

PRAGMATISM IN A HANDFUL OF RICE

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ABSTRACT:

Pragmatism means a way of seeing, accepting, and dealing with situations as they really are without being influenced by emotions or false hopes.

The novelist in A Handful of Rice accepts and deals with the circumstances in the village and town as it, in actuality, is and does not endeavour to make up that it is poles apart. She is doing the pragmatic appraisal of the protagonist Ravi. She depicts the authentic and stunning pictures of Indian society. She attempts to underscore the state of Indian rural society. She poignantly deals with the trouble of poverty, hunger, unemployment, population, accommodation, generation gap, tradition etc.

So the proposed research paper would wind up the problems in detail inherent in Indian rural society. I would undertake to unearth the realities of Indian people.

Keywords: pragmatism, unemployment, hunger, poverty, and Indian society.

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FULL PAPER :

Kamala Markandaya was born in a blue-blooded Brahmin family of Mysore in 1924. Her father was an officer in transport department. Her education and bringing up were not steady due to her father's transfers. A lot of schooling at diverse places proved godsend for her later on. She went to England and Europe and acquired much knowledge of Western culture and civilization. We have a shufti at the Western culture in her novels. Roving proved very constructive in her writings. She herself asserts that the role of observer which every traveller assumes is good preparation for any critic. It makes a good preparatory point and she believes it was her preliminary point. She was got admitted in graduation in Madras University at the age of sixteen. Markandaya is the authoress' pen name. She was Kamala Purnaiya before her marriage.

She worked as a journalist for a short-lived weekly newspaper, as an army liaison officer and as a freelance journalist in Madras and Bombay.

She also visited England in 1948 to get a job as a journalist, but remained unproductive. She was awarded the National Association of Independent Schools Award (USA) in 1967 and the Asian Prize in 1974.

She has been called one of the crispest and most warmly persons of Indian writers. Margaret Parton finds in her works stupendous luminosity and profundity even among India's current crop of highly artistic novelists.

The themes of her novels are – hunger, poverty, love, sex and East-West cultural encounter. H M Williams says-

She treats the theme of tragic waste, the despair of unfulfilled or ruined loved, the agony of artistic ambition, the quest for self-realisation and truth by the young, all themes popular with European and American novelists of recent decades. (84)

She is one of the utmost and most exceptional novelists with noteworthy skills. She has deftly delineated smarmy developed and charismatic characters in her novels. She is an emblematic representative of the feminine sensibility.

Kamala, the most dazzling woman novelist of Indian English fiction, very authentically portrays the life of both in Indian villages and cities. In A Handful of Rice, we come across the authentic and flamboyant pictures of Indian society.

Ravi, the protagonist, significantly suffers from poverty. He is the son of an unfortunate peasant. He is fed up with poverty because villages do not offer any prospect 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, and the 'falling fever', 'recurrent fever'. (12)

Most people in rural area live below poverty line.

He (Ravi) knew better the economics of village life, knew the super human 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 has managed its once, where many men like him never managed it at all. (98)

Ravi goes to the city in order to get rid of rural poverty. There, Ravi is married to Nalini. She is the daughter of a tailor master Apu. Ravi is cynical coming to the city because he observes that there is no discrepancy between a city and a village. An untaught village dweller is only fit for blue-collar work. He again sees exploitation there. Ravi and Apu get 80/- rupees per dozen jackets, while the shopkeeper sells one jacket for 125/- rupees. There is a colossal dissimilarity in cost of buying and selling. Ravi becomes aggravated at the situation. He says-

He and his like perennially scratching round for a living, while they sat still and waxed fat on huge peremptory margins. (81)

He wants to earn a lot of money, but now he has to give up all his ambitions and after Apu's demise, his economic circumstance falters. Consequently, it is found that he is pugnacious for a handful of rice. For want of money, Apu and Ravi's son Raju are not appropriately nurtured and facilitated, so both of them pass away.

Poverty is the mother of hunger and starvation. The poor people are found begging at diverse places in our society. So such is happening from the very commencement of the novel when the leading actor feels very hungry. The hero, Ravi, goes to Apu's house and says-

I'm hungry, I want a meal. I'm starving. (6)

Fruits are rarity for Ravi and Apu's family. In the rural area as well as in the urban one, we may see:

A cluster of people around the ice- fruit stand, mostly children without the money to buy, who stand transfixed like small worshippers syrup in front of row of coloured syrup bottles. (42)

Ravi has to pilot a hard life after Apu's decease. He has to put up for sale his belongings to slake his hunger and other needs. The needs coerce him to indulge in inconsequential unlawful activities; notwithstanding this he is incapable to get pleasure from a superior life.

The predicament of redundancy has been depicted poignantly in the novel. When Ravi comes to town and is made familiar with the hard realities of life, 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 meagre elementary school learning? (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 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. (208)

He feels the fact that city is an artificial woods jam-packed with snares and traps and unkempt promises.

The swift mounting population and consequently, the quandary of accommodation are the burning problems of our country.

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. (47)

After marriage with Nalini, they have to share their room with others. They have no confidentiality. Ravi is enthusiastic to have his own safe haven:

A place they could call their own, where he and his wife could talk, plan, dream, make love undisturbed. (86)

Soon he constructs a shelter on the roof of the house. But they could not have solitude because of Nalini's sister who frequently comes there too to share their room. The trouble of over population is unswervingly discussed in the novel.

Commonly in India, most of the people wish to have a baby boy. So here also, Ravi wishes of having a baby boy and the very thing happens. When a son is born to Ravi and Nalini, Apu is too contented to communicate his feelings. 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 to worry about whom to hand over to like poor old Apu. (92)

Generation gap is also posing a great setback to our society. There is a slight fondness, understanding and concord between the old and the young cohort. In this novel, Ravi represents young age group and Apu, old one. The young age band is to much extent world-shattering and noncompliant while the old one is considerate and uncomplaining. Apu is running his cloth business well and selling his clothes at a very low cost due to the panic of losing customers, but Ravi revolts against it. Ravi impatiently wants to hike the prices even at the cost of losing customers. Here both generations are finding faults with other. Apu says:

You young fellers nowadays, you don't know to conduct yourselves, you're all the same, mannerless monkeys with no respect for anything, not even your elders. (126)

Ravi retorts:

Why should we respect you, what have you done to earn our respect? (126)

The novel is also replete with archetypal scenes of rural life of India. Ravi sees Jayamma's classic Indian kitchen. When he visits the market, he observes a small cluster of people around ice-fruit stand. We also see crowded cinema halls, tea, coffee, cola, ice-cream etc. centres. We also come across bazaar girls who are two a penny, they are wholly brazen.

Who scarcely bothered to draw the cloth of their saris over their breasts; or who were to be seen riding in rickshaws at night on the Marina between Mylapore and the Fort, Hidden behind grimy white drapes in perverted semblance of the habit of a nun. (28)

The novel also presents the customs of Indian culture and society. In Indian families, the male members of the family have to go out of the house during child-birth and so do happen when Nalini is going to deliver a child. In villages, young girls are watched over by their mothers. Ravi has sisters who were watched stringently by him. Jayamma has a watch on Nalini like an eagle. The joint family also exists in India. Sometimes this causes melancholy to the chief of the family. In Apu's house, there are only two bread earners, but so many dependents. So the financial circumstance shatters steadily and in due course even, a handful of rice is a rarity to them.

We pencil in the winding up that the novel principally deals with the theme of hunger and poverty. She has craftily described the theme of hunger, poverty, unemployment, growing population, generation gap, accommodation problem, characteristic scenes of Indian life and tradition. Apart from these themes, the novel also deals with starvation, East-West encounter, cultural conflicts etc. In the novel A Handful of Rice, 'rice' symbolises 'poverty' in general. It depicts bona fide Indian life and is universal in appeal. So the problems, thoughts, and hopes of the protagonist are similar to ours. The protagonist, Ravi, poorly needs a handful of rice to gratify his and his family's hunger. He knows no laws and is caught up in trivial unlawful deeds. He drinks because he wants to overlook his sorrows. Ravi struggles, but he never becomes a rich man, even at the end of the novel, he is a poor man hankering for a handful of rice. So the aforementioned scrutiny bears testimony to the fact that the novel presents a vivacious and existent portrait of Indian society.

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