

Rural-to-Urban Migration and Socioeconomic Disparities in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*

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Abstract

This paper explores Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* as a profound literary examination of economic struggle, social transformation, and moral resilience in postcolonial India. Through the character of Ravi, the novel dramatizes the tensions between rural and urban survival, highlighting the challenges of poverty, injustice, and societal expectations. The analysis foregrounds Ravi's internal conflict and moral dilemmas, situating his journey within broader themes of migration, family obligations, and the pursuit of dignity. By tracing Ravi's evolution from desperation to self-assertion, the study underscores the complex interplay between survival instincts and ethical choices. Ultimately, Markandaya's narrative offers a nuanced critique of socioeconomic disparities and illuminates the tragic consequences of systemic inequities, while simultaneously affirming the resilience of the human spirit.

Keywords: Kamala Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice*, Poverty and resilience, Rural-to-urban migration, Socioeconomic disparities, Postcolonial Indian literature

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya occupies a significant place in postcolonial Indian literature, renowned for her sensitive portrayals of social realities and the struggles of marginalized communities. Her novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966) presents a compelling narrative of economic hardship, rural-to-urban migration, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals navigating systemic inequities. Through the character of Ravi, Markandaya dramatizes the precarious balance between survival instincts and ethical choices, situating personal struggles within broader socioeconomic transformations in India.

While existing scholarship has examined Markandaya's engagement with poverty and resilience, much of the critical discourse has focused on her earlier works such as *Nectar in a Sieve*. Comparatively, *A Handful of Rice* has received less sustained attention, despite its

nuanced exploration of urban survival and the psychological toll of poverty. This paper seeks to address this gap by analysing the novel's depiction of Ravi's journey as emblematic of the underprivileged class's pursuit of dignity amid structural injustice.

The objective of this study is to highlight how Markandaya intertwines themes of economic struggle, social transformation, and moral resilience to critique socioeconomic disparities in postcolonial India. By foregrounding Ravi's internal conflict and tragic trajectory, the paper underscores the novel's relevance to contemporary debates on migration, inequality, and ethical agency. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Markandaya's literary vision and her enduring commentary on the human condition.

Literary Review

Kamala Markandaya has been widely recognized as one of the foremost voices in postcolonial Indian literature, particularly for her exploration of poverty, resilience, and the struggles of marginalized communities. Her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* has received extensive scholarly attention for its portrayal of rural hardship and female endurance. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee have emphasized Markandaya's ability to blend social realism with humanistic concerns, situating her works within the broader tradition of Indian English fiction.

In contrast, *A Handful of Rice* has attracted comparatively less critical engagement, though scholars note its unique focus on urban survival and the psychological toll of poverty. Studies by literary commentators highlight the novel's thematic concern with migration, family obligations, and the moral dilemmas faced by the underprivileged. The symbolism of rice, often interpreted as both sustenance and struggle, has been discussed as central to the narrative's critique of socioeconomic disparities.

This review suggests that while Markandaya's earlier works have dominated critical discourse, *A Handful of Rice* deserves greater scholarly attention for its nuanced portrayal of urban poverty and ethical conflict. By foregrounding Ravi's journey, the novel extends Markandaya's literary vision beyond rural settings, offering a broader commentary on the complexities of survival in postcolonial India

*A Handful of Rice*¹ (1966), Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel, not only projects tangible economic problems but also the obscure intractability invading the characters' inner landscapes and wrecking them in all respects. The author does not fail to accentuate the unpalatable universal truth that rectitude does not always pave the way to prosperity. What is pictured here is the Indian society in transition from a rural to an urban set-up. While the place where the protagonist, Ravishankar abbreviated as Ravi) has spent his early life is not mentioned, the locale of his confrontation with the rich and his emergence as a changed man is specified as in *Possession* and *The Nowhere Man*.

A Handful of Rice is predicated on the economics of survival in an urban society. It is comparable to *Nectar in a Sieve* which centres on rural economics. The focus is on the attempt of Nalini to redeem her errant husband, Ravi, which brings out her extraordinary endurance and capacity for love and it makes for her self-actualisation. These two novels run parallel to each other but with a slight difference as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out

If the outer theme of *Nectar in a Sieve* was rural economics, of the theme *A Handful of Rice* is urban economics. Juxtaposing this novel with Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*. Prema Nandakumar remarks that Ravi runs alongside the Christian wife, Frank Alpine of *The Assistant*. Both Ravi and the Waif, who is portrayed as a fan-favourite antagonist in the Game of Thrones series, are initially determined to commit crimes; however, they unexpectedly surrender themselves and undergo moral transformation after winning the love of Nalini and the Jewish owner's daughter, respectively. The protagonists of these two novels fail to escape the tantrums of their mothers-in-law and have to struggle against dire poverty.

Although the author does not champion the cause of the proletariat overtly as Mulk Raj Anand does in his *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, she undoubtedly brings out the indigence and poverty that devour the very vitals of the rural India. Nor does *A Handful of Rice* deal with the East-West encounter which happens to be a Predominant theme in her early novels but it focuses on the conflict between the haves and the have-nots without failing 'to towards awaken the polite society to the real problems" which the indolent and fatalistic rural populace has been hitherto indifferent. This sense of purpose with which she writes 'endows her novels with a certain representative character that marks them out as a significant entity in the Indo-Anglian fiction

¹ Kamala Markandaya, *A Handful of Rice* (New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books (P) Ltd., 1966) All the subsequent references quoted with page numbers in parentheses are to this edition.

way as all her other novels, *A Handful of Rice* draws however, in the same the 'aesthetic validity from the interlocked polarities of religion and science, possession and empiricism and transcendentalism. renunciation, the extremity of poverty compels Ravi to go out of the village, leaving behind his aged peasant-father, in search of better means of livelihood as Murugan of *Nectar in a Sieve* goes to the town. "The idea, merely mentioned in the first novel is enlarged and given a full-scale elaboration in the latter." But Ravi, like Murugan, does not alienate himself from his kith and kin. Having been hungry for days on end, Ravi's primary aim is to have a handful of rice by hook or by crook. The drama of struggle for survival starts when Ravi attempts to break open a tailor's house (Apu's). Driven by the devil of hunger, Ravi takes to this extreme modus operandi throw asking moral principles to winds. Ravi is disillusioned the evil of poverty that he is eager to escape from, seems to be haunting him even in the city. He is convinced that unless he rises against this devouring menace, he will be nowhere and in no circumstance does he want to compromise with the situation. Ravi's resolve, despite his resorting to violence, suggests his wanting to keep his head above the water although what he has to reckon with is a deluge. Ravi escapes from the pursuing constable and lands at the doorstep of Apu, the tailor. His intense hunger urges Ravi to threaten the inmates, brushing aside their warning. Apu offers him food hoping that the intruder will quit.

'Go away, the voice said. The heaving subsided. Furious mounted strongly in him again. He angers his face close to the grating. thrust

'Listen, ' he said, 'I'm hungry, I want a meal. You let me in, do you hear? I'll give you one minute.

'Go away.' The voice quavered – either an old man or a weak man, a man without men behind him.

He stretched his hands up to the grills and grasped the cross-bar, triumphantly, sweetly conscious of his strength

'One minute, ' he said, 'then I'm coming in and it'll be the worse for you.'

Silence. He tightened his grip and wrenched, and the bar broke, spattering grit on him.

"You, see?"

'All right, all right, I'm coming.' The voice mumbled nervously (pp.6-7).

Ravi's unbearable hunger and the quivering voice of Apu encourage him to take control of the situation. Had Ravi been diffident or hesitant, he would have been driven away from the place. His courage, though boorish, highlights Ravi's awareness of his inbuilt strength to assert himself and achieve his goal. His reaction to the opposition posed by Apu and the success he attains, encourage him to assert himself in the future.

He felt commanding, conscious of dominion: this was what they felt like, the people who said 'Hey, you!', who gave orders and expected you to jump to it, who had money, who had power, who did the pushing around. Well, tonight he would do the pushing

Notwithstanding the relief he gets, Ravi is reluctant to quit the place as it is evident that the inmate is weak and old. However, he is not without apprehension that the police may be alerted covertly. Yet, he curls himself up to sleep giving a warning to Apu 'with concentrated ferocity' (p.8). By now Ravi has weighed his potentiality and is resolved not to give in.

Apu's advice and his wife's indignant reaction ['Behaving like that' (p.12) and a 'decent boy like you!' (p.12)] makes Ravi remorseful. Being homeless and under- educated for a city job, Ravi feels forlorn, before he is befriended by Damodar, a riffraff who introduces Ravi to the nefarious underground activities that fetch huge profits. Ravi familiarises himself with the city life and hopes for a better future and such an approach Bespeaks Ravi's eagerness to establish himself in the city.

Despite being aggressive, Ravi is not without a sympathetic disposition which makes Ravi to make amends. He goes to Apu's house to replace the damaged grill and it is then by the quirk of fate as it were, Ravi happens to see Nalini, Apu's younger daughter. Nalini's charming face compels Ravi to contrive a plan to meet and win her. Ironically, Ravi chooses Nalini though he has quarrelled with her mother. But he is intent upon meeting Nalini, like other young men getting 'to know young girls, within the approving, carefully conducted circle of mutual friends and family relationships' (p.25) and not with any belittlement to himself. Emulating other young men, Ravi too has joined the exodus to the city as the village has little to offer, only to find the city to be no better, 'but it held out before them like an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, someday, there would be something' (pp.25-26). The elementary education he has acquired is found to be of no advantage 'to compete against the gaunt, shabby-genteel young graduates hung around the streets' (p.27) without jobs while it who has deprived him of 'the ability to work with his hands except in an amateur capacity' (p.27). In fact, Ravi is one such young man who decries fatalism and 'has the initiative to fight for proper place in society'. Ravi

uses his knowledge of English and the vernacular coupled with dexterity of hand, quickness of mind and sharpness of eye to fight against the insults to which the rich subject the poor. Finding 'man traps every- where' (p.31) and life to be perilous in every respect, Ravi agrees to be with Damodar, the city lout's accomplice to establish himself in the city and fight boldly with whatever weapons one had. Or go under! (p.198). This attitude in Ravi establishes a typical disposition of a self-actualisers in 'allowing scoundrels to impose on them for a while, 'Now that Ravi has decided to stay in the city, he walks boldly to Apu's doorstep with a roll of cloth procured after going through certain hazards. It is a passport that gains him the first step, which, if rejected, will result in an irretrievable loss sealing his future. This is a clear proof of Ravi's eagerness to prevail upon others:

Ravi is determined to serve Apu to impress him and consolidate his position. The gradual softening of Jayamma and Apu's affability gives him the confidence to enter the trade. Ravi had felt himself being thoughtfully studied, as if the old man was considering whether to absorb him into the busy hive of his industry (p.33). Ravi's self-confidence improves and he discovers that Apu the 'shrivelled up non-entity, whom he had seen by night cowering and cringing before him' (p.33) is the hub of activity in that house. He realises that "where a man's strength and courage alone gave him mastery ... live by jungle law, and then see who survived!! (p.33) and it helps Ravi to achieve self-actualisation. As time passes Ravi's respect for Apu grows for he is the father of Nalini for whom he is prepared to sacrifice everything and cleanse his life.

On that particular morning when Ravi comes seeking some work, an altercation takes place between Ravi and Varma. Ravi's prompt rejoinder is illustrative of his assertiveness: 'Well if it isn't our friend Ravi again,' said Varma facetiously, propping up the wall as usual. 'At least, he said 'I don't get paid for doing nothing.' "What do you mean?' Varma's voice was haughty, that of a householder with entrenched rights addressing a disfranchised quitter. 'I mean I'm not a parasite,' said Ravi explicitly. 'Something of a leech though, aren't you?' Varma was annoyed, but not unduly perturbed. And why should he be, thought Ravi; as a relative his security was established, no family would boot a relative into the street. 'I shall know soon enough if I am, ' for me to be re-joined. 'When it's time go -- I'll go ' (p.35). Although there is no one to hear 'this prickly exchange (p.35), Apu comes to know of it and defends Ravi. True to the relief and belief of Ravi, Apu invites the lad to accompany him on his business visits and Rat obeys unhesitatingly not to lose the opportunity but rite to the occasion. Although Apu is reticent throughout their peregrination, he suddenly enquires of the youngster he still indulged in

hooliganism. Ravi is apologetic for the past incident and assures him of turning a new leaf while accepting the apprenticeship under Apu who is confident of Ravi's success having observed the lad's alacrity. 'I'm willing.' Despite the Ravi managed to sound fervently grateful, come-down, as indeed he would have been but for higher expectations. 'More than willing. Any time you say. Anything you want me to do, I'll do. " 'I've noticed that. I've been watching you. I don't like doing things in a hurry, you know, but I'm getting old begins to feel very much alone when helps him gain confidence one is old ' (p.38). when one Apu is dissatisfied with his household as there is no one who is willing to carry on his trade. But Ravi agrees to do so and joins Apu's ménage with the single objective of coming close to Nalini. Ravi's regular visits to Apu's workshop and his preparedness to be at his beck and call helps him gain work up his way confidence of Jayamma. On one Occasion he offers 'Kola' to Jayamma and Nalini hoping that he will be able to go alone with Nalini to the shop. 'If one goes to the stall, ' he ventured; 'one can drink it really cold. Ice-cold.' Fulling. Of that's riff-raff pushing and 'They hang around there all day long, good- the trouble, said Jayamma. show-for-nothings.' No, no! at this time of day,' he said Ravi earnestly. 'Not seeing her gall case amended hastily, crowded of course, but just now it's quite 'Later it gets empty. " How far is it?! 'Five minutes. Not that.' 'Too far for me in this roiling sun.' Jayamma took up her palmyra-leaf fan and waved it languidly in front of her perspire- face. 'You take the girl ' (p.41). The point is that Ravi's boldness has paid off. Weeks pass during which their being allowed to do such things as visiting a cinema, literally reduces the distance between Ravi and Nalini, though she is chaperoned by Jayamma. On a later occasion Jayamma's invitation to Ravi's so called well-to-do aunt is taken (and rightly too) as a hint for Jayamma's wish 'for a closer relationship' (p.48). Having no mediator to propose 'his claims' (p.48) and impelled by his sixth sense Ravi writes to his father Nalini. making a clear breast of his intentions to marry Elated by his son's plans of settling down in life, without going wayward and estranging himself like hit brothers, Ravi's father, Ram arrives. Gloating over the lad's chances of becoming prosperous, and being satisfied with the status and standing of Apu's family and Nalini's eligibility to become his son's wife, alliance is finalised and the marriage on summated. In this context Ravi's initiative signals his resourceful- ness. It exemplifies Ravi's self-actualising trait. Now that Ravi is the son-in-law of the house, Varma, Pattana and Thangam, Apu's eldest daughter treat him as their equal which elevation, however, does not last long. Even the meagre comforts provided to Ravi immediately after the marriage are withdrawn and he has to sleep on the mat like the other members of the family. Touched to

the quick and having experienced comforts for ten days, Ravi resolves to make life comfortable for him and Nalini. Although Damodar has enlightened him on several practical aspects of life, he prefers not to think of him and his heady ways, to keep up the 'present stance of regained respectability' (p.66). Even Jayamma's dismissed as accolade, which would have been otherwise a scant remark, is accepted wholeheartedly. 'I knew you were a decent boy,' she 'right from the begin- said meaningly, you know ' (p.66).

Ravi's helping hand and his resolve to work his way up encourage Apu to accept even small contracts, which have hitherto been turned down, and help him to prosper. Although the routine of stitching and tacking is found to be tedious and monotonous, Apu's encouragement strengthens Ravi's steadfastness. 'You like it better than you thought you would,' Apu remarked drily one day. 'Didn't think much of being a tailor you oh yes, I could tell from the did uppity airs you gave yourself' (p.67). Ravi's youthful enthusiasm and his awareness of the exploitation of the poor by the rich, determine the price at which the garments made by him and Apu are sold. He is stunned to see the exorbitant prices charged and fabulous profits made by the sellers while they do no work. Apu's reaction to this is dispiriting to Ravi who refuses to believe that 'such a state was unalterable' (p.69): of course, they Apu took it calmly. get. get twenty times what people like us people like That's because they're not us. What sort are they then, devils? Gods?' ' Different, that's all.' like them 'Then the sooner we become the better.' 'Just you try, my lad. Just try and see How far you get!! 'But twenty times as much! Ravi felt like shrieking. The fact stuck in his gullet like an outsize stone, yet here was this old fool apparently able to swallow it whole. 'It is wrong, ' he cried. 'Maybe, but that's the way it is.!' "Then the sooner it's changed the better ' (p.69). (Italics mine) Bracing himself, he feels emboldened to tackle the situation and remembers Damodar's remark about letting himself cowed down by shapeless doubts. Disgust reigns high in Ravi and to get over the stress resulting from the altercation with Apu, Ravi goes out wandering aimlessly. To his consternation and relief, he meets Damodar who pays for their drinks. Damodar's bursting wallet makes Ravi feel apologetic that they had been too good too long in a rotten world' (p.71). His passions simmer. His wallet was fat with ten-rupee notes, he must have had two or three hundred rupees on him. Ravi tried not to be envious, it was wrong to be envious of friends: yet he could not help calculating how long it would take him to earn as much (p.71). Ravi has to alter his opinion about Damodar and wonders why he considered him a fool. Has under-rated and Damodar's remarks that Ravi should give up his 'beggar mentality first' (p.73) if he wants to warn, goes into his head. Nalini's

protestations that Ravi is aiming at impossible things and not being contented with what they have stirs Ravi's emotions only to embolden him further and not to give in. 'You've been corrupted, ' go into all these big houses, see all these she said. 'Your things, it gives you impossible ideas.!' 'They're not impossible ideas.' 'They are. How can people like us ever e like them?' 'They're not made of different clay are they? There's nothing lays down they should always have the best and trample over us and do us down, and we should always come off worst?! 'They're different class, that's all,' she said with a catch in her voice that like should have warned him. 'Ordinary folk us can never be like them. Oh yes, we can. ' 'We can't.' "We can, if we stop thinking like stupid water-buffaloes (pp. 75-76). (Italics mine) Apu's treatment of Ravi has changed for the better Ravi, and Varma and Pattana look at him respectfully. The who's been sharpened by sensitivities have does not fail to flick-knives of city living' (p.78) does not fail to notice this change. Apu hands over more work to Ravi while frequently rests in his room. Ravi attains a great deal of skill in the art of stitching and authoritatively gives instructions to his assistant. The tenor in the workroom builds up Apu's confidence. Rising to the occasion Ravi puts his heart and soul into his work to make it better. It exemplifies Ravi's attempt to self-actualise. He accepts his new responsibility unflinchingly: Ravi never neglected his work, however much he talked, and that was the important thing. Industrious worker, good husband; Apu felt he had not been far wrong in his estimate of Ravi (p.80), In the light of Ravi's willingness and readiness to persevere, Apu plays down his 'last peccadillo' (p.80) and his verbal retaliation over the price of a jacket. He considers them to be the folly of a young man and of passing nature. Apu has assessed that Ravi is capable of managing. the business and takes Ravi frequently with him to his patrons' big houses into which he has gained entry because of his sartorial skill. Ravi is no longer the made to wait in the verandas but is taken into interior apartments -- bedrooms and dressing rooms and is introduced to the memsahibs as his son-in-law with ... one day he a compliment 'He is doing very well too will step into my shoes' (p.83) and is thrust to the fore to be seen by the lady of the house to be patronised in the future. A shelter less and aimless weather-cock like Ravi attains a standing and leads a settled life, however humble it may be, which is indicative of Ravi's awareness of his potentialities to rise in life. Ravi's aim to have a shelter of his own, to be at peace with Nalini takes shape when he makes a small and cosy room over the kitchen. This desire of Ravi is typical of a self-actualiser who yearn "for a kind of psycho- logical intimacy and psychological proximity and of being fully known to each other."9 Jayamma's protest is suit- ably snubbed citing Varma and

Pattana, the two idlers who lead a comfortable life although they hardly exert themselves. 'Then it's high time the others did,' he said. Healthy young men like them ought to out work, not sitting around idling and dicing ... ' (p.88). With the enhancement of Ravi's wages as intended by Apu, Ravi contributes to the general pool of the housekeeping money which is commensurate with the size of his family. When Ravi goes out with a handful of half-finished garments to complete them, he walks to Damodar's palatial house so that he can rest there in the marble paved court-yard and attend to his work. He feels humbled in Damodar's presence and at the sight of his riches. Damodar remarks that possessions like his are not difficult to acquire but that one has to make effort and take risks.

" You think that's dream." Damodar an impossible sneered. "You tell you, what you've got is would. I brain. You can't think big. You've scraped together what you call a reasonable living and you cling to that rather than go for something bigger in case you lose the lot. The lot did I say? It's precious little, and that you hang on to like death ' (p.115), However casual Damodar's comment might have been, it has impressed avid. His misgiving that he may lose his respectability is dispelled by Damodar. *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?' 'Of course, they are said Ravi. "They've become respectable, said Damodar. "That's what money does for are you. And honest: do you think they honest?! (p.116) of Although Ravi shrinks at the ill-gotten wealth Damodar, he elects to see him later with 'a sour and self-critical fretfulness' (p.118) rising in him. He intents upon exercising his ability when called for. His pressing responsibilities compel him to work earnestly as he takes Apu's place and urges his fellow workers to go on with the task unmindful of their resentment. When Ravi witnesses the indifference of the placid couple at the beach towards the imploring beggar-woman and the stoical unwillingness to part with money culminating in the peon hurting her with the walking stick, his belligerence wells up which is an affirmation of Ravi's ability to self-actualise. 'They're not different clay, are they, to be treated like dogs?' (p.135) Apu's indisposition creates uncertainty in the household with the work dragging. Ravi feels demoralised as the entire responsibility falls on him. Nalini's belief that their livelihood lies in the hands of God angers him. 'No, " he said sharply, is not in God's hands, that has been said since I was so high and I am sick to death of hearing it. It is in our hands, our hands (p.145). A sense of euphoria sets in with the recovery of Apu who goes on his business visits accompanied by Ravi although a part of his body has become paralysed. Disagreement over the price paid

by the customers propels Ravi to denounce the sorry state of affairs which only highlights Ravi's proclivity to be assertive and not to be submissive and submitting. know, but why against their own people? I should they act after all aren't they ?! mean we are "Who knows?" Apu shrugged. Perhaps it's because they're the class, same – same money, different countries even coming from makes no difference compared to that. It's the sameness makes them stick together.' We stuck together and demanded decent money began Ravi (p.153). (Italics mine) Ravi's diligence is impressive and Apu presents him as his successor 'without whose help his, Apu's skill would be as nothing' (p.154). City life sharpens Ravi's faculties and when Apu and the memsahib haggle over the price he 'understood it perfectly too ... and he found it less absorbing' (p.160) because Apu gives in as usual and Ravi has his way. son-in-law of Apu Puttanna, the good-for-nothing purloins the life's savings, as it were, of Apu and leaves the house with the booty. The unfortunate incident make Apu flare up: 'Fed. you, sheltered you ... forgave your follies, asked for no return ... ' (p.176). Ravi. despises the old man for clinging to the obsolete beliefs and unlike Apu resolves not to 'go under because of his sponging relatives' (p.176). Marriage had painted a few streaks of respectability on his back, perniciously consumes revived the old values him, so that he once gains lauded superiority of work over loafing: the but he would not go back on what the soundings and observations of his life had taught him, would never give up the new values he had deliberately built up for himself for the old, patently useless values bequeathed him by his father's generation (p.177). Apu dies and Ravi carries on his business and the unfeeling disposition of the lady whose garments Ravi delivers belatedly due to Apu's demise makes him indignant. A smouldering anger rose in him against the rich uncaring inmates of homes they had served cheaply and well year after year, turning away so casually now, Bitches, he thought, nothing mattered could in their eyes, not death itself importance of a dress being match the ready on time (p.184). Again the lady's inhuman interrogation revolts him: Ravi was aghast. Work? How could he? Did this woman realise how they lived? The duties and ceremonies they fell upon the head of the house? In her community did they simply carry straight on after death as if for suddenly - she must have been blind, nothing had happened. As he thought, less than human, more fool he to have imagined otherwise. 'It was not sudden, ' he said, with a coldness to match her own, pulverizing the prudent image of Apu that formed in his mind. * MY father-in-law dying on his feet for several had been (p.184). (Italics mine) months the insults hurled at the poor by the wealthy as though they had no feeling are agonising to Ravi and he is compelled to come to terms with Damodar's

ways 'rejoicing that the rich had been tricked to the advantage of the poor' (p.190). in this predicament he recounts his silent pledge to his wife to denounce his old ways and be worthy of her' (p.199). But this promise is diluted and not worth considering while he repents if he has "priced himself too high' (p.199) as though there was no such a thing "as equity, the dignity of the labouring man, a price worthy of his hire?" (p.199).

Apu's death and the mounting financial burden compel Ravi to shed the old ways which Apu fostered. Puttanna and Varma having gone away Ravi gets rid of Kannan houting at him. 'Get out, ' he said distinctly. 'I'm done with feeding and keeping you or berth nothing. Thought you had a safe didn't you? Well, it's over. You can get out and stay out ' (p.205). This spontaneous outburst underscores Ravi's self-assertion while his exasperation reminds his of the words uttered by the 'power conscious memsahib's' (p.205). If he can talk in that tone it signifies that he is not crushed yet and 'the fat drops still rode high in his blood and he could still show them who was master of the household' (p.206). Ravi's resentment against the rich, his poorly paid job, his son's death and the skyrocketing prices and desertion by all – including Nalini – leaves him with no alternative but to do Damodar's bidding. 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 betraying ramshackle codes. Only one thing: to renew the oath he had taken on the lives of his children to gain them their rights; and this time to keep it (p.231). Even to do this he is too late, but he does not want to procrastinate any further. He joins the mob which Plunders the rice godowns shouting "Rice today, rice, Rice today, rice!" (p.223) rising against injustice, corruption and exploitation rampant in the society. No more does Ravi want to accept things as they are but to Oppose injustice openly. But he fails to get even a handful of rice. This tragic incident affects him profoundly. He re-joins the mob and is frustrated to see only 'the sensuous sumptuous unthinking display of wealth for the unthinkably wealthy' (p.237). The novel begins and ends with violence and thus comes full circle. At both stages Ravi is defeated despite his attempts at being assertive. In the beginning he is cowed down by extraneous forces and in the end by his impulse -- his moral sense. But between these two incidents 'Ravi has undergone a sobering experience, an experience which teaches him to stay on the right side of conscience even when hunger is making its menacing moves. In What A Handful of Rice projects is self-assertion in Ravi giving him the needed courage to oppose the evil" but he is dragged away from indulging in violence to quell the all-pervading depravity because of his moral transformation. His love for Nalini plays a crucial

role in his life and he is determined to be worthy of his loving and loyal wife. If she had not chastised him to be content and prevented him from going wayward only through her affection for him, Ravi would have gone beyond redemption. To Ravi, Damodar's ways appear to be the only means to acquire wealth and lead a comfortable life. But the stigma that will be tagged to the moral side of his life will deprive him of a place in the society and he may even lose Nalini. This realisation saves him from creating a hiatus between himself and Nalini by not resorting to immoral ways. Although Ravi's responses exemplify his self-actualisation, he achieves social but not economic self-fulfilment. He accepts penury rather than resort to violence to end it.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* offers a poignant exploration of the human condition under the weight of poverty, migration, and systemic inequities. Through Ravi's journey, the novel dramatizes the fragile balance between survival and morality, revealing how economic struggle shapes personal choices and social relationships. Markandaya's narrative not only critiques the structural disparities of postcolonial India but also underscores the resilience and dignity of individuals striving against adversity.

By situating Ravi's tragic trajectory within the broader context of rural-to-urban transformation, the novel illuminates the psychological and ethical costs of modernization. This study demonstrates that *A Handful of Rice* remains a vital text for understanding the intersections of literature, society, and ethics, offering insights that resonate with contemporary debates on inequality, migration, and human resilience. Ultimately, Markandaya's work affirms the enduring relevance of literature as a lens through which to interrogate social realities and the moral complexities of survival.

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