



THEMATIC CONCERNS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NOVEL *A HANDFUL OF RICE*

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ABSTRACT

A Handful of Rice is a representative novel published in 1966. The theme of poverty and hunger in an apathetic and ruthless society is the thematic concern of this novel. Kamala Markandaya portrays the picture of Indian society, both rural and urban, with absolute skill in this novel. She tries to draw it with a disobedient voice of Ravi, a protagonist of the novel. Markandaya's basic intention is "to awaken the polite society to the rural problems" (Nicholson 120). The novel is a tragic portrayal of an impractical youth, Ravi. Markandaya tried to explore the psychological effects on Ravi, who becomes the sufferer of industrial changes. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's fight with hunger. The hero of *A Handful of Rice* is a object of hunger and anger, both of which makes his life a long effort.

Keywords: Economics, exploitation, accommodation, incandescent, vision, desperation, ambition, aquare meals.

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya tries to draw it with a disobedient voice of Ravi. The novel is a tragic portrayal of an impractical youth, Ravi. Markandaya tried to explore the psychological effects on Ravi, who becomes the sufferer of industrial changes. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's fight with hunger. The hero of *A Handful of Rice* is a object of hunger and anger, both of which makes his life a long effort. This novel seems to be a sequel to *Nectar in a Sieve*. *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. Every character of the novel fights to get a handful of rice. The novel begins and ends with the

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protagonist's fight with poverty and hunger. The story moves around Ravi, who comes to the city to earn. Ravi runs away from the village because of poverty. Poverty and hunger follow him like shadows. Ravi who comes with the dream of a bright future fails to face the realities of the urban life. He does not get a accommodation 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 former. "It held out before them like an incandescent carrot. The hope that one day, some day, there would be something".

The characters of Kamala Markandaya shows great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities. The novels of Kamala Markandaya do not end in a note of desolation. A ray of light shines through human suffering. The negative aspects of life lead to a positive vision. All the characters in the novels experience troubles in life. But they rise above their desperation successfully because of their ambition. The novelist seems to be questioning the moral values which cannot provide two square meals to a family in spite of their hard labour.

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most prominent and globally known post-independence Indo-Anglian novelists. Her first novel *Nectar in a sieve*, she has proved herself as a creator of tremendously readable novels. It may not be wrong to declare that the novelist is an individual as well as a part and parcel of the society. Kamala Markandaya sailed for England in 1948 at the age of twenty four, uprooting herself from the soil of her origin. She married an Englishman-Taylor and has settled down in England with her English husband and daughter. She makes random trips to India. Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel, *A Handful of Rice*, represents her real world. It reveals an Indians change from the rural society deeply fixed in tradition to the machine-based money-oriented urban society

A Handful of Rice is a well told story of an sensitive and moral experience. It has for its central character a male figure and an well-informed point of view. Kamala Markandaya may accept and understand with this social environment or may rebel against it, but its picture is bound to be seen there. She does not give any solution as a moral novelist does, but only tries to perform a social problem in the style of a social realist. Her greatest advantage is her language, words and expressions. *A Handful of Rice* certainly makes an enjoyable reading. The picture of a joint family with its many psychological stresses and strains is neatly drawn. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's fight with hunger. *A Handful of Rice* begins and ends with the hero's fight to secure food. with the little money he has, Ravi drinks in order to forget his sorrow.

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Kamala Markandaya portrays the picture of Indian society, both rural and urban, with absolute skill in this novel. She tries to draw it with a disobedient voice of Ravi, a protagonist of the novel. Markandaya's basic intention is "to awaken the polite society to the rural problems" (Nicholson 120). The novel is a tragic portrayal of an impractical youth, Ravi. Markandaya tried to explore the psychological effects on Ravi, who becomes the sufferer of industrial changes. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's fight with hunger. The hero of *A Handful of Rice* is a object of hunger and anger, both of which makes his life a long effort

Quest for identity comprises the most outstanding theme of Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice*. The novel published in 1966 as the fifth novel of Kamala Markandaya dramatizes the sociology of India by awakening the respectful society to the difficulty of the rural people. Ravi, the protagonist of the novel, is struggling for identity throughout the novel. Ravi would like to live to breathe freely, a society to provide him a living independently. He struggles for a place in the society, but socio economic burdens push him back to his destiny. Ravi, like several innocent village youths, has drifted to the city in the hope that he would thereby escape hunger and death and live an respectable and peaceful life in the city.

Ravi hopes to get himself decent way of life in the city where he is as 'outsider' without caste, in a no man's land between coolie and clerk' (Harrex 1971:74). As village gave him hunger, the city has also nothing to offer people like Ravi. K.R.S. Iyengar observes about Ravi "caught between the pull of the old tradition that all but strangles him. And the pull of the new immorality that attracts as well as frightens him, Ravi wants to be honest but he understood that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills. As Margaret P. Joseph put it, in this dichotomy between idea and fact, in the impossibility of bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfilment, lies the essence of the tragic in Ravi's life. Ravi comes to us a kind of new tragic hero. R. Sewall says in *The vision of Tragedy*, the new tragic hero does not have a clear cut society and its false values with which the hero has to contend.

Ravi is a human being, his problems, his family, his thoughts and hopes are not very different from ours. This mediation of common humanity to all mankind is one of the important functions of literature. *A Handful of Rice*, which is a much more direct and honest book, and this is the book of a foreigner, carries a much more valid message about India. Ravi's view of life being a jungle gets validated by his experiences. talking of the unemployed youths, Ravi says, "To them too the city was a jungle, he had witnessed their violent assaults upon it too often to doubt that. A man-made jungle, as full of snappers and traps and un kept promises for them as for him and his like. Ravi desires to lead a truly human life, however it is not possible." The human scope in a city like Madras or, for that matter, in any other city in India, produces a decayed and decaying human life. (Singh, 142).



The focus of Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* making use of the representative mode, she sketches powerfully a picture of the post-independent urban Indian society with all its corruption, dehumanisation. It is a society in which the antisocial elements-smugglers, bootleggers, black marketeers, hoarders continue to flourish. Struggle for survival of the poor in a society split by noticeable variations seems to be an important theme in Kamala Markandaya's novels. Life in a city like Madras offers the impression of a jungle. The writer uses the symbol of jungle many times in the novel to reveal the kind and quality of life the urban India offers. When Ravi is struggling under the heavy misfortunes of poverty he finds himself in this jungle. Kamala Markandaya declares: 'He was alone in the jungle, and in the jungle one fought or died'.

A Handful of Rice reveals the novelist's deep concern for the villagers who migrate from their native villages to the cities. *A Handful of Rice* deals mainly with the theme of hunger and the anger of the hero Ravi. In *A Handful of Rice* the scene shifts from the paddy fields of an Indian village to the expansive city. The characters of Kamala Markandaya appear through the story of Ravi, the novelist highlights the problems of the city to the struggle for survival. She stresses the theme of urban poverty. Though urban or rural, the problem faced by the poor is common. The novel is a realistic study of the problems in the city. The cities have become unsafe to live and existence has become difficult. In a city the human values are almost dead. Ravi is an example to show how man can bend and become slowly changed in his struggle for a handful of rice.

The novelist also been pointed out throughout the novel, that the new generation would have to absorb some qualities of the old generation if it has to be successful in life. The new generation has ideas, ambitions, dreams and a capacity to do hard work but it lacks patience and humanity. Apu symbolizes the passing away of the old generation with its characters of hard work and humanity. Nalini symbolizes the intelligent of life, a clean, healthy and traditional life. She expects 'sweet life' but demands hard and honest worker.

It is difficult to understand the dimensions of Ravi's needs and ambitions. He is very sensitive and wants to reach the status. He is anxious when he finds the corrupt ways in which money has been acquired. He is disappointed when he is underpaid for his labour of stitching clothes. He is frustrated to see the rich and the poor. He is sorry to feel the pathetic conditions of the poor like himself. He loves values which he got in his village and whenever he recalls it in Madras he feels weak and pathetic. Ravi is always in favour of meaningful life as there is a need of "Life force" in him 'that life could be sweet, that it was meant to be sweet, that if it was not it should be made so'. City life is a struggle for failure of culture and civilization here. He can not become part of such a civilization.



The characters of Kamala Markandaya shows great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities. The novels of Kamala Markandaya do not end in a note of desolation. A ray of light shines through human suffering. The negative aspects of life lead to a positive vision. All the characters in the novels experience troubles in life. But they rise above their desperation successfully because of their ambition. The novelist seems to be questioning the moral values which cannot provide two square meals to a family in spite of their hard labour.

To quote prof.K.VekataReddy: "it is this struggle in Ravi's conscience that constitutes the kernel of the novel. His active conscience has to choose between penurious respectability and affluent disrespectability. He wants to be honest but, at the same time, he realised that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills". The novelist makes it clear that Ravi "had no sense of moral outrage, no feeling of inner damage, or damage to some abstract standard that Nalini seemed to hold and which the elders of his village had been so fond of brandishing at him and his friends".

Ramesh K. Srivastava comments that unlike Nathan in *Nectar in a sieve*, Ravi 'shunger' does not arouse our sympathy as the young man becomes associated with the people who have money for intoxication but not for food....Besides, the real hungry person is not choosy as Ravi appears to be when he tells Damoder, 'All I want is a meal-a nice, home cooked meal, not bazaar muck'."

Ravi refuses to play the role of Apu's wish. He is always after human values. He is not willing to adopt the character of Apu. He is not in favour of submission to ignominious way of life. This integrity of his self ultimately bring about his alienation. In depicting alienation and death in his character of Ravi, Markandaya shows her universal sympathy for those who suffer. The moral dilemma of Ravi is depicted very brightly. Ravi makes a choice between two worlds one dead and the other to see the light of day. He tells Apu, the tailor, "I'm starving ...I'm hungry ,I want a meal." Apu's wife hits him with all her force for breaking in like a ruffian, and blood drips from his face. "I was hungry", he explains. Poverty had made him leave his "decency. Ravi wonders when he had been "decent" for the last time. He works under Damoder for something making money through illegal activities. But while Damoder prospers in becoming a rich man, Ravi fails because he has "a soft conscience" and therefore he leftovers a poor "angry man" even at the end of the novel. The book is the progress of a gather in the city but without much success.

The language takes the theme of hunger through the repeat of key words and imagery. The title itself with the key words 'rice' is symbolic of the theme. The word 'rice' recurs like a



theme throughout the novel. KamalaMarkandaya's use of language in *A Handful of Rice* is the thinness of imagery compared to her other novels. Among the few images used here image of the jungle is most dominant. The modern city is "a man made jungle...full of snares and traps. Ravi is fighting to make an honest living in the city, compared to the creatures who have to fight for existence in the jungle. Damoder is "a cat" prowling in the city by night. Ravi carries tailored clothes to various houses like a human "donkey". People swan like 'ants'. Ravi's head swings like a 'shoal of fish'. Jayamma observes like an 'eagle'. people who touch are called 'cattle'. At different times Ravi calls mother in law 'abitch', 'asow', 'an old cow', and 'a nanny goat'. The nature of the animal imagery stresses the overall pessimism implied in the image of the jungle.

A Handful of Rice :

This novel seems to be a sequel to *Nectar in a Sieve*. *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. *A Handful of Rice* deals with poverty and hunger. Every character of the novel fights to get a handful of rice. The novel begins and ends with the protagonist's fight with poverty and hunger. The story moves around Ravi, who comes to the city to earn. Ravi, the protagonist of *A Handful of Rice* runs away from the village because of poverty. Poverty and hunger follow him like shadows. Ravi who comes with the dream of a bright future fails to face the realities of the urban life. He does not get a accommodation 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 former. "It held out before them like an incandescent carrot. The hope that one day, some day, there would be something".

Wherever he goes he faces unemployment. The poverty and hunger pushes him into the criminal underworld. He joins the gang of criminals like smugglers, bootleggers and blackmarketeers. Living in poverty, he left his morality. Once heavily drunk he falls into the hands of the Police. To escape he went into the house of a tailor and threatens the old man, Apu, only because of his hunger. 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 makes him accept the apprenticeship in tailoring offered by Apu. He finds in Ravi the heir of his job. He accepts the proposal of Ravi's marriage with his daughter Nalini as he sees in him the support of his old age. It shows his helplessness which is an outcome of his poverty. The marriage offers Ravi a better way of living. For the next few years he forgets the hunger, but not of poverty. He keeps on dreaming about a better life. The large family increasing disturbs Apu's financial status. The



growth of the machine production threat to Apu's tailoring business. Skilled worker like Apu fights hard to survive in the competition. The garment workers are broken by the shop-keepers. When Ravi discovers this exploitation made at the hands of the shop-keepers, he gets uncompromising but the experienced Apu tells him the law of 'the survival of the fittest'. It is better to live than die.

This jungle law troubles Ravi's life. He finds himself all alone in the jungle. This jungle law makes him aware of the reality. After the birth of the twins, the economic condition decreases. 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. Ravi takes charge of Apu's business. The members of the family embarrass him by commenting on his failure to run the house. This time poverty attacks so severely. The debts and dues grow heavier day after day. His failure again takes him to Damodar. This time he goes to follow his path. Damodar suggests him to go back to his village. Damodar makes him realize that urban life is poorer 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." Damodar agrees to give him a job. But again Ravi returns home.

The frustration of the poverty 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. He even rapes his mother-in-law. Nalini who goes to her sister in protest against her husband's immorality, returns home realizing that she cannot stay in her sisters house who herself is living in poverty. Ravi decides to fight against poverty. He gets engrossed in his work to such an extent that he fails to understand his son's illness. He neglects his son's fever Because of doctor's bill. But Raju's condition worsens. He is compelled to call the doctor. He hopes that Nalini will survive. He thinks that to be poor is a sin.

When Raju, his son, who is on the edge of the death asks him questions 'Do you like me? Why do you like me?' Ravi goes speechless. Ravi loves him from his heart. But in his struggle against poverty and hunger he forgets his son. He feels that the society guilty of the murder. He decides to free himself .He decides to give children their rights. He begs Damodar to give him some job. 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. A voice, 'Rice today, rice. Rice today, rice!' makes him aware of the purpose of the march. He hurries with the crowd towards the Government godowns of rice. In the godown the sight of the rice turns him mad. Kannan, the blacksmith makes him aware that it is a crime to rob the godown rice. But Ravi thinks it is his



right to take his 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 rebels 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 of honesty and dishonesty. Finally honesty wins. As in many other of her novels, Markandaya has selected 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 traditions create a realistic picture of the people of the South. 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 money. She throws light on the dilemma of the youth in rural India through Ravi's refusal to accept the craftsmanship like tailoring. Even the village youths like Ravi aim for a white collared job that can give monthly salary. They are ready to accept hunger but are unwilling to use their hands to earn their living.

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