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Dr. Anil Kumar
Deptt. of English, K.S.R.
College, Sarairanjan,
Samastipur, Bihar, India

Rural Reflection in Kamala Markandaya's '*A Handful of Rice*'

Dr. Anil Kumar

Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the eminent Indo-Anglian novelists. Her works focus basically on the life and culture of the rural India. 'Nectar in a Sieve' and 'A Handful of Rice' present an authentic picture of the same. The main themes of the novel are hunger, poverty and exodus from the villages to towns in search of employment with a dream to satiate hunger, wipe out poverty and carve out a distinct identity in the society. The tragic predicament of rural India has been depicted with moving realism. It envelopes lack of family planning, tradition, want for a son, crime, unemployment, class conflict, lethargic attitude as dominant factors of the Indian rural society. The novel presents Markandaya's tragic vision of life with the genuine concern for the miserable lot through the characters like Ravi, Nalini, Jayamma et.c. The tradition of the joint family system with its merits and demerits is reflected through the family of Ravi. There is also a cultural clash between rural culture represented by Ravi, a poor and hungry boy and urban culture through the life of Damodar, a notorious criminal. The novel portrays how desire for a luxurious life also forces one to follow anti-social activities. Ravi is drawn towards Damodar, a criminal to comfort himself from economic strain. Despite Kamala Markandaya's rich experience of the west, rural Indian forms the basis of her creative urge.

Keywords: Hunger, poverty, exodus, tragic predicament, unemployment, lethargic attitude, cultural clash

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya occupies a significant place among the eminent Indo-Anglian novelists. She was an expatriate. She married John Taylor, an Englishman, in 1948 and started living in England thereafter. She had the full experience of both the eastern and the western lives. Her works concentrate basically on the life and culture of the rural India. Almost all her novels reflect the picture of Indian villages. To have a real experience of the villages Markandaya spent some time even in the villages of South India.

India is a country of villages which constitute about seventy percent of the total population. But unfortunately rural India has remained a stagnant society, yet, the soul of India lives in its villages. They have, despite all odds, preserved India's civilizational values. In the depiction of Indian rural life, various Indo-Anglian novelists have tried their hands with varying degrees of success. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Khuswant Singh have given occasional sketches of rural life. While Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is still the best novel on rural India, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* present an authentic picture of the same. Markandaya fills her novels with a graphic and realistic picture of the rural India and its various problems. She has ten novels to her credit. The problems touched in the novels, whether on the economic, social or human level, reflect rural India in their true manifestations.

The setting of *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is provided by a South Indian village in the vicinity of Madras without any fictional locale to universalize the theme. The main themes of the novel are hunger, poverty and exodus from the village to towns in search of employment with a dream to satiate hunger, wipe out poverty and carve out a distinct identity in the society. The exodus from the village to a city due to constant hunger and poverty owing to the lack of employment opportunities is a common sight of an Indian village and it is equally evident in *A Handful of Rice* as affirmed by C. Anna Latha Devi too by saying that "*A Handful of Rice* reveals the novelist's deep concern for the simple villagers who migrate from their native villages to the cities in search of green pastures" (Devi 68).

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Anil Kumar
Deptt. Of English, K.S.R.
College, Sarairanjan,
Samastipur, Bihar, India

Village youth with their poor education and poverty dream of fulfilling all their desires by going to the city. Ravi, the protagonist, driven by intense hunger, is also the victim of such a dream even with bigger hopes when he leaves his village to set himself up in the city. But the city already crowded with university graduates, spares little hope for him. Srivastava beautifully remarks as such, "Ravi is an impractical youth, wriggling out of rural shell but dreaming of dizzy heights and then afflicted by the denial" (Srivastava, 134-144). He badly requires a handful of rice to satisfy his and his family's hunger. He knows no laws and is involved in petty criminal activities. He drinks because he wants to forget his sorrows. P.P Mehta opines that "the struggle between man and overpowering hunger, before which honour, morality and even God do not count" (Mehta, 225). Ravi is caught in the whirlpool of transition from the tradition bound rural society to the machine ridden materialistic urban milieu. Ravi struggles but never becomes a rich man. Even at the end of the novel, he is a poor man craving for a handful of rice. "The novel fictionalizes the society of India" (Ready, 154). The problems, thoughts and hopes of the protagonist are similar to ours i.e. the common rural folk with a universal appeal. The tragic predicament of the rural India has been depicted with moving realism in the novel. Its focus also envelopes lack of family planning, tradition, want for a boy, crime, unemployment, class conflict, lethargic attitude etc which are the dominant factors of the Indian rural society. The novel depicts here both rural and urban society in true colours. According to Shiv K. Kumar, "Kamala Markandaya is the most accomplished of all the contemporary Indian novelists writing in English both in respect of her sensitive handling of a foreign medium and her authentic portrayal of the Indian scene" (Kumar, 1-9).

Poverty is the keynote of an Indian village. Most of the people in Indian villages are poor as the villages do not offer any opportunity to the people to earn better livelihood. The villagers in *A Handful of Rice* are in a pathetic plight as the novelist reveals that "they had all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty the kind in which the weakest went to a wall, the old ones and the babies, dying of tuberculosis, dysentery, the falling fever, recurrent fever, and any other names for what was basically, simply nothing but starvation" (129). In our daily life we so often find people begging for a handful of rice, flour and any other foodstuff. A person lean and his stomach curved inward in hunger and starvation is a frequent sight in a village as in the case of Ravi's friend Damodar.

The problem of growing population, a common phenomenon of a village, is also elaborately discussed in the novel when Nalini is going to have a child, according to the tradition, Jayamma sends Ravi out of the house. Outside the house, he meets a man and both are indulged in conversation. Ravi comes to know that the man has many children. Now the man also realizes the fact and says, "one's easy, two's easy, three and four one can manage but when they keep coming sometimes I tell you brother, I want to put my hands round their necks and squeeze until I know I'll never again have to think about feeding them, no, never again hear them whimper" (126). Ravi too has many brothers and sisters. Apu has a large family and in time Nalini gives birth to four children. One of them dies. Thangam also has many children. Generally in India, most of the rural families want sons to carry on their generation.

Most often this wish of sons is the sole reason of large families. When a son is born to Ravi and Nalini. Apu is very happy. He thinks "there had been babies before: his daughters, the twin sons of whom neither he nor his wife could bear to speak, who had been born dead..... Thangam's babies, daughter after daughter. Now at last a male child had been born to his house" (131). Ravi also desires a child, preferably son rather than a daughter, a little boy who would run after him and call him father, who would look up to him and to whom in time he would pass on his skills, so that he would never have to worry about whom hand over to like poor old Apu" (92).

The novel is replete with typical Indian rural scenes. In the very beginning we have a chance to look into Jayamma's kitchen. It is a typical rural kitchen. A blackened range runs along one wall with firewood and charcoal stacked at the end. Jayamma is fanning a low fire over which a brass vessel is simmering. Apu's house is very small and overcrowded. To see a crowd waiting for a religious procession is also a common sight in villages. In this novel Apu's family members are waiting hour upon hour for processions.

The novel also presents India's rural tradition. For example, in some of the families it is a tradition that during child birth, the male members of the family have to go out of the house. When Nalini is going to deliver a child, Jayamma sends Ravi out of the home and he has to spend many hours on the road. Mostly in villages, the young girls are strictly watched over by their parents. Ravi has sisters and he knows the strict watch that is kept on young unmarried girls in their community. Jayamma also has a watch on Nalini like an eagle.

Ravi's wife Nalini is a typical village housewife who shares her husband's poverty with patience. She even bears the wrath of Ravi who frequently beats her. The story of their life is the story of innumerable poor persons who are leading a miserable life under the burden of poverty which is a common sight in villages. Ravi, in his economic crisis, is tempted to be in the company of Damodar, a criminal.

Ravi even joins the crowd to raid a godown of rice. This situation is also typical of the rural scene where people in the absence of bread earning opportunities turn to be anti social agents.

It is generally felt that Markandaya's themes reflect the tragic vision of life. Her novels depict her genuine concern for the miserable lot of poverty stricken masses. This fact cannot be denied that Indian villages are full of sorrow and sufferings of a person who can hardly make both his ends meet and this fact is evidently clear in *A Handful of Rice* through the example of Ravi. The tradition of joint family is quite old in Indian rural society with its merits and demerits. Sometimes such families are prosperous, but sometimes the economic condition of the joint family is very critical because there are many dependants in the family. In Apu's house there are a lot of family members and the earning members are only two leading to misery and acute economic crisis in the family.

There is a cultural clash in each of Kamala Markandaya's novels. There is also a clash between rural culture represented by Ravi, a poor and hungry boy and urban culture represented by Damodar, a notorious criminal. Ravi, yet, respects him and is drawn towards him quite often and pine for the comforts and luxuries enjoyed by Damodar. But, simultaneously, he has had a different sanskara

inculcated in him in his early life in the village and this prevents him from straying as also revealed by Dr. Nagendra Kumar Singh as such, "Ravi respected him (Damodar) for it. He himself, he knew, would have gone in for rich food, for silk shirts and enamel cuff links: yet his upbringing had taught him to focus inward, upon the constant light within" (Singh, 113). Uma Parmeswaran also talks of such ethics when she says, "Ravi never does get rid of his bourgeois morality. We are meant to see Gandhian qualities of uprightness; and the ancient hidden strength of the village mind that cleaves to honesty and the simple life" (Parmeswaran, 139).

She has enjoyed the glittering world of the West which has enriched her stock of themes, yet the rural India forms the basis of her creative urge and rural India finds an unforgettable room in her vision which can be felt in the following words:

"Although, She has a gift to creating very lively characters and dramatizing the events with a dense and realistic narrative, she is alert to different conflicting issues that rural India in transition confronts" (Naik, 24).

The aforesaid analysis bears testimony to the fact that the novel, *A Handful of Rice*, presents a lively and true reflection of the rural India.

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