

# **Appetite Vs Integrity in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* is considered to be one of the most distinguished novels with the focus on poverty and unemployment. Markandaya's perception and ideology in the novel begins and ends with the protagonist's struggle with poverty and hunger. The novel deals with the conflict of tradition and modernity and an awareness of both the traditional value and the new trends of materialistic western culture. As a novelist, she is deeply conscious of the socio-economic realities, as they have an effect on the lives of Indian people and their depression and mortification. Her novel focused on the theme of family in various aspects. The protagonist Ravi Shankar moves from village to Madras and the life there turns to be a miserable one. Hunger finds the central role in the novel; this is further reinforced by the frequent use of the word 'rice.' Ravi sees city as a jungle and people with animal conscience each crookedly preying upon the other. Food is considered to be one of the basic needs of human being but Ravi struggles for it. Ravi lives for human lives. The main focus of the paper is to show how hunger affects the moral values of Ravi and his struggle to shift from sub-human underworld to the human world of emotions and conscience. It spotlights the problems of the city in relation to the struggle for survival and accommodation in the urban life. Poverty and hunger follow him (Ravi) like shadows in every aspects of life.

**Keywords:** poverty, hunger, rice, struggle, morality.

In Indian English literature Kamala Markandaya is a remarkable and leading literary figure. She had firsthand knowledge of India as well as England. She is an expatriate writer, connected with homeland through her writing. She is one of the most outstanding novelist and journalist. She brings to light the complications of post-colonial and traditional Indian social hierarchy in her works. Her characters are depicted with significant and realistic attributes of life. She has given various dimensions with innovative thoughts in the Indian literature. She is the first literary figure who had depicted the pain of an immigrant through her writing. Kamala Markandaya is one of the crispest and most warming persons of Indian writers and was awarded the National Association of Independent School Award (USA) in 1967 and the Asian prize in 1974.

Among many ailments, hunger and degradation were the most important problems and this was the major social concern of India before independence. She depicted social problems which are closely related to the human life and with moving realism she depicted the tragic plight of Indian society. The strength of Kamala Markandaya as a novelist comes from sensitive creation of individual characters and situations which are simultaneously representative of a large collective. S. Krishnaswamy writes about Kamala Markandaya as, “she however is not a theorist to dwell upon caste and class problem only. Her concerns being predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer a savage tale of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian Man and Woman, is subject too.”

At the root of the acts of immorality there is poverty. Markandaya wants to project that not all choose the immoral path to overcome their poverty. The novel *A Handful of Rice* begins and ends with the protagonist Ravi's struggle with poverty and hunger. Every character of the novel struggles to get a handful of rice. The novel seems to be set in the late fifties, the period of Independent India, trying to achieve economic stability. The economic status of the country had a great impact on the people's lives and this was clearly projected in the novel.

The novel begins with the life of Ravi Shankar. Ravi tries to flee up from his village life into the city. He is son of a poor peasant. He is tired of hunger and starvation. To get free from his rural poverty and hunger he joins the general exodus to the city Madras. He never gets any jobs, floating through different streets and shops. Even he did not get shelter in the city. The another young man Damodar, who suggest about the profits of underworld to Ravi and stimulate

his willingness to earn money in an illegal way. He joins with the local petty criminal. Then Ravi becomes a component of underworld strugglers and bootleggers. On that night Ravi is chased by a policeman. In the panic sense he tries to escape from the cop, he slips into the house of Apu, an old tailor. Ravi threatens Apu and his wife Jayamma. The next morning Jayamma gave Ravi severe hurting for his threatening without knowing the painful experience of his hunger. Suddenly she stopped her beating by seeing the blood bleeding from Ravi's head. It was wounded by the Policeman. Apu and Jayamma felt intense painful emotion for his wounds. They give him compassion. Ravi confesses for his sin committed at last night. Jayamma feeds him and lets him to go.

Thangam – Apu's elder daughter is married and lived in father's house with her children. In order to obey the words of Damodar, Ravi goes to tailor's house in a day time and offers to put the bars, in its place in the window he had broken. Jayamma is very parsimonious. She gave him a five rupee note to bring new bar. Ravi gets the bar from kannan, the blacksmith with him he has worked. He bought the bar in free of cost and returns the money to Jayamma. Apu has been looking for a son and after seeing Ravi he felt that Ravi would be apt to his family situation ad so Apu adopted him as a son.

Ravi joined as an apprentice. Unfortunately Ravi falls in love with Nalini, the younger daughter of Apu. He shows the desires to marry her. He goes to fair and even to the film with her. Before the marriage he wants to be highly regarded person. He wants to shun the bad company of Damodar. He does not receive any offering from her father for his marriage. Ravi after marrying Nalini has the responsibility of taking care of Apu's family and the tailor shop. Apu had been affected by paralysis and his savings and money were stolen by Puttana. In this frustration Apu died. Now, Ravi is the only person to take all the responsibilities in Apu's house, then come the struggles. He is not a skillful tailor so his business is dull. Ravi felt astonished to see his stitched clothes are in high prices at the fashionable shops. But he did not gain more profit.

.....one of their coats. It did not look the same hex; it had Become vastly richer, more sumptuous, since leaving his hands- he had to look twice to make sure it was the same. But there was no doubt about it.... Pleasure filled him...

until his eyes travelled down the straw hand- span waist where the price tag was Rs. 125/-.... Ravi was stunned (P69).

Due to this difficult situation he cannot manage his family properly. Thangam already left Apu's house to live with her husband. Ravi becomes a man of fidgety nature and beats Nalini. Nalini left the house with her son Raju. Nalini later returned home, after that Ravi, Nalini and their son Raju became victims of Poverty. When Nalini pleaded and requested him to call a doctor, Ravi exposed his annoyance. It did not mean Ravi did not have any love and affection to his son. It shows his poverty. Ravi seeks help from Damodar but he refused to help and Raju passed away for lack of medical treatment.

Sometimes, after Raju's death, he wondered if his mind were affected from the erratic way his memory worked, scoring certain Events deeply into his mind, clouding others over (P273).

Ravi leads his life with broken heart. At last, he joined with a mob of young notorious people; again he lost his courage as he was fully broken by his son's death. After Ravi's marriage, he leads a tricky life with many problems, which is common to most of the urban Indian population for problem of accommodation.

Ravi is also an overambitious person. On visiting the house of Damodar he wants to earn a lot of money to buy luxurious bed, gold watch and car. "I want more. I want more. I want a bed.... Day beds, night beds, double bed, divans"(75). Damodar raised his status of life by illegal business. Ravi follows the morality in his life, but to give sophisticated life to his wife he follow life of Damodar. Ravi is in a tension strategy, because the value of Damodar's and Nalini's tradition was totally different; both characters reveal the morality and immortality. The novel was based on the conflict of dilemma of conscience; Ravi started behaving with his wife Nalini in a very cruel manner. He thought that poverty and hunger brought all sorts of sufferings to him including the disintegration of his family.

The novel clearly shows that Kamala Markandaya has dealt with the sufferings of the rural community, miseries of the orphan society, poverty and hunger, clash between materialism and spiritualism, east – west encounter, conflict between tradition and modernity. Markandaya does not falsify the picture of Ravi's problems by making easy solutions, but there

is always hope. The imperfection of the individual is shown in the strange development of Ravi's regression. In comparison to other works of Kamala Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice* highlights the concepts of rural India, its sufferings, its traditions; it does not remain completely aloof from the cultural values. The gutters life of the city blessed by the modernization is symbolized by the city of Madras. In fact, Damodar is a product of the west, and Ravi's interaction with Damodar is the East-West encounter in the novel.

The main character Ravi is tempted by the riches of the cities, have nothing to offer the poor. In a bid to earn his livelihood, he becomes a part of the underworld. Thus the hero of the novel has first dealt with the hunger, want and deprivation. Even tannery was good because it was reflection of modern mechanical revolution. The author's description is about the hunger people to show their needs and sufferings in the day to day life.

The cost of shelters and food are too high that he could not sustain it. The character Ravi felt lot of scarcity and poverty and struggles a lot to get a handful of rice. Ravi's perception of city life totally shows the difference between his fantasy and reality. To overcome his poverty and scarcity he decided to lead a life in city. But he faced more poverty, scarcity and mental illness. Ravi gives value to morality in rural as well as urban. But in the city life his situation and his poverty leads him to another aspect of life. The cruelty of poverty and starvation made Ravi to become immoral in the city. Kamala Markandaya justified the title by making her readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation by the character in her novels and their realization. *A Handful of Rice* deals with urban economics. However the novel deals with the poverty, hunger and exploitation in the ruthless society. The title of the novel is evocative of poverty and hunger. Every character in the novel struggles to get a handful of rice in their daily routine.

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