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Ravi as the Representative of Misguided and Disenchanted Modern Youth in a Morally Degraded Society in Kamala Markandeya's *A Handful of Rice*

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Kamala Markandeya

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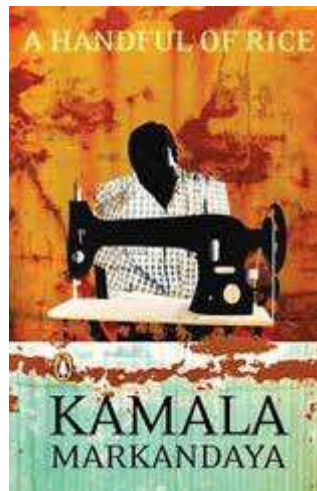
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Kamala Markandaya shares a place of considerable importance among the women novelists of Indian English Literature. She wrote ten novels that focus on a variety of themes. She occupies a unique position because of her pragmatic portrayal of the society in general and the pathetic plight of the individuals in particular. East-west encounter, poverty and unemployment, the problem of conscience, the tug-of-war between traditional values and modern life, inconsistency between religion and science, clash of values, the problem of hunger and starvation etc. are some of her well-known themes. She realistically brings out how the youth undergo terrible mental agony in a Godless society devoid of all values. Though written four decades ago, the problems she discussed in the novels are not only on the increase but also have become the order of the day. Unemployment, hunger and starvation, exploitation, disillusionment, frustration, crime and violence are some of the problems that haunt the modern youth community.

A Handful of Rice



The novel *A Handful of Rice* brings to light the problems of urban India and the tragic plight of modern Indian youth. The youth are tossed by social injustice which makes them takes shelter in unwanted activities. The present modern society, instead of protecting and educating the youth, misleads the youth in the form of sense pleasures. Having misled by the society, the disillusioned youth of today try their level best to squeeze out sugarcane juice from

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the bamboo stick. Though bamboo stick resembles sugarcane, it is not sugarcane. Similarly the society, without providing employment and other opportunities to the deserving youth, renders them jobless and makes them refugees in their own homeland. After graduating from colleges and universities, they have to hunt for jobs and ultimately in their vain search for jobs they become frustrated. The youth dream of a luxurious lifestyle and the society impels them to think that it is the prime objective of life. Modern society makes the youth turn away from God by its flickering beauty of sensual pleasures and this has paved the way for misuse of intelligence. They undergo severe mental anguish because the Godless society in which they live does not show them the proper direction to march forward. They blindly imitate the West and ignore their age old traditional life and customs. They migrate to cities from villages with the strong hope of settling in life, but the cities can only offer them despair and disappointment.

Ravi: Suffering from Hunger and Starvation

In *A Handful of Rice*, Ravi suffers from hunger and starvation. He is a perpetual victim of hunger and poverty. When the novel opens, we find Ravi as a hungry young man without any job. He migrates to the city from his village with lot of golden hopes. But all his hopes get shattered when he lands in the city. The trials and tribulations faced by Ravi make him join the gang of smugglers. He finds life in a modern city a bitter struggle for existence. Ravi in this novel is symbolic of innumerable modern youth who migrate to cities from villages with lot of dreams and hopes about settling in life peacefully. But the modern cities offer them frustration and disillusionment. The cities could not even provide food for its inhabitants then what to speak of offering jobs. In this novel, Kamala Markandaya explains: ... as all the young men he knew had done or wanted to do, joining the exodus to the cities because their villages had nothing to offer them. The cities had nothing either, although they did not discover this until they arrived. (AHR: 25)

Loss of Freedom

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Though the village fails to offer lucrative jobs with attractive earnings, at least it can provide peace of mind which is the much sought after thing in today's cities. The various problems in cities make the people struggle hard for their survival and they turn the modern youth pessimistic and they become rebellious elements like Damodar. Unlike Damodar, Ravi's village brought-up makes him desist from violence even in the midst of hunger as he is saturated with goodness within him. But Damodar succumbs to violence as he is shackled by his urban brought-up. Basanti Panda comments: Damodar, born and brought up in the city, is not troubled by his conscience. He is the prototype of urban culture. He indulges in all corrupt practices to acquire wealth. (RITASMAHR: (26, 27)

Corrupt City Values – Jungle Life

In a city, human values are totally neglected and the people prey on each other like animals. There is no adherence to moral values in the cities. Subhash Chandra elaborates: Many Indian women writers have portrayed city in their novels. It is a place where humanity and human values are dead and the people prey on each other like vultures. Struggle for survival is so stark that there is no scope for finer human feelings. (CNKMADSD: 158) That is why Kamala Markandaya compares the city to a jungle. In a jungle only wild animals survive without any fear and they prey on other poor animals. Similarly in a city, those who resort to unfair means alone can survive and the innocent and the honest find no place there. Since the youth find no employment, they resort to immoral ways. The youth searching for jobs in a city is a common phenomenon. Kamala Markandaya sums up the situation in the novel: In the mornings there were the threadbare students. He saw them aimlessly pacing the streets as he himself did, looking for a job, for often now his mornings gaped open, empty of work. (AHR:208)

Trying to Live a Honest Life

Ravi after joining the family of Apu, the tailor falls in love with Nalini and marries her. After the demise of Apu, Ravi becomes the bread winner of the family and he has to shoulder

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all the responsibilities. He wants to lead a truly honest and human life by supplying stitched clothes to the rich people. The rich buy the clothes for a cheap price and sell them for a higher price. This exploitation of the poor by the rich irritates Ravi. But his earnings reduce and he has to raise loans. His business declines and in a fit of frustration and despair, he often beats his wife. As a result, Nalini leaves home. Ravi in a hopeless and dejected mood indulges in the most abominable act of having illicit sex with his own mother-in-law. His son Raju dies of poverty. He again approaches Damodar but Damodar refuses to take him back under his fold. Finally Ravi joins a crowd that tries to loot the rice depots for a handful of rice. Dr. Basanti Panda comments: In search of an affluent materialistic life, man gets totally lost and lands nowhere. He even fails to arrange a handful of rice as Ravi fails. The alluring world of the modern is not fit for men like Ravi. (RITASMAHR:28)

Loss of Traditional Values

City life is a great struggle because even for obtaining the basic necessities of life man has to fight. Traditional values and human virtues that are always held in high esteem in society are totally neglected by the city dwellers. In such a city, Ravi loses himself. Dr. Ejya Yadav states: City life is a grim struggle for existence and survival. Ravi encounters a total collapse of culture and civilization here. He can't become part of such a civilization. (QIKMAHR:32) The society is solely responsible for the pathetic plight of innumerable youth like Ravi. Hooligans and thugs survive and thrive but honest men struggle hard to maintain themselves. These are the symptoms of a Godless society where all vices are on the increase and virtues on the decline. A society or the Head of a State should see to it that the citizens live happily and peacefully. A Godless society without moral values is like a human body without a head. What can one expect from a dead body? The social body is now lifeless without the head of moral standards. Only if the moral ideals are preserved and respected in a society, peace and prosperity in the society in general and peace of mind to the individuals in particular will be ushered in. Subash Chandra aptly points out:

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All religions, saints and sages hold forth certain fundamental moral values which, if observed, become instrumental in bringing about cohesion, harmony and peace in society on the one hand and happiness to the individual who observes them, on the other. Honesty, truthfulness, selflessness and humaneness are some of the values which have been championed universally at all times and in all climes. What differentiates the human world from the animal world is man's capacity to strive for a moral existence and what distinguishes a culturally advanced society from primitive, atavistic people is the former's awareness and practice of moral values. (CVAHR:87)

Pursuit of Western Style Living

In pursuit of western life style, the socio-economic system has undergone a sea change based on exploitation. Even the educational system instead of moulding the character of students makes them indulge in violence either in thought, word or deed. Moral values and character training find no place in the present educational system. Today's society encourages cinema which is soaked in vulgarity and violence and it spoils the younger minds. Agriculture is considered ignominious by today's youth thanks to urbanization. With a view to escaping the harsh reality, the modern youth take shelter in sex, intoxication and violence and they exercise no self-control.

Educating the Youth

The bounden duty of any sane society is to educate the youth in moral values so that it may have good citizens who are morally, intellectually, spiritually and mentally superior. A traditional God-centered society, one can find many restrictions to the youth because life up to 25 years is very important. Right from the age of five, genuine spiritual knowledge should be taught. Only during this period from 5 to 25 years of age, the foundation is laid for the fruitful future. If the foundation is weak, a building cannot be raised on it. Similarly if the prime of youth is wasted, it cannot be revived at any cost. So it is the bounden duty of the society to

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show proper direction to the youth so that they may emerge as successful citizens in general and productive individuals in particular. But the society we see in this novel does not allow Ravi to have a dignified human existence. Unless a society upholds values and morals, it will decay and its citizens will descend to the level of animals. In the words of Dr. Nagendra Kumar Singh: Unless human existence is sustained by certain values and norms in order that it may exist with the minimum of dignity and fulfillment, it will progressively decay. (DSSKMAHR: 62)

Return to Genuine Spiritual Knowledge

The only tangible solution to the existing problems in the society is to turn to genuine spiritual knowledge and God consciousness. Only then the society can regain its lost glory. Only in a God-centered society that adheres to the eternal teachings of God as delineated in all scriptures can one remain peaceful and successful. Even though the society has advanced in all fronts, crimes and violence are increasing at an alarming rate and the youth are the helpless victims of such crimes and violence. So there is a pinprick somewhere in the social body. It is due to its neglecting the moral codes and functioning solely on man-made laws. Stephen Knapp explains: Even with all our modern conveniences, this is a problem which is reflected by the confusion, the high level of crime, and the general lack of moral stability in society today. However, when one can approach genuine spiritual knowledge for actual guidance, this problem can really be rectified. (TSTVAML: 8) If the society trains the young graduates in proper moral principles and offers them suitable employment opportunities, they will not be anymore the disturbing elements in a society but rather become a rejuvenating force that sustains the society.

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