



## SOCIAL REALISM IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NOVEL A HANDFUL OF RICE

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### **Abstract**

*Indian writing in English is unique and has attained an independent status in the realm of the world literature. Wide range of themes is dealt within the Indian writing in English. Kamala Markandaya's is one of the most important woman novelists of India. Her novels depict Indian social reality at the time of pre and post Independent periods of India. Her novels deal with social aspects, cultural and religious exploitation of Indians. Her works highlight and expose the bitter social and political reality. It is the fact that Kamala Markandaya's novels can be studied at several levels, but this research article focuses on the Social Realism in her novel A Handful of Rice.*

### **Introduction**

The novel *A Handful of Rice* is Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel published in 1966. It consists of forty chapters. It is absorbing and interesting. The main themes of the novel are poverty and hunger, exodus from the village to the city and the destruction of artisan by the industrialization. The novel depicts the real Indian life and is universal in appeal. The problems, thoughts and hopes are quite similar to that of the common man of the present generation.

### **About the author**

Kamala Markandaya's, the most outstanding woman novelist of Indian Fiction in English, very authentically portrays the life of Indians both in the villages and in the towns. Before her marriage and settling down in England, Markandaya's spent some years in a South Indian village to gain first-hand knowledge of Indian rural life. In her other novels as well as in *A Handful of Rice*, the readers come across the real and vivid picture of Indian society.

### **Poverty**

Poverty is the keynote of Indian rural life. Most of the people in Villages are still poor as the villages do not offer any opportunity to the people to earn a better livelihood. In the villages "they had all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty- the kind in which the weakest went to the wall, the old ones and the babies, dying of tuberculosis, dysentery, the 'falling fever', 'recurrent fever'" (*A Handful of Rice*, p.1) People in villages live below poverty line. He (Ravi) knew better the economics of village life, knew the superhuman efforts, the begging and the borrowing that went into raising the train fare, the money for the extras demanded by pride and the standards of a city. His father had managed it once, where many men like him never managed it at all." (p.98)

Coming to the town, Ravi is disillusioned that for a poor man there is no difference between a town and avillage. An illiterate or an under graduate villager is only suitable for manual labor. Here is again exploited. Ravi and Apu get eighty rupees for one dozen jackets



while the shop owners sell one jacket for one hundred and twenty five rupees. Ravi becomes angry at this, "he and his like perennially scratching round for a living, while they sat still and waxed fat on huge peremptory margins." (p.81). Ravi has to give up all his ambitions and after Apu's death his economic condition worsens. Finally, he is found struggling for a handful of rice. In want of money Apu and Ravi's son, Raja, are not properly cured and both of them die.

### **Hunger**

Poverty gives birth to hunger and starvation. In the very beginning of the novel when the hero, Ravi is presented before the readers, he is very hungry. He goes to Apu's house and says, "I'm hungry, I want a meal. I'm starving." Ravi's friend, Deodar's stomach is 'lean and curved inward'. All he wants is a meal. Fruits are rarity for Ravi and Apu's family. In the village as well as in the town, one can see "a cluster of people around the ice- fruit stand, mostly children without the money to buy, who stand transfixed like small worshippers in front of the row of cultured syrup bottles." (p.42)

After Apu's death, Ravi has to sell many things from the house just to satisfy his and his family's hunger. It is to satisfy his hunger that he leaves his village, comes to the town and indulges himself in petty criminal activities and afterwards works very hard in Apu's house, first as his assistant and later as his successor. But even then he is unable to live a better life.

### **Unemployment**

Unemployment is one of the burning problems of our country. When Ravi comes to the city and is acquainted with the hard realities of the town /city he thinks, "if there had been a job, it might have been different, but there was no job. The city was full of graduates- the college turned them out in their thousands each year- looking for employment, so what chance had he, with his meager elementary school learning?" (pp.26-27). Sometimes he despised them, these refined young men who were having their education slapped back in their faces" and sometimes "pitted against men fresh from the colleges, bearing the seal of these great institutes of learning. And these young men waged as fierce a competition as any he had known. He had seen the queues that every vacancy produced, the long waiting times, the fine-drawn patience that suddenly shaped these mild, well-bred men into screaming agitators." (p.208)

He discovers the fact that city is a man - made jungle full of snares and traps and unkept promises.

### **Problem of Growing Population and Accommodation**

Another burning problem of our country is rapidly growing population and consequently the problem of accommodation is also taking place. In the beginning we see that the protagonist, Ravi, "had no quarters... it was a matter of chance where he slept. A bench in the park, an empty six- by-two space in a doorway, the veranda of an empty house, the pavement, all in turn had served to bed down on... since he had left the railway station, the coffee house and its pavement frontage had become a second house to him." (p.47)

### **Want for a Boy**

Generally in India, most of the people want to have boys. Sometimes this wish of having boys is the sole reason of large families. When a son is born to Ravi and Nalini, Apu becomes



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... Than gam's babies, daughter after daughter. Now at last a male child had been born to his house." (p.131). 'He deserves his warmth for sons who had never been born'.

### **Generation Gap**

Generation gap is posing a problem to our society. There is less love, harmony and understanding between the old and young generations. The young generation is now revolutionary and disobedient. In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi represents young generation and Apu, his father-in-law, the old one. Apu does not want to increase the prices of the clothes as he does not want to lose customers, but Ravi revolts against it. Both the generations find fault with each other. For example, Apu says, "you young fellows nowadays, you don't know how to conduct yourself, you're all the same manner less monkeys with no respect for anything, not even your elders." (p.126)

### **Conclusion**

Kamala Markandaya's has written eleven novels and delineated the life of rural as well as urban areas in almost all her novels. Markandaya's has realistically treated every aspect of Indian life and character in her novels. Characters that Markandaya's portrays are highly realistic. They are men and women of their own attitude towards life and society.

The present research article, "Social Realism in Kamala Markandaya's Novel *aHandful of Rice*" is a sincere effort to prove the aforesaid analysis bears testimony to the fact the novel, *A Handful of Rice*, presents a lively and true picture of Indian society.

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