

**Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*: A Chronicle of Poverty
and Food Crisis in Post-Independence India**

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), has chronicled major social and economic problems of India in her novels so she occupies a prominent place among Indian English writers. All her ten novels *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffin Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *Shalimar* (1982) and *Bombay Tiger* (2007) deal with the themes of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, poverty, hunger and exploitation. The present paper aims at studying *A Handful of Rice* (1966), which deals with poverty, hunger and food-crisis as its major themes.

Key Words: Hunger, Poverty, Food Crisis, *A Handful of Rice*

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The novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966) seems to be a sequel to *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) as Markandaya continues to carry her impressions of poverty in it. In her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), the protagonist Rukmani's son Murugan leaves the village for the town to make a better living. Murugan, as readers perceive reappears as Ravi, the protagonist of *A Handful of Rice*. This idea germinates in the readers mind when they take leave of *Nectar in a sieve* seems to have reborn in *A Handful of Rice* (1966).

If *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with rural economics, *A Handful of Rice* deals with urban economics. However, both deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation in the ruthless society. The very title of the novel *A Handful of Rice* is suggestive of poverty and hunger. Every character of the novel struggles to get *A Handful of Rice*. The novel begins and ends with the protagonist's struggle with poverty and hunger.

The novel seems to be set in the late fifties, the period of Independent India, trying to achieve economic stability. The story moves around a rustic boy, Ravi, who comes to the city to earn his living. Ravi, the protagonist of *A Handful of Rice* runs away from the village as many do to escape from poverty. Ravi tries to escape from the impoverished conditions of the countryside, when financial constraints grip him by the neck. Poverty and hunger follow him like shadows. A boy who comes with the dream of a bright future fails to face the ground realities of the urban life. He does not even get a shelter in the city. But he comes to know that he cannot return to the village. The village has nothing to offer to the son of a small rack-rent tenant farmer:

It held out before them like an incandescent carrot. The hope
that one day, someday, there would be something. (26).

He becomes one of the several thousands who throng the city streets for suitable jobs and get ultimately disillusioned. Wherever he goes he faces unemployment and disappointment. The poverty and hunger trap him into the criminal underworld. He joins the gang of aimless loafers and criminals like smugglers, bootleggers and black marketers. Ravi starts thinking that he has a bright future:

...his passport to a world shot with glitter and excitement: a world that revived the incandescent glow the city had once kindled; and suddenly the terror and the loneliness were gone, lifted from the load whose other components were hunger, the lassitude of hunger, and the terror of losing his identity in an indifferent city which was akin to death. Of course much of this world, this dazzling world, lay in the future: but every kind of fear and privation became bearable in the light of its bright promise. (27)

Living in abject poverty, he drowns his morality in drinking. Once, heavily drunk he falls into the hands of the police. To escape he slips into the house of a tailor. Ravi dares to enter the house and threatens the old man, Apu, the tailor only because of his hunger. He says, "I am starving... I am hungry I want a meal. You let me in..."(6). This incident changes his life. The lower middle class house in which he stays for the night attracts him. The family which satisfies his hunger arouses Ravi's dream of his own family and delicious meals.

Later, his love for Nalini, the daughter of Apu and his urge to survive in the city makes him accept the apprenticeship in tailoring offered by Apu. He finds in Ravi the successor of his trade. He accepts the proposal of Ravi's marriage with his daughter Nalini as he sees in him the support of his old age. The poor lower middle class Apu is not left with much choice and he accepts the vagabond, reckless burglar as his son-in-law. It shows his helplessness which is an outcome of his poverty.

Ravi's father is so poor that he has to raise money for the journey to the city. He mortgages his land, his only source of income for the betterment of his son. Though Ravi gets a house to live in, he is made to pay for his stay by Apu's wife, Jayamma. The marriage offers

Ravi a better way of living. For the next few years he forgets the pangs of hunger, but not of poverty. He keeps on dreaming about a better life.

The increasing number of family members in the large family disturbs Apu's economics. The growth of the textile mill and machine production pose threat to Apu's tailoring business. Even a skilled worker like Apu struggles hard to survive in the competition. The garment workers are exploited by the shop-keepers. The big fish swallows the small fish. When Ravi discovers this exploitation made at the hands of the shop-keepers, he gets furious but the experienced Apu tells him the law of 'the survival of the fittest'. It is better to live than perish.

The whole horror of this jungle law haunts Ravi's life, when he finds himself at the receiving end with the business slipping through his fingers. The paralysis of Apu paralyses him too. He finds himself all alone in the jungle. The hard buffetings of this jungle law makes him aware of the reality. After the birth of the twins, the economic condition worsens. There is neither food nor clothes. He cannot even buy milk for the new born babies. They cannot celebrate the festivals. The death of Apu comes like a blow. Ravi takes charge of Apu's business. The members of the family humiliate him by commenting on his failure to run the house. This time poverty strikes so severely that Ravi collapses. The slackness in the business is followed by the hike in the prices of the essential commodities.

Ravi finds it difficult to cope up with hardship and poverty aggravated by the ever increasing prices of essential commodities. The backlog of debts and arrears grow heavier day after day. The frustration of his failure again takes him to Damodar. This time he goes with determination to follow his path. Damodar suggests him to go back to his village. Ravi responds "The village... what do you know about it? It's not fit for cattle, not even the sort of cattle, you think I am"(214). Damodar makes him realize that urban life is worse than that. "I know what a city's like, I have been scavenging in it since I was so high, ever since they found me crowing on a garbage heap and throw me right back onto it."(214) Damodar agrees to give him a job. But again Ravi returns home.

The frustration of the poverty stricken Ravi increases day by day. He suspects the chastity of his wife. Nalini cannot tolerate it and leaves the house. The frustration, due to failure in the fight against poverty, and constant humiliation by his mother-in-law thirsts him to such a length, that once he even rapes his mother-in-law.

In the meanwhile, Nalini who goes to her sister in protest against her husband's charge of immorality, returns home realizing that she cannot stay in her sister's house who herself is living in sheer poverty. Ravi decides to fight against poverty with new plans. He gets engrossed in his work to such an extent that he fails to understand the gravity of his son's illness. He neglects his son's fever out of the fear of the doctor's bill. But Raju's condition deteriorates. He is compelled to call the doctor. When the illness turns out to be meningitis he forgets his "earlier obsessions, work, earnings and equations that never worked out." (229) He hopes that his darling will survive. He thinks that to be poor is a sin.

When Raju, his son, who is on the verge of the death asks him questions 'Do you like me? Why do you like me? (229) Ravi turns speechless. Ravi loves him from the depth of his heart. But in his struggle against poverty and hunger he forgets his son. He feels that it is not he but the society in which he lives is responsible for the death of his son. He finds the society guilty of the murder. He decides to free himself from betraying ramshackle codes. He decides to give children their rights. He begs Damodar to give him some job. Earlier Damodar had offered him a job every time he asked but this time he refuses to give him a job.

He happens to join a hunger march next day unknowingly. A voice, 'Rice today, rice. Rice today, rice!' makes him aware of the purpose of the march. He rushes with the crowd towards the Government godowns of rice. In the godown the sight of the rice, the sound of the rustling of the grain turns him mad. Kannan, the blacksmith makes him aware that it is a crime to rob the rice of the innocent people. But Ravi thinks it is his right to take his share of rice. It is his children's right. But on the arrival of the police he runs away without even *a handful of rice*. He joins another mob of rioters considering it as another march. When he realizes that they are

attacking the rich shops he refuses to throw the brick. He finds it insensible as it will give him neither rice nor grain.

Throughout the novel Ravi's mind is a battle ground of honesty versus dishonesty. Finally honesty wins. Kamala Markandaya through her novel portrays two types of characters: the exploited Indian labourers and the long suffering woman which is found in her *A Handful of Rice*.

As in many of her novels, Markandaya has chosen the South Indian background for the story of this novel. The South Indian names such as Ravishankar, Kumaran, Jayamma, Puttana and references to the South Indian customs and traditions create a realistic picture of the people and locale of the South. Through the character of Ravi, she shows that most of the young men who come to the city are always in two minds whether to go for easy money or work hard to earn their living. She throws light on the plight of the youth in rural India through Ravi's unwillingness to accept the craftsmanship like smithy and tailoring. Even the village youths like Ravi aspire for a white collared job that can give monthly salary and a pension. They are ready to accept hunger but are reluctant to use their hands to earn their living.

Ravi and his friend Damodar begin a life together in the gutters of the city of Madras. Damodar chooses the darker side of life and grows rich by squeezing people's throats. He defeats poverty and hunger at the cost of his morality. Damodar offers Ravi to join him several times but Ravi prefers to remain poor and does not lose his morality. Markandaya uplifts the character of Ravi by showing him firm on his ways of morality. Had he accepted Damodar's offer, it would have been the possible future of Ravi.

Marrying into Apu's house Ravi solves his three basic needs of shelter, food and sex. However, he does not feel happy or satisfied with his lot as he always wishes to be richer. When he goes to the sea beach with his wife, he regrets for not going to a coffee bar, a place where rich people go. He feels unlucky for not getting the life of a carefree rich young man. Thus

Markandaya, through her portrayal of the anxiety of Ravi, focuses on the discontent of the youth in India then. A.K. SrinivasRao in “The Novel of Kamala Markandaya : A Study” says,

Markandaya is not content with mere human misery; nor is she satisfied with survey of the superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country.(Rao 81)

Due to his inability to cope up with the economic failure, Ravi's mind constantly plies between honesty and dishonesty. Each time he gets defeated in the war against poverty, he is drawn towards Damodar. Damodar is brought up in city slums which are the breeding places of violence and crime. Poverty and hunger make Ravi think about surrendering to Damodar's way of life but the basic humanity or the value system in him always makes him retreat to honesty.

When Ravi's son dies, he becomes aware of the hollowness of moral values. He decides to renounce the moral code for the material prosperity. “No more blocks and restraints. No more loyalties and responsibilities, for he had none. Neither to the land nor to people nor to their society nor to society's bebuying ramshackle codes “(231). His long endured poverty and hunger, his economic exploitation by the society make him take the decision of joining Damodar. But this time Damodar refuses him an entry into his underworld telling him that he is not fit for anything.

“--I see nothing”,saidDamodar. “You are empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts something's been at them.” He began to laugh, a high sharp ugly laughter. “What was it, termites?” (232)

At the climax of the story, irritation, anger and humiliation of poverty and hunger make him join the ‘hunger march’. He goes with them, “marching along six students and workmen, and petty craftsmen like himself with the same fires burning their bellies” (233). Kannan the blacksmith, poorer than Ravi makes him aware of the crime he is going to commit. Ravi flows with the tide but fails to get even *A Handful of Rice*. Finally, his conscience forces him to return to his senses.

He refuses to commit an immoral act and accepts the poverty and returns home. The ultimate triumph of conscience shows Markandaya's belief in the essential goodness of man.

Nalini represents the lower-middle class women in the urban society. In the conditions of exploitation, she symbolizes power of endurance, patience, inexhaustible love and tenderness. She is emotionally matured. This emotional maturity enriches her sense of values and strengthens her hold on conscience. It helps her keep rapport with her husband and society. She understands the world. She has none of Ravi's childish cravings. She knows "ordinary folk like us can never be like them" (75). That is why she survives the pressures of the deteriorating financial position and the angry outbursts of her proletariat husband. In most of the financial crisis she remains firm. With sense and sensibility she guides her husband. She is a practical minded woman but her husband's hyper-ambitious nature frightens her.

Apu is yet another exploited Indian labourer. He is a skilled labourer earning as much as the family requires. He knows that he is being exploited by his customers but he is happy with his lot. He appears to be self-centered but he takes care of every member of his family. His calculated economics keeps his family away from poverty. But as soon as he gets paralyzed, poverty and hunger dawn upon his family. He is aware of the gulf between the rich and the poor. But he does not get excited at the pompous show of big houses. He understands Ravi's anger against their exploitation but he convinces him that unless they stand united they cannot raise their voice against exploitation. Markandaya depicts the miseries of the lower middle class in the transitional period in the Indian social history through the portrayal of Apu and his family. S. John Peter Joseph in his essay "Need for the Coexistence of Spiritualism" rightly says,

The most striking feature of Kamala Markandaya's fiction is that it reflects the changing ethos of the post-independent India. Her accurate delineation of the social, economical and political changes with special focus on the concept of cultural continuity reveals her extraordinary sense of historicity. (Joseph 123)

Human relationship has been one of the common themes of Markandaya's novels. She shows disintegration of their relationships in the family due to the economic strain. There is not any emotional bond among the members of the family. Jayamma, Apu's wife neither loves nor respects her two sons-in-law. She calls Puttana her elder son-in-law 'a good for nothing fellow' and hates Ravi for his vagabond nature. Puttanna calls his mother-in-law 'She devil'. He expresses his anger before Verma, another parasite on the family "Do you know she even grudges me *A Handful of Rice*" (95). Her constant scolding for not contributing to the household makes him retaliate. He robs the savings of his father-in-law. It makes him leave the house but it cannot remove his poverty. A.K. Srinivas Rao in "The Novels of Kamala Markandaya – A study." Says:

Markandaya is not content with mere human misery; nor is she satisfied with survey of the superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country. (Rao 181)

Through the deterioration in the relationship of Ravi and Nalini, Markandaya shows how the economic strain can affect even their love. Nalini is all the time preoccupied with the thoughts of her household. She cannot look after her husband's emotional and physical needs. The feeling of being neglected makes Ravi so furious that he beats his wife. Even the pregnancy of his wife does not give him much happiness. In order to buy material essential for the baby, he has to forget his simple desires of buying a new bed, bicycle, shirt and a mouth organ for himself.

Through the protagonist Markandaya rejects the hypothesis that parents love their children in all circumstances. Usha Pathania in, *Human Bond and Bondages : The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya* says,

It suggests that poverty and deprivation make a monster of us all. It is not the children only who desert their parents, even parents ignore them. The inability to provide for them is killing for father also. Ravi whiles away his time sitting on the

roadside, when Nalini is in labour. To get rid of the boredom and tension of the moment, he starts talking to the stranger sitting nearby. The man informs him that having children no more pleases him. With nine children to take care of, he has really become sick of them all. (Pathania 162)

The impact of poverty is so intolerable that it makes the poor lose their energy and the very instinct to live. At the age of thirty Ravi feels that he should die. In an attempt to make both the ends meet he neglects his son to such an extent that his son dies of meningitis. The question which Ravi, his son asks him in his illness 'Do you still like me?' makes the reader brood over the declining human relationship.

Markandaya throws light on the poverty of the lower middle class families in the city by giving a number of small incidents. By the detailed descriptions of the big houses and accompanying them, with those of the dilapidated houses of the poor on the other hand, she throws light on the wide gulf between the rich and the poor. She gives voice to her criticism of socio-economic system with explicit bitterness. She is critical of sharp social inequality in the urban society. But she knows the gap is so wide that it is difficult to bridge it. She shows, how a rich man can afford to spend fifty rupees on a little jacket for a little girl when others are unable to afford even daily vegetables for their dependants. She makes her protagonist raise her voice against the exploitation but she makes us realize how impotent his rage is.

The tragedy of Ravi is a tragedy of all those rustic small rank rent tenant farmers who turn to cities in order to earn their living. Through the description of poverty in the countryside Markandaya shows what makes them desert the villages, she says,

As far back as he could see 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' and any other names for what was basically, simply nothing but starvation. (12)

There are many such descriptions of poverty and hunger for which she is criticized by some Indian critics for her oversimplification of village life in India as an absent narrator. She is accused of over-playing poverty in rural India with a conscious effort to make her work more acceptable to the readers in the west. Elina Kalinnikova comments that Markandaya's presentation of India as less civilized than it is, is out of her "desire to cater to the taste of a reader in the west." (Kalinnikova 47) Rochele Almeida feels,

she is unable to portray real India as her privileged position separated her from real India, the India of custom and tradition, religious orthodoxy and conventions, poverty, hunger and degradation. (Almeida 251)

Uma Parmeswaran seems to agree with her that Markandaya's distance from their native country accounts for the inaccuracy and the lack of authenticity of sociological and cultural details in her novel. She says,

She knows English in India better than she knows peasants clerks of India. The English belongs to the world in which she has lived herself. (Parmeswaran 197)

Some critics look at Kamala Markandaya's expatriate status positively. According to these critics her expatriate status allows her the required detachment and objectivity to deal with. As an Indian, settled abroad she has the first hand knowledge of both the East and the West so that she can be the most dispassionate observer. Her art is free from propaganda and didactics and is inspired by welfare of humanity and the alleviation of human sufferings. She has a flair for virtuosity and ambivalence in her attitude to society. Pravati Misra in *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*, says,

Kamala Markandaya's perception of Indian ethos is strikingly similar to that of contemporary social novelists, there is nevertheless a unique sensitiveness in her novels in terms of the extent, range and depth of perception. (Misra 8)

A thoroughgoing study of her novels clearly reveals that though she appears to be inadequate in her description of Indian social reality, her very intention in portraying the reality is not to give microscopic descriptions of the reality but to sensitize the readers about the root causes of poverty, hunger and exploitation. She goes to the roots of the social realities to explore the economic and social structure and its impact on the human mind. She gives description in order to probe into human psyche than to allure the readers with the superficial observations. When Ravi leaves his village, Markandaya says,

The village life sickened him, that life; the misery and the squalor, the ailing babies who cried all night long. The way one was always poor and everyone knew was always poor too, the desire, the constant nibbling desire to have a second helping of food, a cup of coffee every morning, a shirt without holes, a shawl made of pure wool to keep out the cold of the monsoon dawn; and to know that one never would.

They always knew: knew that things would never be any better, they were lucky to stand still, for the only other way was downward. It was this knowing the worst, the hopelessness of it, plus the way people accepted their lot and even thanked God it was no worse - thanked God! - that sickened him... so he had got out, the very first moment he could, before he too got stuck like them, like flies on fly paper (P.49)

After presenting the grim picture of poverty, hunger and exploitation in the countryside through *Nectar in a Sieve* Markandaya wrote *A Handful of Rice* to show that the picture is not much different in the urban India. *A Handful of Rice* is a lesson for the youth who blindly rush to the cities to earn their living. She shows that if there is nothing to offer to the young men in the villages, even the cities too have nothing in their store for them. The peasants, with their meager education get trapped into the urban evils. Those, who succumb to the evil practices like that of Damodar, do get name, fame and fortune but not a family life. On the contrary, those like the protagonist Ravi who stick to honesty do get an average, though not happy, family life but do not get name, fame and money. Despite Ravi's attempts to work hard by achieving the skills

of his father-in-law, due to the lack of funds and a cutthroat competition in business on the account of the advent of the machinery and new trends in business do not allow him to stand in it. Rochelle Almeida in *Originality and Imitation*, says,

Though Ravi struggles to make two ends meet, circumstances beyond his control continually deter him : the birth of children he can ill-afford, the competition offered by skilled workers with a larger investment capital, the parasitic demands made on him by idle members of his family and society's callousness towards his plight Ravi differs radically from Rukmani in his reaction to poverty. While Rukmani is fermented, she remains calm and self-possessed throughout, Ravi's degradation and state of want provoke him to contemplate violence (Almeida 114)

In the climax of the novel Kamala Markandaya takes her protagonist to the highest fatal moment of his life. Ravi joins the mob to get rice or grain, but coming back to his conscience, later, clearly shows that though poverty makes him lose his temper for the time being his conscience remains intact. Though most of the poor lose their grim battle against poverty they do not lose their conscience.

Markandaya makes the readers aware of the exploitation of the labourers but she does not give mere superficial description. She peeps deep into the human psyche. A. K. Srinivas Rao in *The Novels of Kamala Markandaya – A Study*, remarks:

Markandaya is not content with mere fatalistic poetic explanations of human misery; nor is she satisfied with summary of the superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country (Rao 226).

Unlike most of the social novelists who hold the rich largely responsible for the exploitation of the poor which results in poverty and hunger, Markandaya in her novels blames more the vagaries of nature and the entire social structure than merely the rich for the declining conditions

of the poor. It is the natural social condition in which her characters are born, that is responsible for their destiny. Though it appears that she probably wants to show that the dreams of the poor are simply the illusions which will never turn into reality in the present social structure, it is actually her intention to value morality more than money. Ravi's aspiration for a better future represents every average rural youth who has rosy ideas about the city life. However it is a point worth considering that she wants to show that such ambitions can never turn into reality by following the unfair means in life and it is not necessary to be immoral to change one's own destiny. Markandaya seems to reveal the truth that there is no place for immorality for the eradication of poverty, hunger and exploitation from the society.

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