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## KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S A HANDFUL OF RICE – A STUDY

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### Abstract:

*Kamala Markandaya's A Handful of Rice is jolt to awaken the society to the plight of the rural people. Ravi, the protagonist of this novel, is caught in the maelstrom of change, in the transition from the tradition-bound rural society to the machine-ridden, materialistic urban milieu. The novel deals with hunger & poverty and consequent degeneration of human values. The modern man given to money and machine, hypocrisy and corruption suffers from melancholy and mal-adjustment, emotional and psychological instability. Skepticism, Surreptitiously increased due to extreme paucity of faith: (Sharma 1986:73), for, "Man ceases to have faith even in his own self" (Sharma 1985:30) Ravi searches for a world where he can breathe freely, society where he earn his livelihood. He struggles hard to find a place in society, but due to socio-economic pressures he is pushed back to his ill assorted destiny.*

### KEYWORDS:

Markandaya's, Handful of Rice , machine-ridden , materialistic.

### INTRODUCTION:

Ravi, an uneducated son of peasant, tries to find for himself a decent way of life in the city where he is an outsider without caste, in a no 'man's land between coolie and clerk' (Harrex 1971:74) in this exploitative society of modern times, even the best and the honest man is likely to be corrupted, and wise man act wisely, Ravi is like any one of us. His conscience- stricken life is our own. His predicament is our own. Markandaya forcefully deals with the theme of hunger and human degradation in "A Handful of Rice"

The novel begins and ends with Ravi's struggle with hunger. Living in abject poverty, famished Ravi cannot hear the voice of his conscience. He drowns his morality and his misery in drink. "I am starving," he says "I am hungry, I want a meal". commenting on Ravi's plight, Srinivas Iyengar observes: 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 lurches now this side now the other side and has the worst of both (Indian Writing in English:66)

Prompted by his conscience and moral values, Ravi flees from the countryside and its impoverished conditions to take refuge in the city but city disowns him. It dispels and discards him. He is disillusioned. Like Nectar in a Sieve the theme of poverty and hunger in an apathetic and ruthless society is the thematic concern of this novel too but "the latter goes a step further in attempting a search for identify for persons like Ravi who run away from the countryside and its impoverished conditions to take shelter in the city where financial constraints grip them by the neck" (Banerjee 1990:93). In the stifling and suffocating urban milieu of Madars, Ravi has the Lassitude of hunger and "the terror of losing his identity in an indifferent city which was similar to death" (27). He is all along worried about his true identity in the city where people feel insecure, where being dogged by brute forces of money and machines, scepticism and violence, despair and disillusionment, they hardly have any sense of social conscience and human values, where man ceases to have faith even in his own self. In such circumstances man becomes self-

alienated.

In the village, Ravi led a life of genteel and acute poverty. He had seen “nothing but starvation”. (12), starvation that had led the villagers astray. Ravi comes to the city for foothold in life. But has the city to offer to poor people like him?

In endeavor to put an end to his hunger and procure a handful of rice, Ravi plunges in to the tremulous turmoil of urban life. He runs a hurdles race which leaves him disillusioned and desponded. He barter his conscience and trust with a band of die hard criminals and in course of time becomes a members of underworld smugglers and bootlegger, and ally of Damodar who initiated him into to the evils of urban existence. Ravi witness life in all its raw hunger, penury and exploitation. Life in the city is grim struggle for existence for survival. The city is a jungle, and people here cherish jungle's values and animal conscience, each unscrupulously preying upon the other. He realizes how “in this jungle one had to fight fiercely, with whatever weapons one had or go under” (198). Go under, shedding all values and norms. However, in his untiring to belong, to strike roots, he finds in Apu's tailoring a convenient means of making out a living, falls in love with the tailor's daughter, Nalini, and decides to do away with criminal career. Initially apprenticed to Apu, he finally becomes a member of his family by marrying his daughter.

Crises of conscience leads to a gradual decline in faith which obviously means a total “collapse of culture & civilization”(sharma 1989:152). A civilization based on perversion and distortion of values, on corruption, exploitation, murder, robbery and all forms of social evils is absurd and meaningless. Ravi cannot become part of such a civilization. Hence, his preference for a happy life with Nalini. He longs for mental peace and emotional richness but does he get it? N. From all sides urban milieu with its persistent evil presses down on him, and for him there is no escape route. For him there is no diving underground. He has encountered its darkness and poverty. But he cannot flee. He is tied to his family, to the society. When he becomes Apu's assistant and Nalini's husband, his condition seems to improve a bit, but Apu's sudden illness, the theft of savings by his son-in-law Puttanna, and finally with Apu's death the entire burden of the family falls on Ravi. He loses his job in the hospital, his first-bond dies, Nalini falls ill. On top of all, the price of rice goes up day by day. With upward spiralling prices, Ravi's family fortune “slips down with increasing momentum” (196). They had to devour rice full of black stones. Bad harvest. Then the drought what Ravi gets is not enough for him and his children. “He wanted more. It was his right, his children's right”(217). In such a situation a handful of rice could make all the difference between life and death, between conscience and lack of conscience. Poverty makes him a rebel, an angry young man. He joins hands with a mob which in its rice-craze pulls down and then pulls out the gunny bags of rice from the fashionable store EVE. Ravi thinks of throwing a brick at the store but his hand drops conscience forbids him. Ironically, his beginning turns out to be his finale. The spasm of hunger and anger at a conscienceless society locked him in, locked him up and forced him to turn to himself, to the scruples of his conscience and the values he cherished.

Kamala Markandaya presents Ravi's moral dilemma quite convincingly. Torn between two worlds, one dead and other yet to see the light of day, Ravi makes a choice which ultimately proves to be life denying. Ravi's struggles, goes forward, comes very close to the rice bags, but when his turn comes for looting it he stops. A hand full of rice remains within a hand's reach for ever and Ravi the modern Tantalus ends with his efforts to procure rice rendered futile. He cannot decide. He cannot choose. The strength that had inflamed him, the strength of a suppressed, laminated anger ebbed as quickly as it had risen. Thus, the scene of the infuriated mob trying to loot the godown has symbolic significance. It resolves Ravi's dilemma and brings his wavering morality and his sense of values to stability. But unfortunately, Ravi is a failure with a conscience. With this crises of conscience and values in the novel is related the question of human survival. The problem is whether to face “the ferocious assaults of existence”(Desai Interviewed, The Times of India: 13), with submission and surrender or shy away from them, whether to act according to the dictates of one's self or of the society. Ravi lives for human values and existence and hence declines the role Apu wanted him to play. He is reluctant to adopt Apu's code of conduct. He starves but does not stoop to conquer his hunger He does not submit to an ignoble, ignominious way of life. This integrity and fidelity to his self ultimately brings about his alienation.

Nalini is happier than Ravi since she is emotionally mature. She understands the world. Feels it not like an infant as Ravi does. She has none of Ravi's cravings. There is hardly any emotional understanding between the two. Though very much attached to her in the early days of their marriage, he falls out with her even on trivial matters.

The crises of conscience and values in 'A Handful of Rice' is born neither of the gulf existing between the old and the young, nor of the conflict between tradition and modernity as in 'A Silence of Desire' but of the protagonist's wobbling and wavering choice between right and wrong, between just and unjust. To quote Prof. K. Venkata Reddy: “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 realized that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills.” (“A Tryst with Conscience,” Perspectives on Kamala Markandaya: 158).

Ravi is not a traditional tragic hero. He is a new hero. His opponent is not either an immoral society or a pseudo-value system but his own conscience. It is this crises of conscience in Ravi and his search for values that lead to his quest for identity, threatened by an indifferent and apathetic society. In depicting this crisis of conscience and values in Ravi, Kamala Markandaya shows universal sympathy for those who suffer.

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