

Social Realism in Indian Urban Societies as Depicted in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*

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Abstract

The term *literature* which is derived from Latin word ‘litera’ meant letter. The writings represented the expressions of humankind, however with the cultural transitions; the literatures now serve as the depiction of culture and the ideology of the society. The paper would throw light on the cultural inequalities and its effects on human life in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*. The binary oppositions in culture shatter the dream of the protagonist Ravi. The life of Ravi as depicted in the novel reflects the struggle between his dreams and the reality. Ravi wanted to become rich and enjoy the liberties of rich; however, he had to disdain all his ambitions. The portrayal of Ravi is the symbolic sign of the cultural clash that exists between the Indian urban and rural societies. The research paper would throw insight on the economic oppressions faced in the social milieu of Indian society.

Keywords: Kamala Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice*, Binary opposition, Dreams, Economic oppression, Cultural clash, Urban and rural society.

The changing scenario in Indian literatures has laid the pathway to understand them in its new dimensions. The term ‘literature’, which is etymologically derived from Latin, meant “writing formed with letters”, however the contemporary literatures are not mere letters but they are the expressions of reality.

The ‘letters’ refer to both spoken and sung texts, which includes folk literatures. The original purpose of these literatures began with the expression of the writer about themselves or to execute their excellence in aesthetic writings. The literatures are now realistic and celebrate reality rather than imagination. The pragmatic approach to literature expresses how it has taken its own responsibility in presenting social reality through their writings.

Unlike other genres of literature, Novels project reality with the minutest details. The novels are the reflection of the characters in the mundane society. The research paper would focus on Kamala Marandaya's *A Handful of Rice*" and explore the life of the protagonist Ravi in the urban life. The character is the representation of individuals who desire to achieve in sophisticated urban life, however they remain crushed and the reality is completely paradoxical to their aspirations.

The novel was written during post independent India in the year 1966. Though it is more than four decades since its publication, the literature brings its current relevance to Madras of modern times.

The text revolves around the central theme of ‘hunger’ and ‘poverty’. The male lead ‘Ravi’ undergoes various struggles to overcome them, however till the end he fails to do so. The portrayal of ‘Ravi’ is the symbolic representation of class struggle that exists in the Indian society. The binaries of urban and rural life are presented in the novel. The binaries in any system is the sign of woe and Ravi’s life presents how both urban life and his village both denied him the basic need for survival. ‘Food’ which is considered as one of the necessities for one’s survival was deprived all his life.

The life of ‘Ravi’ is an attempt to understand the multiple meanings expressed in the novel such as class, language, gender, economy, and social order. In analyzing Ravi’s character one can find the constructed notion of identity and belongingness being subjected to deconstruction.

Ravi is introduced in the beginning of the story as a vagrant. He suffers in his village even for one time meal and believes that city life would at least fulfill his hunger. As the son of a poor peasant, he comes to Madras and joins the local petty criminals to earn his bread. The leader of the team Damodar teaches him the art of pilfering and Ravi becomes a thief. The change of behaviour is the result of one’s situation and Ravi had to adapt to the Darwin’s evolutionary theory of “survival of the fittest”, therefore Ravi is the symbol of such individuals who come to the city aspiring to achieve great things. Many times, the reality is a bitter one.

He takes refuge in Apu’s house at late night, but he was asked to get away quickly from the house. The beginning chapter reflects the vagabond life of Ravi where he was chased by Apu as, “well you can’t rest here. Go find a chatram. I’ll give you just one minute.”(6).

He was chased and beaten black and blue by Apu and Jayamma, however they also show empathy towards him after knowing his dismal condition. He is deprived of both the basic necessities namely food and shelter. Apu and his wife Jayamma takes pity on him and later feed

him and let him go. The description of the food is more appealing to the sense organs and it further symbolizes how Ravi worships food. His affinity towards food is described as:

“She took off the lid and a cloud of white steam rose, bringing familiar and tempting smells to his nostrils. He peered into the steamer, knowing exactly what he would see: three idlies, composed in clover pattern in the steamer, each wrapped in butter muslin, well-risen, rounded and pure white. His mouth began to water.” (11)

In the village where Ravi was brought up all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty. His condition in the village is described as, “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’, and any other names for what was basically, simply, nothing but starvation”.(12)

The acquaintance with Apu’s family creates him an opportunity to win Apu’s daughter Nalini and he also constructs a good bonding with Apu. Apu as an aged man considers Ravi as a trustworthy son than a son-in-law and marries him to his daughter Nalini. The marriage life brought disappointment in him as he was not able to fulfill the basic needs of family life. Even privacy was denied due to their economic status. He could not afford a proper accommodation to his wife and they had to live along with the other family members in Apu’s house. The story reflects on the common problems faced by every individual in the urban society. The search and craving for food, dwelling, livelihood, customs, manners and the mundane rituals of urban life is reflected in Markandaya’s narrative.

As W.B. Yeats writes in his poem “The Second Coming”:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,”
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;”

Ravi’s life also falls apart after the death of Apu. The centre which is supposed to be the pillar of the family also dies and the entire burden of the family falls on the shoulders of Ravi. As the poem expresses the ‘mere anarchy loosed upon the world’, Ravi understands the power struggle that exist between the Indians and the British memsahibs. The memsahibs do not give respect to the Indian bourgeois and Ravi faces such insults to bribe the gatekeeper to even enter in to the memsahib’s house.

The death of Apu completely changes life of Ravi. He could not carry on the business as convincing as Apu, therefore it becomes a failure. He is not able to accept the eccentricities in the characters Jayamma, Thangam, Puttana and others. Even with his son he was a failure, he could

not save his son Raju, as he was not economically affordable to spend for the medical expenses of his son. Raju dies of convulsion as Ravi prays,

“At last Ravi prayed not for himself but for his child to die; and towards dawn there was a last convulsion. Ravi held his son in his arms, tightly, crooning to him to take the terror away, until it was over.” (230)

The death of his son and the economic instability of his life make him to take vicious path. The innocence is drowned as he steps in to the urban life he could no longer stay a stable man. He violates his morality at a point, where he has forced sexual intercourse with his mother-in-law Jayamma. Though he felt disgusting about his own carnal desires, the behaviour of Jayamma was a shocking one. The people of the dwellings always bothered about their social status and about their neighbours. Jayamma is the reflection of such individuals in his place. Jayamma responds to Ravi as:

“Do you think I care about that? Who cares what goes on between four walls? It’s the public scandal that breaks one in two, you roaming all night, and creditors at the door every day.’ She wiped her eyes. ‘It’s the scandal.’” (223)

The culture is also not considered as a valuable one. The life of individuals is designed and destined by money in the urban societies. Ravi as a failure from the beginning falls a prey in the sophisticated urban life. The story is the reflection of the struggle for survival in the urban society. This struggle is not just reflection of 1966 Madras, but the similar experiences and people like Ravi are still found in every urban city, but they are unnoticed in the busy lifestyle.

The portrayal of two binaries of characters, Ravi and Damodar proves how in spite of hardships Damodar as a local criminal succeeds his life in the city whereas, Ravi as a migrant from village to city decides to take up Damodar’s path and ends up in joining the gang of protestors to get a handful of rice. As Ravi mentions the city as, “In this jungle one had to fight, fiercely, with whatever weapons one had. Or go under.” (198).

The title of the story is thus justified by the protagonist Ravi whose entire life is a struggle from beginning to end for a handful of rice. Neither his village nor the urban life could change his life. Ravi stands therefore as the symbolic representation of people who are the victims of the society.

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