

Research Article

Hunger and Human degradation in kamala Markandaya's a handful of rice

A. Rabeka Mary*

Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram-605 002, Tamil Nadu, India

(Received: August 23, 2021; Revised: June 02, 2022; Accepted: September 11, 2022)

*Corresponding author: A. Rabeka Mary (rabeka1985@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to depict hunger and poverty, exploitation, deprivation, disgrace, anguish, and unemployment via the life of Ravi, the protagonist of Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966). This is a book about Indian society that is realistic. In this work, Kamala Markandaya attempts to address a variety of concerns. *A Handful of Rice* is a practice for teenagers who haphazardly rush to metropolitan places to make a living. The author explains that if there is nothing to give young people in towns, then the urban areas have nothing to offer them as well. With their little training, the employees become entangled in the urban shadows of malice. Individuals who surrender to sly techniques such as Damodar's get fame, recognition, and riches, but not a family life. Those who keep to trustworthiness, like the primary protagonist Ravi, obtain a regular, if not cheery, family life, but not reputation, distinction, or money, contrary to popular faith. Kamala Markandaya brings her hero to the most incredible fatal picture of his life near the end of the narrative. Despite the fact that the great majority of the impoverished lose their hopeless battle against poverty, they retain their inner voice. The novel's subsequent line is incredibly heartfelt and might be considered at its pinnacle.

Key words: Deprivation, Torture, Sly, Humiliation, Preoccupation, Survival.

INTRODUCTION

The major goal of the article is to depict modern India as a result of many political, social, intellectual, and cultural transformations. Markandaya's significant attention with shifting Indian societal standards is revealed in the work. The theme of Hunger and human Degradation are primary in this novel: from this follow subsidiary themes such as the theme of alienation, the theme of subjugation of women. Themes expressed in this story are not stereotypes; rather, they are unique. Ravi, the protagonist, gets caught in the maelstrom of change from traditional to contemporary society, and he fights for survival from beginning to conclusion.

In *A Handful of Rice* the novelist depicts both rural and urban Indian society in its true colors (Markandaya, 2008). The novel successfully deals with the problem of exodus of rural population to the city. Poverty compels the villagers to leave the villages and to settle down in the cities. Ravi the protagonist of the novel goes to the city in search of some employment.

Employment and accommodation are the two great problems faced by the people living in Indian cities. Ravi finds that the city is full of graduates who are wandering in search of job. The problem of accommodation is beautifully shown through Apu's house. Apu has small house many have to share the same room. Even the newly married couple has no privacy.

The tradition of joint family is quite old in Indian society. It has both merits and demerits. Sometimes such families are prosperous, but sometimes the economic condition of the joint families is very critical, because there are many dependents in

the family. In Apu's house there is lot of family members and the earning members are only two. Besides, the problem of generation gap, traditions and superstitious, desire for a boy, the description of street girls and petty criminals etc. present the true picture of Indian society before us.

Hunger and starvation are natural outcomes of poverty. People begging for a small amount of rice, flour, or other basic items are commonplace in daily life. The protagonist stands in front of us at the start of the story, and he is famished. Upon arriving at Apu's home, he says, "I'M HUNGRY, I WANT A MEAL. I'M STARVING". Damodar, a friend of Ravi, has a "lean and curled inward" stomach. He only wants to eat. For the families of Ravi and Apu, fruits are uncommon. Both in the city and the village, we might see "a cluster of people around the ice-fruit stand, mostly children without the money to buy, who stand transfixed like small worshippers in front the row of colored syrup bottles (5)".

Kamala Markandaya's novels explore different facets of contemporary India. Each has a moral concern at its core. Her focus is on the reality of how human experience and human behaviour are affected by external forces, nature, political divisions, industrialization, and gender roles or cross cultural communication. The novelist is the first and foremost an individual with a personal vision. In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya paints the picture of both rural and urban Indian society with consummate skill.

The title of the novel suggests that it is about hunger and therefore a handful of rice is needed to quench the hunger of the protagonist who dies not to get square meal a day. A hungry man knows no law. Ravi debases himself by trying

to face the world through questionable means. Each day is a trying day. Despite his sense of morality he fails to control himself and allows the things to drift.

A Handful of Rice is an answer as to why the villagers leave the village and what happens to them when they come to the city. The reason why they leave the village is clear; to escape the endless cycle of poverty and hand to mouth existence, thrown between matures 'storms and the landlords' threats (Joshi, 2007).

The main character Ravi in *A Handful of Rice*, along with his brothers, is schooled by their father. He finds it extremely difficult to find employment in the metropolis as a result of his inadequate primary education. Ravi understands that,

The city was full of graduates – the colleges turned them out in their thousands each year – looking for employment, so what chance had he, with his meagre elementary – school learning? His father had been proud of this learning, had insisted on it as a key to the power of earning which was the broad base of a man's pride, had taken his whip to his whimpering sons to drive them to it. But he had been wrong. The key opened no doors: it closed them, for his education did not allow Ravi to compete against the gaunt, shabby – genteel young graduates who hung around the streets, while it had taken from him the ability to work with his hands except in an amateur capacity. (27-28).

In Indian society the race for jobs in the city is increasing day by day. The result is unemployment. Ravi finds in the city that unemployment is mounting up day after day. From the very beginning of the novel, Ravi opposed the world of Damodar who had experienced the "passport to a world shot with glitter and excitement; a world that revived the incandescent glow the city had once kindled" (28). Ravi seeks the help of Damodar to win Apu's favour. Damodar advised him to steal some cloth material from a warehouse which Ravi does unwillingly. Soon Ravi gets closer to Apu's family Nalini was allowed to go with Ravi to the slat. One day he suggested going to the cinema, Jayamma accepts his suggestion and goes to the cinema with Ravi and Nalini.

Ravi also writes to his father to come to the city to discuss about his marriage with the parents of Nalini. Ram, Ravi's father is typical village man comes to the city after selling his land for the negotiation of his son's marriage. Ram and Apu talked about the marriage proposal and in no time reach an agreement "the details of the marriage were quietly settled Nalini would bring her husband no dowry: on the other hand, Ravi was being paid during apprenticeship" (54).

Ravi is married to Nalini and starts leading a decent life. He feels that he has got a safe foothold in the society. Social injustice is not tolerated by Ravi. He is really startled when he faces social injustice and exploitation by the rich. He was unable to tolerate the inequality shown to the honest, industrious and craftsman like Apu. He didn't like the idea that the poor are only to suffer and the rich to govern them.

He notices the economic stability of the rich which makes them to use that commanding tone. Ravi is totally irritated and depressed when he realizes the truth that a jacket that he stitches is sold for one hundred and twenty five rupees while he receives only eighty rupees for a dozen jackets.

Unemployment is one of the burning problems of our country. When Ravi comes to the city and is aware with the hard realities of the city 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 meager elementary school learning?" The present day Indian society has two dimensions – rural and urban. It is predominantly rural and agricultural with here and there urban centers. Life in both villages and towns and cities for most people is a long misery. Hunger, degradation and starvation hem them in from all sides, leaving hardly any escape route.

Moreover, it elucidates in detail that hunger and poverty have psychological effect on human relations. Ravi, the protagonist of the novel comes to the city with a dream but he is totally disappointed and becomes a prey to the underworld in the city. Though the city, like the village has nothing to offer poor people like Ravi. Young men leave the village, thinking that it was not right for them to live there and with a feeling that it would be utterly wrong for their children to continue living in villages which had nothing but poverty.

There is a parting of ways between Ravi and Damodar. Damodar accepts the challenge of the jungle – life and plays the game jungle animals play for their survival – the strong devouring the weak. Damodar once tells Ravi: "There's enough wealth going around, you have to help yourself to it, that's all" (116). And one helps oneself to as much wealth as one can if only one becomes a jungle animal. When Ravi asks him what he should do to get rich, Damodar's candid and final reply is "What I do if you want what I've got? There is no other way really, as things are. Grab or go under" (117).

Ravi, though he had been in the company of Damodar for a time and had been initiated into the philosophy of jungle life, opts for a different kind of life. It is not that Ravi hates Damodar. He respects him and is drawn towards him quite often and wants to have the comforts and luxuries that Damodar enjoys. But at the centre of his being he has had a different experience. Kamala Markandaya writes that "Ravi respected him for it. He himself, he knew, would have gone in for rich food, for silk shirts and enamel cuff-links: yet his upbringing had taught him to focus inward, upon the constant light within, to see the raging obscenities and miseries to their life as essentially external and ephemeral; and for all that he angrily repudiated this teaching, shreds of it obstinately clung," (130). 'I've tried,' said Ravi miserably. 'You know I have. But now my wife—she—she doesn't want me to do anything dishonest, she and her family I mean, they're respectable—' 'Respectable? Dishonest?' Damodar laughed softly. 'What a peasant you are! Tell me, those people up in the posh houses

you and your old man go to, are they respectable?' In his naivety Ravi replies: 'Of course they are!' 'They've become respectable,' said Damodar. 'That's what money does for you. And honest: do you think they are honest?' (134).

Ravi had a different awareness of life's meaning and value. His belief was "that life could be sweet, that it was meant to be sweet and that if it was not it should be made so" (149). It was this belief that made him get out, the very first moment he could, from the slowly decaying human existence to which most people in villages are condemned. In the city life offers anything only to those who can fight and grab like ferocious animals in the jungle. Ravi is initiated into this kind of life immediately after he comes to the city. But there is something truly human in terms of feeling and values that make him seek another kind of existence.

Damodar as stated earlier chooses the life of a ferocious jungle animal for which it is either to kill and grab, or get killed. Damodar's philosophy or values prove a success. The new house that he builds for himself is a living monument of his success. Kamala Markandaya describes it thus:

It stood on the site of a dozen tenements, which Damodar had bought and torn down, scattering the dazed inmates without qualm. Built to dominate, several stories higher than any of its neighbors, with a wide frontage on to the teeming street, the edifice had been planned as a bold salute to success; and the price per square foot of the land on which it stood mocked that of snob building in the classy areas (250).

Ravi wavers and wavers. It is only when his beloved son dies of meningitis in the absence of proper medical aid and when the remaining members of the family are driven to the very extremity of despair that he goes to Damodar to do any dirty job that Damodar might ask him to do. Damodar tells him that "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, terminates?" (274). He terminates into poverty and degradation have eaten into the very vitals of Ravi's being so that now he is hollow inside. Ravi gets so degraded that he indulges incestuous sexual act with his own mother-in-law.

A Handful of Rice is a novel which pays importance to kin bonds and human relationship. The novel is the continuation of the novelist's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. *A Handful of Rice* also deals with the struggle for survival at the physical, moral and psychological levels. The novelist wants to make clear that the economic stress disrupts the social and filial bonds. Ravi is tempted by the riches of the cities. But he soon discovers that like the village cities too have nothing to offer to the poor. Ravi, to earn his livelihood becomes a part of the underworld of smugglers and bottle egggers. Thus the hero of the novel has a first-hand encounter with hunger want and deprivation. Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* quoted by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book *Indian Writing in English* states that:

In Malamud's novel, a stray Christian waif, who comes to steal from a Jewish shop, stays on to help the

shop-owner and win the love of the daughter? He is nagged by his mother-in-law and tortured by poverty. But the shop-owner's sudden breakdown makes him indispensable in the house and the shop. An identical situation is contrived in Kamala Markandaya's novel when Ravi breaks into Apu's household. He stays on to become an assistant to the tailor Apu and marries Apu's daughter, Nalini. Apu falls ill and Ravi takes charge of the house and the business. After Apu's death, he takes up Apu's daily struggle to keep his home and hearth alive. But though the story harks back to Malamud, it must be said in fairness to Kamala Markandaya that she completely transforms the atmosphere. It is purely Indian tale, relationship linked to the present Indian economic situation (445).

The novel incorporates balanced, familial bond, which provides one with the strength to bear on slaughters of cruel nature and all-pervading urban atmosphere. It deals with hunger and poverty and its destroying impact on the marital bond that exists between husband and wife, and the filial bond between parent and child. In the novel, Kamala Markandaya is successful in focusing the impact of the diverse contemporary problems of primary ties of human relationships (Singh, 2005).

Parents are the real well wishers of their children. For them, their children's happiness is above anything else. The old father is not at all conscious of being neglected. He feels it his great pleasure when he sees his son, Ravi, settled and happy. He is perfectly happy to see his son so honoured. Financial status plays an important role. Ravi's parents belong to the below poverty level. Their financial status plays an important part in maintaining the solidarity of the filial bonds.

The protagonist exploits his relationship with his father to his own advantage. Ravi does not mind when the old man is neglected at the time of his marriage ceremony. On the other hand he gives more values to his friends Apu and Jayamma who help him financially. Both of them bear the entire expenditure of the marriage ceremony. They play an important place in the wedding ceremony while his old father is neglected.

Apu has been successful in making his family financially sound and therefore he has a successful control over his household. His rich purse supports everyone in his large household and so Apu has power and authority over his family members. Ravi is also aware of it. Apu runs his business nicely and his decisions are honoured by everyone. He holds the household together. But there is a one shortcoming. Apu has no close rapport with his two daughters because he cannot spare his time to satisfy his daughter by hearing their genuine complaints.

Apu is very busy man and has no time to pamper his daughters. He is always submerged in the piles of clothes to be stitched and his daughters also do not complaint about his preoccupation. He does not show the merits of an affectionate father to his daughters. This results in the gap between the father and the daughters. His daughters do not approach him for anything. Nevertheless, when Apu falls sick, his daughter

Nalini feels how she has always been deprived of the loving indulgences of a doting father. Although Nalini respects her father she hardly loves him. As a devoted daughter she pains to see her father lying so sick in the bed. Nalini wishes that her father should soon be well. Her eyes filled with tears, but her tears are more out of respect than from love for him.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book *Indian Writing in English* quotes that "Ravi is not so very unlike us. His problems, his family, his thoughts and hopes are not very different from ours" (447). He, like other sons of the society, has the common feeling for his parents (Iyengar, 1985).

Poverty ultimately leads to hunger and starvation. In the beginning of the novel he is seen as hungry and is longing for a meal. He is on the edge of starvation. Fruits become rarity for Ravi and Apu's family. It is an old proverb that the father corrects the child while the mother comforts the child. This truth is to be found in the case of Ravi and his son Raju. Once Ravi and his wife Nalini are on the beach with their son, who tugs at the loin cloth of the pattani seller. The tray tilts scattering a handful of pattani. Ravi is beyond himself with rage and beats his son mercilessly, but the mother is unhappy to see him so cruelly beaten by his father. She comes to Raju's rescue. But it is useless because Ravi could not be stopped. He keeps beating the child and sometimes his blows fall on Nalini; who had intervened. The innocent wife is annoyed with her husband and she walks ahead with her son to express her resentment. She goes in front and her head seems high and stiff. This incident reminds the incident in R. K. Narayan's novel, *The Dark Room*. Like Nalini its Savitri also intervenes between the father and the son is beaten for no fault of hers.

The novel exhibits Kamala Markandaya's skilful handling of the socio-economic colour. The remarkable feature of the novel is that it deals with hunger, degradation and despair. The novel depicts a real and vivid portrayal of Indian society. Most of the people in Indian village live in poverty which makes them to leave their village and settle down in the city. In general the villagers are the victims of poverty. After Apu's death Ravi has to sell many things from the house just to satisfy

his and his families hunger. It is to satisfy his hunger that he leaves his village, comes to the city and indulges himself in petty criminal activities and afterwards works very hard in Apu's house first as his assistance and later his successor. But even then he is unable to live a better life.

Before India gained its freedom, Kamala Markandaya was deeply concerned with the issues facing rural areas. The most agonising and repulsive of many illnesses were hunger and the accompanying deterioration of humankind. Before India gained its independence, these issues dominated its social life. In the guise of the East-West Confrontation, she had addressed a number of issues pertaining to many elements of India, such as social, political, national, and international.

Nearly all of her novels made mention of human degradation. Her books, which she infused with her societal concerns, were where her sad vision found its finest expression. She took this action for the benefit of advancing and bettering humankind. According to Joseph (1980), "Kamala Markandaya's novels are formed by the tragic vision that finds in current reality a fruitful seed-bed for conflict" in his book, *Kamala Markandaya* (211). She addressed things realistically based on her experiences, unlike other Indian-English novelists. In reality, people degraded as a result of hunger and malnutrition.

REFERENCES

- Markandaya, K. (2008). *A Handful of Rice*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Random House.
- Iyengar, K. R. S. (1985). *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers.
- Joshi, L.M., "Kamala Markandaya's (2007), *A Handful of Rice: A Critical Appraisal*". Indian English Fiction. Ed. K.A. Agrawal. Jaipur: Book Enclave.
- Joseph, M. P. (1980). *Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi, India: Arnold Heinemann.
- Singh, N. K. (2005). "Dilecties of Society and Self in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*". *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. Ed. Dr. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.