Brahmins’ inability to perform his funeral rites demonstrates the depth of this disruption. Their hesitation reveals that the caste system depends less on divine authority than on collective belief and repeated performance.



Desire and the Collapse of Moral Authority:

In *Samskara*, the crisis of Brahminical authority reaches its most dramatic point through the inner collapse of Praneshacharya. Revered within the agrahara as the embodiment of scriptural discipline, Praneshacharya represents the moral centre of the community. His authority rests upon the image of the ascetic scholar who has mastered bodily desire through rigorous adherence to dharma. Yet the narrative gradually reveals that such authority is not natural but carefully produced through practices of renunciation, ritual discipline, and social recognition. When this carefully constructed identity fractures, the ideological stability of the agrahara itself begins to unravel. As the omniscient narrator suggests, the Acharya's fall is not merely personal; it exposes the fragility of the moral structures that sustain Brahminical power (Ananthamurthy, 62).

The decisive rupture occurs when Praneshacharya encounters Chandri in the forest. Removed from the ritual space of the agrahara and its regulating gaze, the Acharya confronts a desire he has long suppressed. The narrator records the moment with striking intensity: "He trembled as he touched her" (Ananthamurthy, 62). This trembling marks more than physical hesitation; it signals the collapse of a lifetime of disciplined restraint. The Acharya, who has devoted himself to scriptural study and ritual purity, suddenly finds his identity destabilized by the body he has sought to transcend. The forest, symbolically removed from the structures of caste surveillance, becomes the site where suppressed desire erupts and the ideological coherence of Brahminical asceticism begins to dissolve.

From the perspective of Michel Foucault, this moment reveals the disciplinary mechanisms that produce moral authority. Foucault argues that power operates through the regulation of bodies and desires, creating subjects who internalize norms and govern themselves accordingly. As he famously notes, "power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (*Discipline and Punish*). Praneshacharya's identity as a spiritual authority emerges from precisely such disciplinary practices: fasting, scriptural study, celibacy, and the continuous policing of the body. These practices generate what Foucault calls a "docile body," one shaped by the internalization of moral codes. When the Acharya succumbs to desire, the regulatory framework that sustains his authority collapses. The transgression therefore reveals that his moral prestige is not an inherent quality but a product of discursive and institutional arrangements.

The aftermath of the encounter exposes the depth of this crisis. The narrator describes Praneshacharya's disorientation with stark imagery: "He felt as though the earth had slipped from beneath his feet" (Ananthamurthy, 65). The metaphor captures the existential shock of a subject whose identity has been grounded in moral certainty. What collapses here is not simply personal virtue but the symbolic authority that allowed the Acharya to interpret scripture and guide the community. In Foucauldian terms, the subject produced by disciplinary power confronts the instability of the very discourse that constituted him. The Acharya's crisis therefore becomes a moment in which the mechanisms of Brahminical authority are exposed as contingent rather than sacred.

Within the narrative structure of *Samskara*, the omniscient narrator transforms this intimate moment of desire into a broader critique of caste ideology. By entering the Acharya's consciousness, the narrative reveals the gap between public authority and private vulnerability. The community reveres him as the embodiment of dharma, yet the narrative exposes the precariousness of this image. Desire, which Brahminical discipline seeks to suppress, returns as the force that dismantles the illusion of moral purity. In doing so, the novel questions the legitimacy of a social order founded on rigid codes of bodily control and ritual hierarchy.

Ultimately, Praneshacharya's fall reveals that Brahminical authority depends upon the continuous performance of moral discipline. Once this performance falters, the legitimacy of the system itself becomes uncertain. The Acharya's trembling touch and subsequent crisis dramatize



the instability of identities produced through strict ideological control. Through this narrative moment, Ananthamurthy exposes how power constructs moral authority while simultaneously rendering it vulnerable to rupture. Desire thus becomes not merely a personal weakness but a narrative device through which the novel interrogates the foundations of caste, discipline and spiritual legitimacy.

Judith Butler's concept of the psychic life of power further illuminates this crisis. Butler argues that subjectivity is formed through the internalization of social norms, which shape both identity and desire (Butler, 3). Praneshacharya's moral identity depends upon the suppression of bodily desire. When that suppression fails, the identity constructed through it collapses.

The omniscient narrator transforms this personal crisis into a broader critique of Brahminical authority. By revealing the Acharya's inner turmoil, the narrative exposes the gap between public virtue and private vulnerability.

Chandri and the Ethics of Marginal Space:

In *Samskara*, the figure of Chandri reveals a striking ethical paradox within the agrahara. Though placed at the margins of the Brahminical social order, Chandri consistently demonstrates a moral clarity absent among the orthodox scholars who dominate the community. The novel repeatedly juxtaposes her practical compassion with the ritual anxieties of the Brahmins, exposing the distance between ethical responsibility and scriptural orthodoxy. Through this contrast, the narrative suggests that moral action often emerges outside the institutional structures that claim to regulate virtue (Ananthamurthy).

When Naranappa dies, the agrahara descends into paralysis. The Brahmins debate endlessly about ritual propriety, fearing pollution if they perform the funeral rites of a man who had openly violated caste norms. The narrator captures the inertia of their deliberations as they gather "arguing about scriptures and expiations" while the corpse remains unattended (Ananthamurthy). In stark contrast, Chandri attempts to resolve the crisis through decisive action. She offers Naranappa's jewelry to the Brahmins, hoping it will persuade them to perform the funeral rites. Her gesture is direct and pragmatic, motivated not by doctrinal correctness but by a sense of responsibility toward the dead. The contrast reveals the moral contradiction at the heart of the agrahara: those who claim custodianship of dharma remain immobilized by ritual calculation, while the socially marginalized figure acts with genuine concern.

From the perspective of Hannah Arendt, Chandri's intervention can be read as an ethical moment within what Arendt calls the "space of appearance," where individuals reveal themselves through action before others. Arendt writes that action discloses "who someone is" rather than merely what role they occupy within a social system (*The Human Condition*). Chandri's decision to intervene exemplifies this principle. Her act transcends the rigid roles assigned by caste hierarchy and introduces a moment of responsibility grounded in human concern rather than ritual authority. In doing so, she exposes the hollowness of a moral order that privileges textual interpretation over ethical action.

Parvathy notes that Chandri's role challenges the moral authority of the Brahmin community by demonstrating that ethical responsibility can emerge outside institutional structures (Parvathy, 65). Her presence therefore complicates the rigid hierarchy of caste.

Ultimately, Chandri's position at the margins allows the novel to critique the ideological rigidity of the agrahara. Her compassion stands in silent contrast to the Brahmins' anxious debates about purity and pollution. By foregrounding her ethical initiative, *Samskara* suggests that responsibility does not arise from caste privilege or scriptural learning but from the willingness to act in response to human suffering. Chandri therefore becomes a quiet but powerful counterpoint



to Brahminical authority, revealing how genuine moral action can emerge from spaces that the social order seeks to exclude.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the omniscient narrator in *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* performs a complex structural and ideological role within the narrative. Rather than functioning as a unified voice that directly reflects the intention of the author, the narrator operates as a discursive position that organizes the circulation of multiple voices and perspectives within the text. Through this narrative strategy, the novel constructs a discursive field in which the contradictions of caste hierarchy, scriptural authority, and moral responsibility become visible. Interpreted through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the author function, the narrator can be understood as a structural principle that regulates the interpretation of discourse rather than its origin. The narrative voice does not impose a singular moral judgment; instead, it reveals the instability of the ideological structures governing the agrahara. The crisis surrounding Naranappa's corpse, the interpretive failure of scriptural authority, and the moral collapse of Praneshacharya collectively demonstrate how power within Brahminical society depends upon fragile regimes of knowledge and discipline. At the same time, the narrative structure can be read through Hannah Arendt's notion of the space of appearance. The omniscient narrator creates a narrative arena in which characters reveal themselves through speech, action, and moral hesitation. Within this space, figures such as Naranappa, Praneshacharya, and Chandri embody competing ethical possibilities that expose the contradictions within the social order of the agrahara. By integrating Foucauldian discourse theory with Arendtian spatial philosophy, this study demonstrates that narrative authority in *Samskara* functions simultaneously as a discursive organizer and as a space of ideological revelation. The omniscient narrator transforms the novel into a critical site where the structures of caste, power, and morality are not simply represented but interrogated. In doing so, Ananthamurthy's narrative technique illustrates how literary form itself can participate in the critique of social institutions, revealing the instability of seemingly immutable traditions and opening a space for ethical reflection within modern Indian literature.

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