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Fragmented Selfhood and The Five Sheaths Reading Undine Spragg in Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country

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***Abstract*—The study highlights the distinction between external achievement and inner development. By examining the five sheaths as interrelated dimensions, it shows how Undine's preoccupation with appearance, ambition, desire and social calculation limits the development of self-awareness and lasting fulfilment. The reading also demonstrates the usefulness of the Pancha Kosha framework as a comparative interpretive lens for understanding fragmented selfhood in modern American fiction.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country (1913) presents the rise of Undine Spragg, a young woman whose ambition is directed towards the acquisition of social recognition, wealth and distinction. Moving from the provincial world of Apex to the elite circles of New York and Europe, Undine repeatedly treats marriage, appearance and social connections as means of advancement. Her changing circumstances suggest movement and achievement; nevertheless, the novel's ending reveals that the fulfilment she imagines remains incomplete. The distinction between social success and inward fulfilment forms the central concern of this paper.

Critical readings of the novel have frequently considered Undine in relation to consumer culture, social mobility, marriage and the changing American class structure. Laura Rattray describes her as a modern material figure whose movement through society is marked by dazzling surfaces and an unending desire for recognition [3]. Taeko Inagi's discussion of interior decoration also shows how the changing houses and furnishings in the novel register Undine's social ascent while exposing Wharton's criticism of consumer society [4]. These approaches establish the importance of material culture in the novel. The present study extends the discussion by asking how the pursuit of external rewards affects the different dimensions of Undine's selfhood.

The Five Sheaths theory, or Pancha Kosha, articulated in the Taittiriya Upanishad, provides a philosophical framework for understanding the human being through five interrelated dimensions: the physical, vital, mental, intellectual and blissful sheaths. The framework moves from the outermost Annamaya Kosha to the innermost Anandamaya Kosha. These sheaths are not independent compartments; they are interrelated dimensions through which the self is experienced and understood [1], [2]. Applied to Wharton's novel, the framework makes it possible to examine not simply what Undine acquires, but how her physical self-presentation, energy, desires, judgement and capacity for fulfilment are represented.

This paper argues that Undine's selfhood is fragmented because her identity is persistently organised around external validation. Her physical beauty becomes social currency; her vital energy is channelled into restless advancement; her mental life is dominated by desire and comparison; and her intelligence is used more effectively for social calculation than for self-reflection. Consequently, the deeper fulfilment associated here with Anandamaya remains inaccessible. The analysis does not claim that Wharton consciously adopts an Indian philosophical model. Instead, Pancha Kosha is used comparatively as an interpretive resource for reading the novel's representation of an incomplete and externally dependent identity.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The Taittiriya Upanishad presents five sheaths through which embodied human existence may be examined. Annamaya Kosha refers to the physical or food-based sheath; Pranamaya Kosha to vital energy and life force; Manomaya Kosha to the mind, emotions and desires; Vijnanamaya Kosha to intellect, understanding and discernment; and Anandamaya Kosha to bliss or deep fulfilment. The sheaths are interdependent, with the outer dimensions permeated and informed by the inner ones [1], [2]. In this paper, these concepts are used as broad interpretive correspondences: they are not treated as clinical categories or as a rigid sequence of psychological development.

The study follows a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on close textual analysis of characterisation, narrative description, relationships, decisions and outcomes in The Custom of the Country. Particular attention is given to scenes involving Undine's self-scrutiny before mirrors, her changing clothes and residences, her marriages, her treatment of Ralph and Paul, and the novel's closing episode. The analysis asks how each dimension of the Five Sheaths is represented and how the imbalance among them contributes to the fragmentation of selfhood.

III. ANNAMAYA KOSHA: THE BODY AS SOCIAL CURRENCY

Annamaya Kosha, the physical sheath, offers a useful starting point because Undine's body and appearance are central to the way she understands her social value. At the beginning of the novel, her beauty is repeatedly observed and evaluated by others. Mrs. Heeny praises her 'lovely form', while Undine herself is acutely conscious of the impression her appearance can produce [5]. Her

body is not represented simply as a lived physical reality; it becomes an instrument through which she seeks entry into privileged social spaces.

Chapter II makes this dependence especially clear. Undine stands before a mirror, examines her reflection and imagines herself arriving at a fashionable gathering. She studies the effect of her hair, complexion, dress and bodily shape, worrying that even a slight change in her figure might conflict with prevailing fashion. Her pleasure comes from watching herself as an image that can attract admiration. The mirror therefore becomes more than a domestic object: it reflects an identity constructed through the anticipated gaze of society.

Clothing intensifies this external orientation. Undine buys dresses because they are beautiful or fashionable, but quickly becomes dissatisfied with them when they lose novelty. The value of a garment depends less on comfort or personal attachment than on its capacity to produce distinction. Her repeated changes of wardrobe and residence show how physical appearance is linked to consumption. In this sense, the Annamaya dimension is given disproportionate importance: the body is cultivated as a social possession, while its deeper significance as part of an integrated self remains unexplored.

Wharton's attention to houses and interiors reinforces this reading. As Inagi observes, the changing decoration of the spaces Undine occupies marks her movement through different social environments [4]. The body and the house become parallel surfaces on which status is displayed. Undine's physical and material world expands, but this expansion does not necessarily deepen her sense of identity.

IV. PRANAMAYA KOSHA: RESTLESS ENERGY AND THE PURSUIT OF ADVANCEMENT

Pranamaya Kosha concerns the vital energy that sustains action and movement. Undine possesses abundant energy, but the novel shows that it is directed almost entirely towards social advancement. She is restless, quick to respond to opportunity and unwilling to remain in a position she considers inferior. Her movements between cities, social circles and marriages suggest a powerful drive to transform her circumstances.

Yet this vitality rarely develops into purposeful inner growth. Undine's energy is activated by comparison: she wants the people, houses, invitations and possessions that belong to a supposedly superior world. In the early chapters, her insistence that she wants 'the best' reveals how her ambition is structured by external standards [5]. She is not simply pursuing comfort; she is pursuing a position from which others will recognise her superiority.

The novel also indicates the exhaustion produced by this continuous striving. During her social manoeuvres, Undine becomes nervous and fatigued; success itself can be as demanding as failure. Her vitality is therefore consumed by the maintenance of appearances and the pursuit of the next achievement. Through the Pranamaya lens, her problem is not a lack of energy but the direction in which that energy is invested. The vital dimension serves acquisition rather than self-development.

V. MANOMAYA KOSHA: DESIRE, EMOTION AND THE UNSETTLED MIND

Manomaya Kosha relates to the mental and emotional dimension, including desires, feelings, imagination and reactions. This sheath is particularly significant in understanding Undine because her inner life is shaped by dissatisfaction. She rarely experiences contentment with what she possesses. Each achievement soon becomes inadequate when she encounters a more attractive possibility or a person with greater prestige.

Wharton presents Undine as both independent and imitative. She wants to appear original, yet repeatedly models herself on the last person she has encountered. This contradiction suggests the absence of a stable internal measure of value. Her desires are generated and redirected by the social world around her. The result is a mind that is constantly occupied with comparison, anticipation and disappointment rather than sustained reflection.

Her relationships reveal the emotional consequences of this instability. Her marriage to Ralph Marvell brings her into an established social world, but she becomes dissatisfied with the limits of his family, home and finances. Ralph's emotional investment in marriage and family is not reciprocated in the same way. Undine's attraction to the possibilities represented by other men and social circles weakens the relationship and contributes to its collapse. Her treatment of her son Paul further exposes the distance between desire and emotional responsibility. Paul becomes, at different moments, an inconvenience to her plans rather than the centre of a sustained maternal attachment.

Through Manomaya Kosha, Undine's selfhood appears governed by fluctuating wants. Her emotions are real, but they are repeatedly organised around acquisition and social comparison. The mental sheath does not provide stability; instead, it reproduces the dissatisfaction that drives her from one social arrangement to another.

VI. VIJNANAMAYA KOSHA: INTELLIGENCE WITHOUT SELF-DISCERNMENT

Vijnanamaya Kosha refers to the intellectual dimension associated with understanding, judgement and discernment. Undine should not be described as unintelligent. She is observant of social codes, quick to identify useful connections and capable of adapting her behaviour to the expectations of different groups. She understands that marriage can provide access to wealth and status, and she learns to use social conventions strategically.

However, the novel distinguishes practical calculation from deeper discernment. Undine can recognise what is useful for her immediate advancement, but she rarely considers the ethical or emotional consequences of her decisions. Her intelligence is directed outwards, towards reading other people and social situations, rather than inwards, towards examining her own motives. She can identify the restrictions imposed by society, yet she does not consistently question the values that make social approval so important to her.

This limitation becomes visible in her treatment of Ralph and Paul. She does not fully recognise the emotional damage caused by her pursuit of a more advantageous life. In the later part of the

novel, Paul's confusion about his family history and his mother's repeated absences reveals the consequences of her choices from a perspective she has largely failed to consider. The narrative thus exposes a gap between Undine's ability to calculate and her capacity to understand the human implications of her actions.

Vijnanamaya Kosha, in this reading, is not wholly absent from Undine's character. Rather, it is inadequately developed as self-awareness and ethical discrimination. Her practical intelligence enables social mobility, but it does not lead her towards a more integrated identity. This distinction is essential: the novel critiques not intelligence itself, but intelligence confined to the service of external success.

VII. ANANDAMAYA KOSHA: THE ABSENCE OF INNER FULFILMENT

Anandamaya Kosha, the sheath associated with bliss or deep fulfilment, provides the culminating perspective for this analysis. It should not be reduced to ordinary pleasure or the satisfaction of obtaining a desired object. In the Upanishadic framework, it points towards a deeper dimension of being that cannot be secured through material possession alone [1], [2]. Undine's life, by contrast, is marked by the repeated substitution of one external goal for another.

The final episode makes this distinction unmistakable. Having married Elmer Moffatt and acquired wealth, a magnificent house, jewels and social prominence, Undine appears to have achieved the success she once imagined. Yet when she learns that her divorced status prevents her from becoming an ambassador's wife, she experiences a fresh sense of deprivation. The narrator observes that 'under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained' [5]. The image condenses the novel's critique: even extraordinary material success cannot satisfy a desire that continually creates new conditions for happiness.

Undine's final disappointment is not simply the loss of one social opportunity. It reveals that her idea of fulfilment remains dependent on a position recognised by others. She believes that the role of an ambassador's wife is the part for which she was 'really made for', suggesting that she has mistaken social distinction for the realisation of her potential [5]. The novel ends not with inward discovery but with the continuation of performance: she turns towards her guests, still displaying the identity she has constructed.

From the perspective of Anandamaya Kosha, Undine's achievements remain external because they do not culminate in lasting inner contentment. The innermost dimension is not represented as attained. Instead, the ending exposes the distance between the appearance of completeness and the experience of fulfilment. The Five Sheaths framework therefore helps clarify why the accumulation of wealth, beauty and influence does not produce an integrated self.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The analysis of The Custom of the Country through the Five Sheaths framework demonstrates that Undine Spragg's selfhood is shaped by an imbalance among the dimensions of human

experience. Her Annamaya identity is organised around beauty, clothing and material display. Her Pranamaya energy is channelled into restless social advancement. Her Manomaya life is governed by desire, comparison and emotional dissatisfaction. Her Vijnanamaya intelligence enables strategic adaptation but does not mature into sustained self-awareness or ethical discernment. Consequently, the deeper fulfilment associated with Anandamaya remains unrealised.

Undine is not a passive victim of social structures; she actively negotiates and uses them to pursue her ambitions. Nevertheless, her agency remains closely tied to the standards of the society whose approval she seeks. Wharton's ending exposes the limits of this achievement: the more Undine acquires, the more clearly the next inaccessible distinction defines her sense of lack. Her selfhood is therefore fragmented not because she lacks ambition or practical intelligence, but because her identity is persistently measured through external validation.

Reading the novel through Pancha Kosha offers a comparative way of understanding this fragmentation. It brings together the physical, vital, mental, intellectual and inward dimensions of Undine's experience without claiming that the novel directly expresses Upanishadic philosophy. The framework makes visible the difference between social advancement and holistic self-realisation. Ultimately, Wharton's portrayal suggests that a self-built primarily through appearance, possession and public recognition cannot secure the deeper fulfilment it seeks.

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