

**Social Transformation through Fiction**

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**Introduction**

This chapter explores the distinctive contribution of fiction to transformative learning. Their ability to produce intense vicarious experiences is central to this. Fiction enables us to speed up the process of learning that might occur through ordinary lived experience, to have many lives and relationships, including some that are rare and unusual. Through the use of imagery, symbolism and sensory stimulation they startle us into recognizing new patterns and connections in the world, stimulating our imaginative faculties and expanding our perceptions. In this way they can become the disorienting dilemma, the trigger for transformation that is central to the literature surrounding the constantly evolving theories of transformative learning (e.g UR Anthamuthy's "Samskara" talks about the orthodox Brahmin family tried to manipulate the mind of the people)

Discussions about the transformative potential of fiction are located within a range of theoretical frameworks. Sometimes these are openly acknowledged, sometimes implicit. Such discussions are often concerned with social justice, coming from a position that can be understood in terms of critical theory more generally. They draw on concepts of hegemony and resistance, focusing on the development through fiction of a critical consciousness that will heighten awareness of power structures that maintain inequalities. Discussions also draw on postmodern theory, recognizing the shifting and constructive nature of discourses and the way that these are created through fiction. There is also a psychological and psychoanalytical dimension to some analyses, indicating that fictions tap into hidden aspects of our psyche. Discussions of transformative learning often operate within more than one theoretical dimension, however, and learning itself happens in ways which blur these boundaries. Therefore, rather than attempting to separate these artificially, I have focused on one aspects of fiction vicarious worlds and have drawn on theoretical frameworks as appropriate. The first aspect is fiction's power to social change in fiction the second concerns fiction's ability to enable us to stand back from our own situations; to use distancing techniques that affect our epistemologies and help us to see the constructed nature of our realities.

**Social change in fiction**

Researchers have demonstrated that fiction enables us to engage with lives that are radically different from ours and with people who may be on the margins of our social world or even seen as threats or enemies. This not only creates understanding and empathy with those who are different from us, it allows us to imagine alternatives to the way we live now. Transformative learning theory focused on social reform is particularly well served by such fiction. (Samskara) argues that genuinely critical reflection must include ideology critique, an examination of 'power relations and hegemonic assumptions'. He asserts that even personal reflection is ideologically based because ideologies are constituent parts of our personalities. Fictions that connect us with outsiders often operate at an emotional, even visceral level. Sharing something intense with a character whose situation or perspective is alien to ours can shake our beliefs about ourselves. Our conviction, for example, that we could never behave in a particular way or that certain groups are wrong, or to blame for their own misfortune, starts to unravel. Changing political perspectives often begins at this level of human understanding, rather than through engagement with a theoretical perspective. Personal, socio-cultural and epistemic change are developing simultaneously, as the viewer feels differently about themselves vis-à-vis an outsider group, which means that they have to recognize that perhaps there is no single truth or reality, and begin a

process of unravelling the constructs that have been taken for granted up to that point. This may happen simply through the stimulus of exposure to intense and powerful fictions, or through repeated exposure. The political potential of the arts is summarized by UR Anathamurthy:

“What’s the way out now? Can we just fold our arms and stare at a dead body laid out in the *agrahara*? According to ancient custom, until the body is properly removed, there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing. And, because he was not excommunicated, no one but a Brahmin can touch his body”.

The stubbornness of wanting to follow sacred law causes Naranappa’s body to rot, which makes the *agrahara* unbearable to the living. Between the horrible stench, the abundance of rats and appearance of vultures, all members of the community must flee. The Brahmins place ritual above what is considered a basic human right: the decency of a respectful and timely burial, regardless of the deceased’s religion.

When the novel was written in the 1960s, many South Indian Brahmin communities criticized the harsh portrayal of their conservatism in the conflicts over Naranappa’s death ritual. It is no wonder that these Brahmins would be upset by this depiction of their religious sect as ridiculous hypocrites with individual hedonistic obsessions. The Brahmins in the novel at least feign piety and self-control, while Naranappa openly flaunts his rejection of their strict practices. For example, Dasacharya is a miserly man who gets all of his food and nourishment from the meals that Brahmins receive at death ceremonies and anniversaries. He is distraught not because of the controversy over Naranappa’s, but because the mourning period requires strict fasting, and he doesn’t know when he will have his next meal. Another Brahmin, Durgbahatta, can’t stop leering at Chandri, who is rarely seen outside of Naranappa’s home. The description of Durgbahatta’s lust exposes the duplicity of these supposedly religious men:

### **Conclusion**

When we think about the way in which the transformative power of fiction has been and can be theorized, it is possible to group the kinds of changes discussed into two categories. There are those changes that rely on the creation of intense and passionate emotions, social change. Then there are those which rely, conversely, on making us stand back, stimulating awareness not only of the constructed nature of fictions themselves, but of the way we construct our daily lives and experiences.

These two aspects of fiction promote perspective transformation across all three of the categories originally outlined. The nature of transformation through film and fiction reinforces many claims made by those who have developed transformation theory over the last forty years in that it draws on many aspects of our humanity, on our emotions and our unconscious fears and desires, as well as on our intellectual and cognitive facilities.

In the psychic domain, fictions can promote greater self-awareness, enable us to recognize and challenge some hidden aspects of ourselves that may limit our development. Socio-cultural meaning perspectives are transformed as we live through the experiences of others and come to understand the validity and complexity of other subject positions. Epistemic perspectives expand as fiction shows us the many versions there are of what appeared to be a shared reality; as we recognize how we construct our lives and formulate our experience into patterns and narratives; as we see the huge potential for reformulation, for telling our own stories differently.

Transformation through fiction across all dimensions integrates the emotions and the intellect. The intensity of the experience makes it an emotional and sensory as well as an intellectual process. The balance between the emotions, senses and intellect in the transformation process will depend on the nature of the fiction itself, but also on the

scope for reflection and critical dialogue available to us, either through our own resources or as a result of an educational opportunity.

**Reference:**

1. U R Ananthmurthy's "**SAMSKAARA**"
2. Wikipedia