

From Spiritual Comfort to Spiritual Combat: Ezeulu in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Pranesharcharya in Anantha Murthy's *Samskara**

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Introduction

Removed from teaching to focus on study and research in the second part of the summer 2013 by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VHF) in its Residential Fellowship program, I had the opportunity to devote my time and energy to study and research in internationalization and teaching of World literature in colleges and universities. As people engaged in world literature, students and faculty should be able to appreciate its relevance and its potential to develop more broadminded critical thinking world citizens. Internationalization and teaching of World Literature could be guided by two concerns: (1) the sole concentration on western literature in a World Literature course stifles true appreciation of literature as a central discipline in the humanities; (2) the frustration of faculty who want to integrate other cultures' literatures into the course weakens significant exploration and teaching of Introduction to World Literature as it should be meaningfully taught.

Raising students' awareness of differences and sameness among cultures cannot be left to chance. It is in world literature that students' awareness of differences and sameness can easily be raised through exposure to significant literary works or masterpieces from various world cultures. I notice that the current Introduction to World Literature here in many colleges is essentially a survey of western literature from Early times through the Renaissance, and from the Renaissance to the Present. There is no meaningful integration of other cultures' literatures in it.

If world literature is to continue to be an exciting core of the humanities, it cannot afford to remain parochial. It is incumbent on its proponents to develop studies in the field in an international or multicultural manner embracing the rich and diverse cultures of the world to present what it means to live in a true multicultural global community. No other field is able to examine cultural mechanisms, manipulations, and processes in quite the same way as has literature. As a central discipline in the humanities, literature has a centripetal force that brings various strands of many disciplines into discussion.

This is why its position in the college curriculum for all students cannot be questioned. Literature is an indispensable learning and pedagogical tool in any of the humanities disciplines or social sciences. In a world decimated by violence, literature which provides vicarious experience is quite a positive force that promises to broaden people's awareness of others and their values. Such an awareness usually helps college students to appreciate and respect cultural diversity in a world that is increasingly growing multicultural in population. Internationalized literature can help students gain an understanding of other cultures and learn to appreciate the effects of social issues and forces that impact and shape the lives of others.

Since about the mid-1990s, the notion of world literature has emerged as the most promising rubric for imagining a major paradigm shift in the study and teaching of literature and for thinking beyond the dead ends of traditional comparative study. Porter (2011) argues that world literature, most broadly can refer to the universe of all written works in any language from any period. A significantly more manageable subset can be achieved by applying an evaluative filter to select the most significant masterpieces from a variety of traditions, giving us a world literature that resembles a globalized version of a great-books collection. Frankly, "world literature is not (and should not be) an infinite ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading."¹

The focus of this essay is on two major masterpieces by an African writer and by an Indian writer—Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) and U.R. Anantha Murthy (1932 -) from two different and far-flung traditions – Africa and the Indian subcontinent. It is interesting to note that they were born in the early 30s – Achebe in 1930 and Murthy in 1932, and their masterpieces were published almost at the same time in the 1960s.

In 1964 and in 1965, Chinua Achebe and A. R. Anantha Murthy published respectively, *Arrow of God* and *Samskara* — two great works which now have a significant place in the corpus of world literature. *Arrow of God* was first published in English but *Samskara* was first published in Kanada, an Indian language that has a literary history of more than a thousand years in South India — the official and administrative *language* of the state of *Karnataka*. Eleven years later, *Samskara* was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan, and published by Oxford University Press in 1976.

One might wonder about how, what, and why this kind of pairing by me. It does need a brief explanation. I have taught *Arrow of God* a number of times to both undergraduate and graduate students in various colleges and universities as a professor. I did not by chance stumble on *Samskara*. I got my first exposure to it in the early 1990s while I was taking part in a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) sponsored program of expanding World Literature offering in the English Department at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. It was in the Indian component of the program that I along with the other participants got our first exposure to *Samskara*. The discussion of this novel was led by Vinay Dhawadker who was fresh and energetic from the University of Chicago. I still consider *Samskara* as the best selection on that list of literary works which stimulated literary discussion and anthropological and religion

discussion as well. *Samskara* is now one of the novels along with *Lord Jim*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Things fall apart* that I am likely to be found reading again and again because of the unquenchable interest I have in each of them. On all counts, *Samskara*, Anantha Murthy's first novel is not only a classic of Indian literature but a classic of world literature.

Alone as a novel, *Samskara* in its sophistication and artistry demolishes the thinking inherent in this part of Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835): I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), the historian, essayist, and parliamentarian, served as a member of the supreme council of the East India Company from 1834 to 1838, where he oversaw major educational and legal reforms. The "Minute" was written as a rebuttal to those council members who believed that Indian students should continue to be educated in Sanskrit and Arabic as well as English; Macaulay's party carried the argument (www.wvnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/macaulay.htm). Is this not an excellent example of the politics of education? Of course, that was then. But even now, there are still aspects of this kind of situation in education and in the real world. In part, perhaps Anantha Murthy published *Samskara* in Indian indigenous Kannda language as a rebuttal to Macaulay's "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" and his notion of "intrinsic superiority" of western Literature. In the light of current world enlightenment, globalization, multiculturalism and increasing ease and sophistication in communication in the world, literary masterpieces from every culture of the world should be accessible to every reader or scholar or researcher. It is truly, "reading our way to a better world" (Spencer, 2013).

Until *Samskara* was published in English in 1976, its accessibility was limited albeit to those who read and understand Kannda language—thousands or millions of people. For a broader or more international readership any literary piece should of necessity be translated into various languages. Translation cannot be ignored in a truly effective study and teaching of world literature. Translation plays an important role in bridging the gaps between the different cultures and nations. Literary translations in particular help these different nations reach a universal culture on a common ground. A good translation is not simply concerned with transferring the propositional content of the source language text (SLT), but also its other pragmatic features (Hassan 2011). In an early critical essay in 1971, S. Nagarajan indicated that as far as he knew then, the novel *Samskara* (Manohara Grantha Mala Dhawar) had not been translated into English,

and added at that time, "indeed it is not easy to translate it either, since its structure and style have something of the complexity and density of an English 'metaphysical' lyric. (The only person who can perhaps successfully attempt the task is A.K. Ramanujan). Perhaps that implicit faith and trust of Nagarajan incited A.K. Ramanujan to embark on that gigantic task of meticulous translation, and five years later in 1976, he successfully produced the English translation which the international community now has access to. Evidently, Nagarajan was able to publish his incisive critical essay on the novel in *Indian Writing Today* because he had a thorough command of Kannda language which many a scholar did not and still do not have.¹ For a novel in an Indian "vernacular" to attract such a world-wide attention is a rare phenomenon indeed. One can easily dismiss this as stemming from an anthropological stake that the western world has in things eastern. But the fact is that *Samskara* is a great work of fiction in the literature of its birth, and if it has become world-famous, this only proves its merit (Tirumalesh, 2009).

Our reading and discussion of this novel at the seminar in Atlanta, Georgia, was always recalling for me *Arrow of God*. The local and rural Durvasapura in *Samskara* recalls the local and rural Umuaro in *Arrow of God*. The spiritual leader, Praneshacharya, and his predicament, recalls the Chief Priest, Ezeulu, and his predicament in *Arrow of God*. Certainly, without Praneshacharya there is no *Samskara* and without Ezeulu there is no *Arrow of God*.

Umuaro and Durvasapura

Both novels are set in rural communities undergoing changes. The fictionalized rural setting in *Samskara* is Durvasapura, a community (agrahara) of conservative Madhava Brahmins, and the fictionalized rural setting of *Arrow of God* is Umuaro, a union of six villages created to ward off attacks by a hostile neighbor, the Abam. This union created Ulu as their traditional god and made Ezeulu as its chief priest. In *Samskara* and *Arrow of God* Durvasapura and Umuaro offer excellent settings for the actions of Praneshacharya and Ezeulu respectively because they are the kind of places where traditions and orthodoxy in matters of religion can still be strong even in the face of looming changes. In the twentieth century with the rise of non-Brahman movements, especially in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, they (the once powerful Brahmins) have finally seen the eclipse of their prestige. Few Brahmins today pursue their traditional occupation as priests. Their power has all but vanished. In village India today they live a hand-to-mouth existence. (Parthasarathy, 190). *Samskara* is not so much concerned with the Durvasapura Brahmin society as with Praneshacharya himself. Similarly, *Arrow of God* is not all that concerned with Umuaro community as with Ezeulu himself. The job of this essay is to compare and contrast these two spiritual gurus from their superficially comfortable spiritual leadership state through their state of combat and confusion as leaders of their communities.

Praneshacharya and Ezeulu

Early in the novel, Praneshacharya appears comfortable in his reputation and in his role as the spiritual leader of the Durvasapura agrahara. He deliberately married an invalid wife, "a dried-up wasted pea-pod." at the age of 16, and for over two decades,

he does not complain about any emotional or conjugal starvation but instead gladly takes care of her in the belief that he was going into paradise. His heart overflows with gratitude for his bed-ridden wife who, by becoming an invalid, has obliged him with the opportunity of becoming more perfect and more mellow on the road to salvation and he constantly rejoices in his fate (Nagarajan, 117). I wonder why Nagarajan indicated “by becoming an invalid.” Did his wife choose to become an invalid?

Besides his taking care of his sickly wife, Praneshacharya regularly recites the Vedic puranas and scriptures and sacred Hindu legends to the other Brahmins who have a high regard for him as the “Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning,” an honorific appellation that befits only a few studious holy men. According to the author, Praneshacharya’s presence in Durvasapura adds prestige to their agrahara making other agraharas respect Durvasapura. But only one fallen Brahmin, Narranapa, has no regard for him or for orthodox Brahminism.

On one visit to Narranapa, Pranehacharya is told defiantly by Narranapa, the reprobate Brahmin: “Your texts and rites don’t work any more. The Congress party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all outcastes (p.21). In *Arrow of God*, beside traditional African religion and socio-political and cultural life, a new religion, Christianity, and a new and foreign administration, British colonial administration, have been established. Arguably, it is no longer at ease in Umuaro. The old dispensation of traditional African religion and belief is not as strong as it used to be. Traditional religion and traditional authorities are being challenged. In such sociopolitical situation, does Ezeulu’s ruminating over his power as Chief priest of Ulu early in the novel come as a surprise? “Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. . . His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. . . What kind of power was it if it would never be used? Better to say it was not there, that it was no more than the power in the anus of the proud dog who sought to put out a furnace with his puny fart. . . (p. 3. p.4).

Like Durvasapura in the twentieth century in *Samskara*, Umuaro society in *Arrow of God* is in flux particularly in terms of historical and political changes. Although Achebe never admitted it publicly, the single most important source—in fact, the only source—for *Arrow of God* is a tiny socio-historical pamphlet published without copyright by a retired corporal of the Nigeria Police Force. His name was (he died in 1972) Simon Alagbogu Nnolim, and the title of his pamphlet was *The History of Umuchu*, published by Eastern Press Syndicate, Depot Road, Enugu, Nigeria in 1953. On all counts then, though fiction, *Arrow of God* like *Samskara* is strongly rooted in real solid history.

But one should note however that the collapsing of boundaries between the pure and impure is more easily accomplished in the fictional world than in the real. Tradition cannot be given up overnight, however desirable this may be. In traditional societies like India, the stroke of a pen, whether the writer’s or the legislator’s, accomplishes little. Caste is a fact of existence in secular India, and untouchability, though illegal, has

not entirely disappeared in spite of Gandhi’s Himalayan efforts to clean the brahmanical cowsheds (Parthasarathy, p.194).

In *Arrow of God*, British colonialism was already a fact and was getting more entrenched with covert and overt onslaught on the customs and traditional practices of the Umuaro people. The system of Indirect rule—ruling the locals through a chief, traditional leader or head—was the British style of administration in many of their colonial territories in West Africa. This is what Captain Winterbottom, the British colonial District Commissioner, wants to do with Ezeulu—to turn a traditional African chief priest into a chief servant or warrant officer for British colonial administration in a part of Africa where they “abominated kings.”²² Ezeulu rejects Captain Winterbottom’s offer of this warrant chief position because he believes firmly that his primary loyalty as Chief Priest is to Ulu, the traditional god of his Umuaro people and not any other authority. For his rejection of the position offered and for his arrogance, he is jailed for two months. While in jail, he misses his traditional ritual eating of one sacred roasted yam to signify the passing of a month in their agrarian calendar. Umuaro people interpret Ezeulu’s sending one of his sons, Oduche, to the new Christian religion as his friendship with the British colonial administrator, Captain Winterbottom, but Ezeulu’s main reason for sending his son is to have his eye and ear there getting any information on them through his son. He rigidly considers himself first and foremost, the Chief Priest of Ulu and the proud traditional head of the Umuaro people.

Ezeulu and Praneshacharya

The traditional spiritual leaders, Pranshacharya and Ezeulu, feel dutybound to honor, respect and abide by the dictates and directives of their gods even in the face of crisis. Each novel opens with a description of the seriousness and integrity with which each spiritual leader or chief priest performs his role and duty. *Arrow of God* opens with Ezeulu in his third day of gazing or watching intently for signs of the new moon because he should not make any mistake in the calendar of events in Umuaro.

Ezeulu is quite intelligent and wants to move with the changing sociocultural and political climate of Umuaro. This is why he sends his son to the Christian mission to be his “eye” there. Versed in the indigenous lore of his people, he recalls what his father told him about the true owner of the land that Umuaro and Okperi fought over. A man of integrity, Ezeulu is the only one who took side against his Umuaro people in their war with Okperi because according to him, “Umuaro does not fight a war of blame.” It is this singular act of courage, fearlessness, and integrity that endeared him to the British colonial administrator, Captain Winterbottom. This is why Winterbottom also considers him for the position of a paramount chief working for the colonial administration. But his own people do not absolutely approve of his friendship with Winterbottom, and the leader of this opposition is Nwaka, a chief priest of another lesser god in Umuaro, Idemili.

Like Ezeulu the intelligent priest, Pranesharcharya is the learned Brahmin who has a prestigious and honorific title, “Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning.” For a thorough appreciation of the significance of Praneshacharya, let’s look at the position of the

traditional Brahmin in Indian culture: The Brahmin is the keeper of the sacred traditions, the Vedas, which he has for two thousand years preserved, interpreted, and transmitted. His other occupation is the performance of sacrificial rituals. As makers of the Hindu tradition, Brahmans had enormous prestige. Indian civilization is unthinkable without their extraordinary presence.” Such is Praneshacharya in *Samskara*. However, as Satish C. Aikant (2011) rightly asserts, Praneshacharya’s brahminism extends beyond the normal parameters and his self enforced celibacy is a manifestation of his excessive zeal for purity. He studied in Benares Kashi the center of Hindu studies. He is seen at the beginning of the novel with a good degree of extraordinary comfort and dedication, in rendering service to his invalid and sick wife, Bhagirathi. According to the author, Praneshacharya has been doing this routine for 20 years. He does this for a reason and also based on solid belief: He believes that the merciful Lord has put him to this way of life to test him. His heart overflows with gratitude for his bed-ridden wife who, by becoming an invalid, has obliged him with the opportunity of becoming more perfect and more mellow on the road to salvation and he constantly rejoices in his fate (Nagarajan, 117)

Moment of decision

At the heart of the dilemma in each of the two novels is a significant decision to be taken by the spiritual leaders in their respective communities under certain special circumstances. In *Samskara*, Praneshacharya has to decide on whether it is proper cremate the dead body of a fallen Brahmin without polluting themselves or polluting the whole agrahara. He searches the Vedic scriptures and goes to the Maruti temple god for an answer but gets none. In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu is faced with taking an important decision about ritually eating two roasted yams to signify the passing of two months – a passage of time necessary for Umuaro people to harvest their yams which were in danger of getting rotting in the ground. Like Pranshacharya, he also goes to his god, Ulu, for direction and answer to the dilemma but he gets none.

Ezeulu’s visit to the shrine of Ulu and Pranshacharya’s visit to the temple of Hanuman the monkey god

As chief priest or spiritual leader, Praneshacharya and Ezeulu were quite comfortable and apt in discharging their duties to the point of becoming too idealistic. But underneath this façade of idealism is a human weakness. Both Ezeulu’s visit to Ulu and Praneshacharya’s visit to Hanuman, the monkey god, are predicated on a search for an answer to a predicament in their communities—predicaments that are really not insurmountable. While that of Praneshacharya looks somewhat genuine, that of Ezeulu is not. Ezeulu’s motives are not entirely honest. He is not happy about his people except his friend Akuebue not visiting him in jail and he intends to “hit Umuaro hard” with his refusal to eat the sacred yam and accelerate the calendar for the village to harvest their yams. It is a disrespect and an insult to ignore a genuine appeal from respectable people as regard any serious situation that is not insurmountable. By selfishly bringing his own personal grievance to bear on a precarious communal situation—the chance or possibility of a no harvest at all with attendant possibility of famine in Umuaro—Ezeulu

directs attention to his intransigence and thoughtlessness. Ezeulu is told by his people that they will take responsibility for breaking religious custom by harvesting their yam crops of yam... The paradox in Ezeulu’s actions is that he can be fully flexible in accommodating himself to the will of the white government, but wholly inflexible (and not typical of Igbo attitudes and actions in general) in adjusting to the realities of the villagers’ need (Killam, 2004). Immensely proud, Ezeulu’s image of himself is enshrined almost in hubris. According to him: “I can see tomorrow...I have passed the stage of dancing to receive presents.” It is this kind of self image that makes him blind to reality in Umuaro and makes him ignore both elders and common people in Umuaro.

When in desperation, ten Umuaro community leaders—“men of high title”—call on him in a grand special way picking their words with care through their spokesman, Ezeulu should have accommodated them and listened to them. Their visit and interaction with Ezeulu is pivotal and significant enough to warrant quoting some significant excerpts from the novel:

“Perhaps you can guess why we have come. It is because of certain stories that have reached our ears; and we thought the best thing was to find out what is true and what is not from the only man who can tell us. The story we have heard is that there is a little disagreement about the next New Yam Festival. As I said we do not know if it is true or not but we do know that there is fear and anxiety in Umuaro which if allowed to spread might spoil something. We cannot wait for that to happen; an adult does not sit and watch while the she-goat suffers the pain of childbirth tied to a post. Leaders of Umuaro, have I spoken according to your wish?” (p.206)

“We are Umuaro. Therefore listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those yams today and name the day of the next harvest...I said go and eat those yams *today, not tomorrow*; and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the ten of us here. You will be free because we have set you to it. ... (p.208)

The Umuaro leaders exhaust all their appeal and persuasion skills to make Ezeulu eat the remaining yam to the point of offering themselves to absolve whatever arises from his consumption of the sacred yam. But he refuses defending himself that the sacred yams are not ordinary yams for eating. He only promises the Umuaro leaders to consult Ulu for a directive or answer; and the leaders’ duty now according to them is “to watch Ezeulu’s mouth for a message from Ulu.” Clearly, “whatever external forces are brought to bear upon his life are there only as objectifications of what actually goes on inside him” Mordaunt” (1989).

Ezeulu’s visit to Ulu’s shrine does not really come out of his mind but simply to satisfy the Umuaro leaders who called on him. With this kind of mindset, it is not surprising that his experience at the shrine smacks of a foreboding disaster: “As Ezeulu cast his string of cowries (for divination exercise) the bell of Oduche’s people (the new Christian religion) rings. For one brief moment he was distracted by its sad measured monotone and he thought how strange it was that it should sound so near –much

nearer than it did in his compound” (p.210). Arguably, the ringing of the Christian religion bell suggests vibrance and vitality to the umuaro community and even beyond while his own casting of his string of cowries yields no audible sound. If any, it does seem that the sound of the Christian bell silenced it. He comes out of Ulu’s shrine to announce that his consultation with the deity “had produced no result and that the six villages would be locked in the old year for two more moons.”

According to Achebe, perhaps Akuebe was the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages that made up Umuaro. “He knew that the Chief priest was helpless; that a thing greater than *nte* had been caught in *nte*’s trap but “the trap” is not beyond fixing or repair. It is Akwebe that intimates him about the new religion taking advantage of Ezeulu’s refusal to eat the sacred yam, and promising the new religion’s immunity against any calamity—”offering sanctuary to those who wished to escape the vengeance of Ulu” (p.220). To avoid disaster and hunger, Umuaro people start harvesting their yams and presenting them to the new religion. A knowledge of this and his son’s failure to inform him about the new religion’s plan or move infuriate Ezeulu and he makes his son Oduche, a victim of displaced aggression: “I called you as a father calls his son and told you to go and be my eye and ear among those people...I sent you to see and hear for me.I did not know at that time that I was sending a goat’s skull...Go away and rejoice that your father cannot count on you...go away from here, lizard that ruined hismother’s funeral.” (p.221). Ezeulu’s young son, Oduche, is not old and mature enough to understand the ramification of his father’s refusal to eat the sacred yam that he missed while he was in the British colonial administration’s detention for bluntly rejecting the warrant chief position that was offered to him.

Ezeulu’s nightmarish dream seeing mourners singing and drumming seems to foreshadow the death of their traditional religion and the triumph of the new Christian religion. The sudden death of his son, Obika, compounds Ezeulu’s mental state and he lives out his last days as a demented priest. To the Umuaro people, the issue is simple: their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors—that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan (p.230).

Unlike Ezeulu who is appealed to and pressured to break custom considering the circumstances of harvest in Umuaro, Pranesacharya, the learned Crest Jewel of Vedic leaning, who has won all accolades for his brilliance, discipline, and integrity, is not pressured to go to the temple of his god. He does it out of his own volition. His experience however in the the monkey god Maruti’s temple is almost the same as Ezeulu’s experience in Ulu’s shrine—no result. It is the same loneliness, silence, and lack of response: Pranesacharya waited desperately for the god’s favour, His solution. “Without a proper rite, the dead body is rotting; O Maruti, how long is this ordeal going to last?”—he pleaded...the man-sized Monkey-god Maruti just stood still...(p.62)

Outside the temple, it is worse. The stench of Narranapa’s corpse is unsettling the neighborhood and vultures are everywhere picking the dead rats and of course waiting to feed on that of Narranapa if no cremation was done. The brahmins shout in unison to

scare the vultures away but fail. One of them, another Brahmin who according to the author “had just returned beaming, after filling his belly with *uppitu* (note that he was not supposed to eat anything before cremation of Narranapa’s body) “ suggests to them to bring out the sacred gongs and beat them to scare away the vultures. This worsens the situation and makes the agrahara looks more ridiculous. In the author, Anantha Murthy’s words, “The dreadful auspicious din, like the din during the great offerings of flaming camphor, shattered the grim silence of the afternoon like grisly wardrums. For anyone who heard it in the villages five or six miles around, it created the illusion that in Durvasapura it was worship time, that they were making an offering of flaming camphor in the temple and beating the huge temple drum” (60). But the reality is that death and stench dominate Durvasapura, and the vultures seem to triumph: Again and again the obstinate vultures came back and sat on the roofs. The brahmins came out again and again and beat their gongs, blew their conches. The battle was on till evening. But it was the brahmins who got exhausted (p.61). It is in this kind of bleak and depressing environment that Pranesacharya who is physically and spiritually weak easily falls victim to temptations of the flesh—sleeping with Chandri, a lower caste woman, and his transformation begins.

A life of asceticism and self denial gradually begins receding to the past and an integrated fuller life of spirituality and humanity gradually begins.

The novel does not really end. Will Pranesacharya change or modify his philosophy of life in light of his own experiences beginning with his intimate relation with Chandri? At least he strongly realizes the emptiness of the thought or fear of pollution through mere talking to a lower caste person like Chandri and realizes the fullness and bloom in a physical and arguably a spiritual union with a lower caste person like Chandri, and learns that Mahabala and Narranapa were not absolute demons afterall. At the moment of his wife Bhagirathi’s death when she “let out a shriek that left him speechless,” it is Chandri of all people that he runs to albeit, Chandri has already decisively left their agrahara.

What is noteworthy and interesting is that Pranesacharya’s running to Narranapa’s house and calling out to Chandri soon after his invalid wife’s death is just like a reenactment or replay of what Chandri did earlier—running to him (Pranesacharya) when Narranapa died. But at that time Pranesacharya as an orthodox brahmin, did not want to talk to her primarily to avoid pollution. Pranesacharya now finds himself in the same situation. Wiser now he does not think about “pollution” looking for Chandri to talk to. Frankly, this is like running full circle. Pranesacharya’s psychological and spiritual combat with himself is crystallized in his statement, “All things indirect must become direct. Must pierce straight in the eye. But it’s agony either way. If I hide things, all through life I’ll be agonized by the fear of discovery, by some onlooking eye. If I don’t I’ll muddy the lives of others by opening up and exposing the truth to the very eyes my brahminhood has lived and grown by” (p.132).

“To read *Samskara* as a critique of orthodox Hinduism is to limit it severely for it is a novel that repudiates a decadent value system but more significantly redefines the

process of a collective code giving way to individual choice” by Praneshacharya (Aikant, 36). Like Samskara, *Arrow of God* is really about individual choice by Ezeulu.

In adhering too much to the letter of their religions instead of to the spirit, the chief priests, Praneshacharya and Ezeulu, demonstrate their limitations and their fallibility as leaders. In Anantha Murthy’s thinking, the full redemption of Pransacharya is best left outside the scope of the novel, but in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu ends up demented, in all probability, as the last chief priest of a dying independent traditional African god, Ulu—demonstrating the end of an era: So in the end only Umuaro and its leaders saw the final outcome. To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors—that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan(p.230).

Intense confusion in Praneshacharya and in Ezeulu

Like Macbeth who becomes a nervous wreck soon after realizing the enormity of his crime—murdering his royal guest, King Duncan in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*—Praneshacharya is a nervous wreck after he realizes what he has just done—committing adultery secretly, or engaging in a clandestine sexual intercourse with Naranapa’s wife, Chandri, a prostitute, and from a lower caste in the dark forest.

Evidently, his religious orthodoxy and ascetism was just a veneer that cracked easily with the touch of Chandri’s breast in a safe and lonely environment in the forest. He ruminates, “I was roused by the unexpected touch of her breasts, I ate the plantains she took out of the end of her sari” (p.97). Any wonder why Praneshacharya swiftly becomes a hedonist, at least, in his “one night stand” with the prostitute, Naranapa’s concubine in the dark forest? Used to dryness and lifelessness from his wife, “Bhagirathi’s body, a dried-up wasted pea-pod” he gets an electrifying charge of his sexuality and humanity which had all the while been dormant for 20 years with his Brahmin wife. He succumbs easily to the soft feminine touch of Chandri’s breast, and with simple feminine intuition as well as a prostitute’s skill, Chandri takes charge of the seduction and lovemaking: “As his hand played on her hair, *Chandri’s intensity doubled* (my emphasis). She held his hands tightly and stood up and she pressed them to her breasts now beating away like a pair of doves. Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. As the strength in his legs was ebbing, Chandri sat the Acharya, holding him close (p.63). As a special foreplay before sex, Chandri takes out her plantains, peels them and feeds them to him like a child before spreading her sari on the ground for sex. This scene of Praneshacharya’s sex with Chandri is like a fulfillment of what Naranapa, the hedonist and reprobate Brahmin, told or scoffed or vented on him earlier in the novel: “You read those lush sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness... Can I give you Brahmins a piece of advice... Push those sickly wives of yours into the river. Be like the sages of your holy legends—get hold of a fish-scented fisherwoman who can cook you fish-soup, and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don’t experience god when you wake up, my name isn’t Naranapa(25, 26). Praneshacharya eventually is fed peeled plantain and goes to sleep in Chandri’s arms in the forest. Is this a special prediction of what a

brahmin like Praneshacharya can do at an unguarded moment and under a conducive environment for romance or sex?

Praneshacharya is definitely not the like of Joseph who can tear himself from a woman, Portiphah’s wife, who freely offers herself to him to commit adultery or fornication but close to David who lusts after Uriah’s wife and eventually commits adultery with her in *The Bible*. He is perhaps not all that close to David. I wonder if he is close even to David who commits adultery after seeing or looking at a nude woman, Uriah’s wife taking her bath. Unlike David who saw Uriah’s wife in broad daylight Praneshacharya in the novel does not even see Chandri’s breast in the dark. “Even in broad daylight, it was shady and dusky there” (p.83). Only the physical touch was enough to arouse him, and very soon after, the whole experience disturbs him to the point where he rationalizes it but it is a futile rationalization:

“I was roused by the unexpected touch of her breasts... Hunger, weariness, and the disappointment that Lord Maruti gave no answer. That was the reason why ... That moment brought into being what never was and then itself went out of being. Formless before, formless after. In between, the embodiment, the moment. Which means I’m absolutely not responsible for making love to her. Not responsible for that moment. But the moment altered me—why?” Even after Naranapa’s death, he finds it difficult to forget him. As a matter of fact, has Praneshacharya not partaken of the same prostitute that Naranapa had as his wife? This realization makes him uneasy. It is like an epiphany. He cries or moans like a baby. This childhood image of innocence and guilt is the beginning of Praneshacharya’s real combat in realizing that he is not better than Naranapa after all. “At the touch of Chandri’s breast, the animal leaped to its natural self and bared its teeth. Narranapa’s words came to his mind” p.81).

Though a reprobate Brahmin, Narrapa does seem to be a transparent and honest confident character than Praneshacharya. He sees the brahmins and even Praneshacharya himself as frauds. His challenges are blunt. For example; “*let’s see who wins, Archarya. You or me*. Let’s see how long all this brahmin business will last. All your Brahmin respectability. I’ll roll it up and throw it all ways for a little bit of pleasure with one female (p.21; my emphasis). On another occasion—the last time really — when Praneshacharya confronts him after his sacrilegious act – taking Muslims early morning to their sacred site, Ganapati temple stream, and carrying away the sacred man-length fish, Narranapa challenges him again, “*Let’s see who wins in the end—you or me*. I’ll destroy brahminism. I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there’s no brahminism really left to destroy in this place—except you” (my emphasis, p.21). He accuses him of hypocrisy and asserts that he is honest: “You read those lush sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness. But my words, they say what they mean :If I say *sleep with a woman*, it means *sleep with a woman*; If I say eat fish, it means *eat fish*.(p.25). In the end who really wins? According to S. Nagarajan (1971), “Narranapa was no ordinary reprobate; his heterodoxy was planned and cultivated in deliberate opposition to Pranashacharya’s orthodoxy.”

Arguably, Narranapa, though dead was the winner. In life and in death, Narranapa wins. Praneshacharya becomes conscious of his wife's 'ugliness' and lifelessness only after sleeping with Chandri, his prostitute and concubine. In the light of Narranapa's confidence and relentless challenges to him, Praneshacharya is the weak and spineless loser. He lacks the assertiveness and confidence of Narranapa who did not hide his relationship with Chandri. Before the other brahmins, "he was afraid to say openly, to say explicitly, that he too had shared in Narranapa's pleasure" (p.77).

He now sees, on reflection and deep thinking, that Narranapa was not a complete and thoughtless reprobate Brahmin after all. "Just like Narranapa who turned the agrahara upside down by fishing in the temple- tank, I too would have turned the Brahmin lives upside down. I'd be giving their faith a shattering blow. What shall I tell them? "I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust for my wife" (p.131) He agonizes mentally and spiritually about a decision to be free from spiritual fraud and bondage and secrecy publicly confessing his sin— his shortcoming and failure as a brahmin—sleeping with a lowcaste prostitute, Chandri, that lived with Narranapa of all people in the agrahara. Evidently, he is indecisive. He seems to literally take everything to God for direction. Praneshacharya now realizes that he lacks the decisive power of Narranapa and that of Mahabala: "O God take from me the burden of decision. Just as it happened in the dark of the jungle, without my will, may this decision too happen... Narranapa, did you go through this agony? Mahabala, did you go through it?" My question is, whose will was it – secretly enjoying sex he had denied himself for two decades? Chandri is even more decisive. After their secret love-making, she decisively cremates Narranapa's body with the help of some Muslims and she goes away to Kundappura but Praneshacharya is confused and combats too many things.

It is in part his indecisiveness that makes him go to Hanuman the monkey god even for a common sense decision to cremate a dead body whose stench in the hot summer could endanger the life of the whole agrahara. In such a dire situation, Praneshacharya should have taken the decision to cremate but did nothing. He does not realize that literal interpretation ignores context. A decision to cremate in the context of the hot and humid summer would have been pardonable, and of course that is arguably the better decision. In his orthodoxy, he believes too much in the letter instead of the spirit of what his religion or brahminhood says. I am not sure that the world would have blamed him for his decision to cremate a fallen Brahmin—a cremation which Chandri eventually does with the help of Muslims.

Similarly, I am not sure the world would have blamed Ezeulu for deciding to ritually eat one sacred yam to mark the passing of another month when the whole agrarian community's yams were in danger of getting rotting underground (yam tubers grow big and ripe for harvesting in the ground/underground). This kind of decision could have saved the whole of Umuaro from a certain disaster and could have prevented the new Christian religion from taking advantage of the precarious situation in Umuaro. Too much emphasis on doctrines can degenerate into doctrines for doctrines sake and too much emphasis on law can degenerate into law for laws' sake. Where there is a human

need, should the doctrines and laws not bend? Frankly, the growing importance of religion places an onus on religious leaders (or spiritual leaders) to use the power at their command with as high a sense of responsibility as is humanly possible. They should preach tolerance between rival religious groups on one hand and between church and state on the other. Given the multifarious problems facing it, the last thing Africa (or the whole world) needs today or in the future is religious wars on the continent (or elsewhere in the world).⁴ But pockets of religious conflicts and wars and catastrophes emanating from doctrines for doctrines' sake are in various places in the world today.

All said, *Samskara* and *Arrow of God* are two good examples of what David Damrosch considers as "literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language." The success of this Indian novel and this African novel is due strongly to the fine artistic and credible psychological portrayal of these memorable characters, two religious or spiritual leaders from two different cultures—Ezeulu and Praneshacharya. Against a background of the dynamics and forces of religions from time immemorial through the present century—some pleasant and some horrible— a thoughtful reflection on these two characters and their activities is important in a true realization and understanding of what true religion, spirituality, and humanism should be.

Notes

1. Like many, I do not know a word of Kannda but I have been able to read and appreciate in English a good modicum of some aspects of Indian culture which hitherto was unknown. See detail of Erin Scumpf's stress on intermediality and translation in comparative and world literature in "Intermediality, Translation, Comparative and World Literature," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13. 3 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1814>>
2. According to S. Nagarajan, the job he attempted in his article was to provide for non-Kannda readers like me some idea of the main theme and characters of the novel and its temper and tone. Arguably, he was a very early scholar and critic of note of what eventually was published in the English language as *Samskara*.
3. In the revised edition of *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe uses "where they abominated kings" to replace "where they had no kings before" in the original "unrevised" edition. Unlike some other African societies that had centralized authorities — the Obaship or monarchy in the ancient empire of Benin, or in Oyo empire or in the Sokoto caliphate — there was really no central authority among the Igbos that *Arrow of God* deals with. This was why British colonial system of indirect rule did not really succeed very well there.
4. See "Of transcendent controlling powers" *West Africa* No 3964 13-19 September 1993, p.1610. There are more thoughtful reflections on religion in Africa in this particular issue of *West Africa* whose cover is AFRICA: IN THE NAME OF GOD –THE POWER OF RELIGION.

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