CHAPTER - I

INERTIA AND RESIGNATION

- Nectar in a Sieve
- A Handful of Rice
- The Nowhere Man
Nectar in a Sieve

With a backdrop of colonial India, the Nectar in a Sieve seeks to dramatize the predicament of the peasant community in the wake of the changing scenario generated by the assault of industrialization, and the resultant loss of lands and self. If the wheel signifies progress, productivity, prosperity, it also poses a threat to individuality and breeds exploitation and erosion of human values. The novelist uses ‘microcosm’ as technique to project on the epic scale the pangs of poverty, hunger, shame and humiliation, ignorance born of illiteracy and the medievalistic beliefs and superstitions. The little world of ‘Nathan – Rukmani – combine’ represents the theatre and saga of suffering and pain wrecked on the peasant class by nature’s vagaries, flood and famine and partly by man’s acquisitive thrust for affluence. The peasant community is the protagonist and the dragon they are destined to fight is the tannery that has begun to devour their lands, their morals and happiness. The protest is marginal and the exit is less within sight. Thus the novel in the words of Margaret P. Joseph remains a “passionate cry against social injustice and portrayal of patience in the face of suffering and labour if there is no hope”\(^1\)

The novel begins with Rukmani’s past rising in the dream in the darkness of the night and with the disappearance of the dream in the morning the stage collapses, the reality is reflected and the tone of the novel is set. Rukmani is left a widow of 42, a lonely woman to create her own values to live by in a hostile milieu.

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"Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs."\footnote{Nectar in a Sieve, p. 1}

She is the central consciousness of the novel, the action swings back into time to reflect the nightmare of Rukmani and the two other women, Ira, her daughter and Kunti a neighbour. They are introduced as foils to project a woman’s dilemma of morality and value and her changing attitude to human dignity in a world of falsity, betrayal, deceitfulness and exploitation. They show little progression and development in absence of illumination and are at the end where they were in the beginning. If Ira’s turning to nightly bohemian escapades are, it is told, prompted by god of Necessity in that she has to support the family, Kunti plays the game with dice loaded by choice. Rukmani at the end is left a battered, broken and bewildered being and resigning to fate and Ira and Kunti as the exploited and the deluded selves.

What destroys the happiness of the peasantry are the social evils like dowry and child marriage. They crush the finer essence of humanness and the very individuality. Rukmani’s marriage preys heavily on her parents because she, being the fourth daughter in the family is to receive the share of the dowry in the decending scale. A girl at the age of 12 hardly understands the meaning of marriage and the responsibilities it entails. But Rukmani is happily dispatched of in marriage to a tenant farmer, Nathan and is housed in a mud-hut which is symbolic of Nathan’s world of love and care. The novelist keeps track
of Rukmani's reaction to the new world which, to her puzzlement, is rather shocking. "I wanted to cry. This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch, was my home. My knees gave, first the cramped one, then the other, and I sank down."¹ But soon Rukmani reconciles to the existing situation and finds that the material poverty is immaterial to destroy the spiritual ties. Nathan is deeply attached to his wife and she, in return, shows all respects caring little of his social position. She is happy to see that "he was poor in everything but in love and care for her."²

Rukmani's assistance in sharing farming in the beginning is marginal. Nathan too did not favour to see her work with him on the land. He is a tenant farmer who does his farming on his own piece of land where prosperity is to rise in proportion to the amount of labour put into harvesting. The novelist has expressed the joy of a woman who learns that she is the 'darling care' of her lord.

"While the son shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content. Peace and quiet were ours."³

The incipient fear yields place to pride, the genesis of which is the coming into spiritual togetherness of the two selves. If marriage means security involvement, love and reciprocity, then Rukmani has it in abundance. Each class on the social totem-pole has its distinct traits.

¹. Ibid., p. 4 ². Ibid., p. 11 ³. Ibid., p. 7
which fashions its morals and manners, taste and enthusiasm. The peasant class is subject to their own obscurantist ideas and beliefs which restrict their range of vision and knowledge. They are less aware of the benefits of education and in case of women the pendulum seems to swing to the extremity. But Rukmani is an exception in that despite the opposition of her mother, she was taught to read and write by her father which in later life became an object of joy and comfort.

Illiteracy and ignorance breed moral backwardness, superstitions and ill-founded fears. Sometimes they raise their head to such alarming degree and create waves of confusion and misunderstanding that the innocents are betrayed and fall a prey to beastly exploitation of male-egotism. This is manifest in reaction to Rukmani's first child who happens to be a daughter, not a male child. In a traditional society the birth of a male child is gods' favour in that the salvation is anchored in a son. Even Nathan, her husband, felt rather uneasy because he had "wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the sand, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind."¹ Nathan's is not scared by dowry-consideration. Rather it is a reflection of man's primitive belief that takes the birth of a male child, not in term of a biological determinism but the operation of a divine hand.

The daughter is named Irawadi, after one of the greatest rivers of Asia. The river-symbology shows that as water is most precious and vital to life of a farmer, so is the daughter in the household which is one

¹. Ibid., p. 15
measurement of their conjugal happiness with the years advancing by Ira grows up and with it appear shades of anxiety on Rukmani's forehead. The fear is: what though if the second child too happens to be a girl? In the existing situation one turns to heavenly powers. The mother takes Rukmani to the temple to pray for the birth of a male child but little do they know, the novelist says, that gods “have other things to do: they can not attend to the pleas of every suppliant who dares to raise his cares to heaven.”1 Ignorance breeds fear of the supernatural powers in the wake of which mean is drifted away from the solution to the problem if there is really one within sight.

Her mother gives her a stone lingam to wear next to the skin with the belief that it would help her in begetting a male-child but the self-anointed therapy is frustrated and Rukmani, we are told is cured by Dr. Kenny when a son is born to her after a long spell of seven years. The treatment administered on her is kept a secret which is scandalized by Kunthi, a village beauty. Rukmani is a mother of six sons - Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvan and Kuti, being the youngest.

Sir Francis Bacan says that “children sweeten labours but they make misfortunes more bitter, they increase the care of life.” One can dismiss the truth of the observation as cynical but no one can be blind to the ironic implication of a large family. Large families, if they inflate the traditional parental ego they carry with them the darkening shadows of untold and unconceivable tormentation and shame. With so scanty and a frail economic structure it was hard for Rukmani to support a

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1. Ibid., p. 18
family of six children.

It so happens that the silence of the village is destroyed by the rise of a huge tannery building. The eruption is a sudden and dramatic jolt for the villagers, hard to reconcile. But they are weak to stop the march of the entrepreneurial greed: the open space in the countryside is sold out for the construction sites to raise mighty business empires. The change in village—psyche is recorded with all the poignancy of horror and realism:

"The change that came blasting its way into their life came wrought in the form of tannery, the symbol of industrialization in the form of flood and drought, Nature 'red in tooth and claw'. Hunger raises its head. Hunger appears like an octopus in the novel. It is the real evil, stronger than the original Satan that disturbed the bliss of the Eden Garden."¹

The tannery is the rock they have to push upward to the top with the painful realization that it has to roll down of its own weight before it reaches the top. The villagers accept the fate and its assorted horror and loss. They are aware of the menace created by the socio-economic system as nurtured and sanctified by feudalism that the village and the village land does not belong to the villagers. Any time they can be dispossessed of the land they cultivate by the barons. Rukmani looks upon them as moral menace and destroyers of peace and harmony.

"They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things."²

¹ M. Prasad, Perspective on Kamala Markandaya, p. 99.
² Nectar in a Sieve, p. 28
Nathan's attitude to the rise of the tannery on the land is that of a pragmatist, the sanity lies in learning to live with the noise and tremor of the wheel rather than crying feebly and helplessly for a change. He says, "Foolish woman," ... There is no going back. Bend like the grass that you do not break."¹

Both the littleness and excess of rains bring drought and famine, and throw life on verge of starvation. The year was of excessive rains that kept falling for eight days.

"As night came on – the eighth night of the monsoon – the winds increased, whining and howling around our hut as if seeking to pluck it from the earth. Indoors it was dark – the wick, burning in its shallow saucer of oil, threw only a dim wavering light – but outside the land glimmered, sometimes pale and sometimes vivid, in the flicker of lightning. Towards midnight the storm was at its worst. Lightning kept clawing at the sky almost continuously, thunder shook the earth. I shivered as I looked – for I could not sleep, and even a prayer came with difficulty.

"It cannot last," Nathan said, "The storm will abate by the morning."

Even as he spoke a streak of lightning threw itself down at the earth, there was a tremendous clap of thunder, and when I uncovered my shrinking eyes I saw that our coconut palm had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own."²

The wrath of rain-god destroyed the crops and the entire village was in the grip of want and scarcity of food. What is in store for a peasant to suffer outside the natural calamity is man's inhumanity to man. In a traditional society wherein the male-chauvinism is the law, a woman's predicament is blighted if she happens to be a barren womb or fails to beget a male child. This is the fate which is to befall Ira for her failure to

1. Ibid., p. 28
2. Ibid., p. 40
conceive pregnancy. The family is already in the grip of starvation and Ira's desertion by her husband swells their misery. The husband brings Ira to her parents because she is barren. Rukmani protests against this accusation but fails to move man's obduracy and sternness. He says:

"Mother-in-law," he said, "I intend no discourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman."

"You have not been married long," I said with dry lips. "She may be as I was, she may yet conceive."

"I have waited five years," he replied. "She has not borne in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons."¹

This is sufficient to corrode a woman's femininity in patriarchy. Ira, the beautiful daughter of a peasant's family is thrown out as if she were an item having lost its exchange value. The accusations are false and malicious. Ira takes her desertion heroically, perhaps she better understands the ways of the world and the possible threats to a woman's identity. She comes to term to the situation which is also the intention of the novelist:

"Leave me alone, Mother. I have seen this coming for a long time. The reality is much easier to bear than the imaginings. At least now there is no more fear, no more necessity for lies and concealment."

"There should never have been," I said. "Are we not your parents? Did you think we would blame you for what is not your fault?"

"There are others," she replied. "Neighbours, women... and I a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a child." All this I had gone through - the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself and it was my daughter this time.

"Hush," I said. "We are all in God's hands, and He is merciful."²

¹ Ibid., p. 50
² Idem
Markandaya drops two of Rukmani's sons, Arjun and Thambi from the cast and sends them to Ceylon when their jobs in the tannery are dismissed and since then nothing is heard of them. It is symbolic of the family's beginning of dissolution, the two sons have moved away at a critical juncture when the parents need them most to overcome the domestic crisis.

The tenant farmer has to pay dues to the landlord and in case of failure there is every possibility of eviction from the land. Finding no other means Rukmani chooses to sell her saris which is no doubt a sacrifice but this leaves the family with little to support in the hour of dire need. This is what happens in a feudal order. The farmer is alienated from the land, family and from his ownself. Outside nature, this is man-made calamity, the sting of the socio-economic forces is more biting than the wrath of the elemental forces of the nature. However, by the time the erratic course of rain clouds is set right, the farmers are totally exhausted and broken. "But in us there was nothing left – no joy no call for joy. It has come too late."¹

As such, the scarcity of food and means of survival destroys the moral climate of the neighbourhood. The tannery begins to throw its lurid gleams over the helpless villagers to pervert their morals to the degree that the women are seen prowling in the night in search of a prey to feed on. Ira also falls a victim to human lust because the need is to procure food for her mother's newly-born child she is much attached to. The child gets enough to eat out of what Ira earns by way of sharing

¹. Ibid., p. 80
beds with strange fellows. Rukmani feels a sense of satisfaction and gratitude that at last gods "were not remote not unheedful since they had heard her cries and stilled them as if were by a miracle." But soon the vision of the miracle falling from the sky fades and Rukmani comes to know of the truth of the god. The god is the law of Necessity to survive which has dehumanized man and destroyed the purity of body and spirit. Nathan and Rukmani come to know of Ira's immoral pursuits which for her was 'sacrifice'. Nathan feels wounded as if it has left a scar on his psyche and having collected courage turns to Ira to express his unwillingness.

"I will not have it said – I will not have you parading at night – "
"Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more."
"Like a harlot," he said. "A common strumpet." Nathan's morality clashes with Ira's morality, which is tragic. Life turns out to be a puzzle for Ira when she gives birth to a child who happens to be an albino. As Father Time (Jude the Obscure) descended on Jude and Sue like a blight to destroy their happiness in one single stroke, so is Ira a victim of a malignant deity. What an irony that she was jilted when she failed to mother a child and now when she has become a mother, she has no place to call her own! Rukmani broods hard to rationalize between the product of lust and love, of enduring passion and fleeting encounter which, it is believed, is responsible for the birth of freakish child. She wonders if it could be the result of Ira's alliance with Hawthorne's Black Man, a child born out of wedlock is a case of

1. Ibid., p. 108
2. Ibid., p. 99
biological aberrations.

“A child conceived in an encounter fares no worse than a child born in wedlock...so Kenny had said; but could one be sure? A man takes his wife with passion, as is his nature, yet he is gentle with her: amid the fire of breast on breast and bared thigh on thigh he still can hold himself, and give as much as he takes, leaving the exultant flesh unbruised. But the man who finds a woman in the street... what cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained his relief. She her payment... What care or safeguard is there when the consequences of one’s act are hidden from one’s thankful eyes, and the woman is one of many, soft, desired, lost, forgotten?”

Rukmani’s world - outlook is medieval. Her universe is theocentric: gods in heaven killing man in sport as wanton boys killing flies. She holds Ira less responsible for this moral crisis rather than the failure of crops and the resultant scarcity of food. If all had gone well, things would not have taken such an ugly turn. Nobody is to be blamed except “the wind and the rain and the sun and the eath, they can not refute it, they are the culprits.” The child is named Sacrabani and Ira takes fancy on him with glowing happiness and sense of motherly satisfaction. She is fully aware of the moral mechanism of patriarchy that one day it could raise a finger at the birth of a child born out of wedlock. Sacrabani one day turns to Ira to know the meaning of the word ‘bastard’ because the moral ideologues of the dominant class put this tag on him:

“Mother, what is a bastard?”
“Why do you ask?”
“I want to know.”
“It is a child whose birth his mother did not wish for.”
“Oh,” he said, looking at her speculatively. “Did you

1. Ibid., p. 116
2. Ibid., p. 119
The moral sting of the innocent query shakes Ira to the roots. She did not wish to make the child see the light of the day, she thought of its destroying in the pregnancy but failed to do so. The realization is too sardonic and painful. Ira's tongue falters and in the words of the novelist "...all the guilt of her efforts to have an abortion was inner voice."

The unusual growth of the child and the wisdom ahead of age betray shades of tragedy. After sometime Sacrabani shot another disturbing question which perhaps Ira could also expect:

"Mother, have I got a father?"
"Yes, dear, of course."
"Where is he?"
"Not here, my son; he is away."
"Why does he never come to see us?"
"He will when he can."
"But why not now?"
"Because he cannot. You will understand when you are older."
"How old?"
"I do not know myself. Now run away and play. You must not ask so many questions."

The first lie; many to follow. The distressing, inescapable need for lying.

The eviction of the farming community is no surprise, it goes on but it amounts to the disruption of moral order. The forced displacement of a peasant from the land is tragic but its suddenness makes more hard to bear with. After eviction, Nathan and Rukmani have no alternative but to leave the village in search of their son

1. Ibid., p. 127
2. Ibid., pp. 127-128
Murugan living somewhere in the city. But soon their great expectations turn into great deceptions when, much to their discomfiture and dismay, it is learnt that Murugan had left the Koil street two years ago and found work with the Collector living on Chamundi Hill. Their journey to the Collector's residence is a reflection of city culture. There they meet Ammu, Murugan's wife who, she tells, was abandoned two years ago. They are much moved to see her child cry which are the cry of hunger, "different to the other cries of infants."\(^1\) Ammu is herself a parasite and thus helpless to accommodate her in-laws which aggravates their trouble in an unknown place. But it stirs her conscience. She is well aware of the temper of the city and the plight of the unhoused and the unsheltered rotting in the gutters.

Thoughts rising in her mind show her concern and humanity. She reflects: "These people are old ... they are mine through my husband ... I have a duty to them, but what of myself and my children? Are we not poor enough ragged enough, without two more coming to share our resources? Yet what of them, they have nothing. The "shadows of her thought, dull and heavy, moved across her pale thin face."\(^2\) Nathan is much shaken by Ammu's plight. The world is wide but for the man having no money it is shrunken and "narrow as the coins in your hand. Like a tethered goat, so far and no farther. Only money can make the rope stretch only money."\(^3\)

However, Nathan and Rukmani leave Ammu and her child to their fate and return to the city where survival is governed by jungle-morality,
where each night

“was a struggle, more fierce now that we were daily engaged in it. I saw, night after night, what I had not observed before: the lame with their crutches knocked away from them so that they fell and were unable to rise, the feeble separated from their supporters so that their numbers were halved. Many a time my husband stood aside unable to face the fray: if I had not reproached him his distaste of the whole procedure would have led him to starvation. As it was more often than not one meal sufficed for two.”

Markandaya introduces realism to project the quality of life lived under the crushing weight of hunger, poverty and sickness. Children playing on the road suspend their play and fight desperately in the dust for food when some passerby throws a piece of sweetmeat or a crust of bread on the road. Rukmani sees her own children locked into similar fight for food. “I remembered but time had mellowed the memory or dimmed it, for it did not seem to me that they had struggled like these: teeth bared, nails clawing, ready, predatory like animals.”

The odyssey of the two is the acid test of their humanity which is rather obscured by their lack of precise understanding of the genesis of the problem they are trapped in and thus they fail to evolve a viable strategy of survival to overcome the crucial conditions of living. If they find it hard to “surmount a fate” they at least can learn to assign a meaning to living in a universe which is silent to human query. What they experience in the temple, the house of god is what a big city has in store for the destitute and the dispossessed. They lose their little bundle of articles during their scuffle for food in the line in the temple. The rebukings of the temple-priest to Rukmani for demanding the share of

1. Ibid., p. 166, 2. Ibid., p. 153
her husband since he is unable to move, are customary chastising which ironically bring out the comicality of the spirit of charity and religion. The priest fails to appreciate Rukmani's 'asking for more' food and cries out.

"Keep your distance. Do you want to devour pot and all?"

"I must ask for my husband," I thought, and found myself quaking. The plantain leaf was handed to me, the rice placed on top, then the cup of dhal. Now.

"If you would be so kind, sir," I said, "I will take my husband's portion as well on my leaf."

They gaped at me, surprised, affronted.

"The woman is mad," one called out. "Expects a double portion."

"Not satisfied with one," the other rejoined in an offended voice, "but must try and make capital out of charity."

"I do not," I said. "I have a husband and he is here, I ask only for his portion."

"If he is here let him come and we will serve him in his turn. We cannot hand out food to everyone merely because they ask for it. Do you take us for fools? Keep your tales for the unwary!" cried one, and the other called out impatiently."

The two share the food, and lie down half-starved with a mind torn by hallucination. Rukmani could not sleep the whole night, the vision of the stone gods and goddesses kept haunting her imagination to sustain the flickering hope for a better tomorrow.

"Gradually I was able to make out the forms of the carven Gods and Goddesses on the sides of the temple, on the colonnades, and in the niches of the walls, and as I gazed they seemed almost to live, their stone breasts gently breathing, their limbs lightly moving. Nearly – nearly could I believe what I saw, sitting there in the darkness by the temple wall. Until dawn, when the stars went out one by one, and the grey light changed the sculptured figures back into immobility."2

1. Ibid., p. 147, 2. Ibid., p. 150
With the loss of their belongings, Rukmani and Nathan are virtually left as paupers having nothing to fall back upon. They undertake the job of stone breakers at a quarry to earn their livelihood. The temple is their night hermitage and a boy named Puli is their Christ to look after their comforts.

"Each day Puli accompanied us to the quarry, usually remaining with us while we worked and always returning with us to the temple. Whatever we earned we entrusted to him: the theft of the money from my sari whilst I slept had undermined not only my confidence but Nathan's; besides, Puli was manifestly more capable of caring for it than we were."\(^1\)

Soon Nathan feels disillusioned and finds stone-breaking of no worth to support their life. He thinks of returning to the village which is also a fallacy in that what he has to own in the village. His predicament is like the ants moving on a burning log toward fire. Both ways they are sure to be roasted alive. The novelist uses the technique of indirection to project the plight of a peasant who has been dispossessed of his lands and is unfamiliar to the ways of a big city. When Nathan asks Puli if he could accompany them to the village, Puli's reaction to this fancied proposal is painful but realistic. His cry is a protest of a wounded heart over the system that has drained the very essence of life.

Nathan and Rukmani are highly impressed by Puli's independent spirit and clarity of vision to face reality. He has the considerable knowledge of the ways of the city and courage to face its passion. But what darkens Nathan's optimism is the assault of sickness devouring Puli by degrees. "What then of this bright fearless child who boasted that

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 176
he stood alone. There is a limit to the achievements of human courage."¹ The word 'limit perhaps speaks more of Nathan's dispirited and collapsing courage. He develops sickness, the feeble body shivers of cold. Nathan dies of illness leaving no other alternative for Rukmani but to return to village with her adopted son Puli. She has to carve a niche with Ira and her son, Selvan in the midst of the old familiar socio economic ambience.

“So good to be home at last, at last. The cart jolted to a standstill. I looked about me at the land and it was life to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet and wept for happiness. The time of in-between, already a memory, coiled away like a snake within its hole.”²

The experience of Nathan and Rukmani are the shared experiences of their class in larger human significance. The vagaries of weather and man's apathy to man are the destiny with which they have learnt to live, not with the spirit of defiance but of acceptance and resignation. “The spirit of acceptance, born of simple faith does not break down even when the deities in whom Rukmani and Nathan repose their faith remain unmoved by their prayers.”³ The rising graph of joys and sorrows in Rukmani's life has its own significance. She is well aware of Nathan's philosophy 'to bend rather than to break' but what she has yet to gain is illumination. That is her attitude to the socio-economic forces and the agencies of suffering is not changed. She accepts their sinister mechanism as a variant of fate and superstition. She has yet to understand the difference between the self-inflicted

¹. Ibid., p. 178  ². Ibid., p. 189  ³. Uma Parameshwaran, A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists, p. 94
sufferings for the purification of the spirit and the sufferings wrought on man by man. She heroically faces the odds of life, the self experiences the tremor of stirring but confusion keeps shrouding lucidity, initiation, understanding and the creation of a fundamental vision. Rukmani is yet to arrive at the wisdom enshrined in the epigraph which is comprised of Coleridge's words:

Work without hope draws nectar in a shieve
And hope without an object cannot live.

Rukmani's fate is as much a dreadful punishment as that of Sisyphus who is condemned by angry gods to pushing a rock to the top of a mountain whence it has to roll back of its own weight. The rock is his fate, it is his thing and therein contains all his silent joy. It is a test of his patience and limitations. How long one can go with the rock symbolic of 'the work without hope'? But does Sisyphus cease the strife? As a blind man who is eager to see knowing that night has no end is still on the go. Sisiphus teaches higher fidelity that enables man to raise the rock. He too concludes like Oedipus that "all is well" for the reason that he has known all that is human. Rukmani lacks this insight and vision.

Kunti is another woman who is a victim of wrong - value orientation and come to lose her femininity for want of vision. She is a prostitute by choice. Markandaya draws her with a view to projecting how a woman happens to choose evil with the presumption that this could be the only way to seek fulfillment. Rukmani has developed a dislike for her and Janaki, another woman, is more vocal and outspoken to explain her conduct. In her eyes, Kunti is a trollop who "is anxious only that there should be a supply of men." Poverty could be as much
responsible a factor for her fall as it is in case of Ira but what
distinguishes the two is the degree of emotional involvement and the
circumstances which drift them to commit moral violence. Kunti has no
moral scruple whereas Ira's conscience is pricked by a sense of guilt and
shame.

Kunti's exploitative tendencies and vileness of nature come on the
fore when one day she happens to see Rukmani talk to Dr. Kenny in an
intimate manner. She takes it a fine opportunity to settle scores and
black mail Rukmani by way of scandalizing her morals. Rukmani has to
pay her share of rice to silence Kunti which shows her dehumanization
and wickedness. Even her attitude to tannery is different from that of
the other village women. She is highly fascinated by the stirring of the
wheel on the village land. She has no fear to seek employment for her
two sons in the tannery saying

"You see," ... "The tannery is a boon to us. Have I not
said to since it began? We are no longer a village
either, but a growing town. Does it not do you good
just to think of it?"¹

She is a good looking woman and has passion for gaiety of life.
She has taste for music which her husband fails to appreciate. At times
she is critical of her husband's lackadaisical attitude to living. She has
developed fancy for the city life, the village life has not deprived her of
her natural charm. She snubs the village women if they grow suspicious
of her conduct. "... no wonder they call us senseless peasant women,
but I am not and never will be. There is no earth in my breeding."²

¹. Ibid., p. 46  ². Idem.
Kunti thus symbolizes the changing sensibility of the village women folk which is not perversion unless they indulge in romantic day dreaming and come to abuse the benefits of this realization.

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A Handful of Rice

A Handful of Rice (1955) is a sequel to Nectar in a Sieve but the setting and the technique resembles an expressionistic drama. The problem of economic insecurity and the resultant rootlessness of the village population in the wake of industrialization constitutes the centrality of the action of the novel. Nalini, the female protagonist, is an extension of Rukmani in the sense that the predicament of the two in patriarchy is the same. But unlike Rukmani, Nalini’s problem of survival is of a different nature. It is not hunger but accommodation and acceptance of the ways of the system that stands on gender-discrimination and exploitation of women as biologically weaker vessels. A woman is broken in patriarchy by the beatings inflicted on her in her house. Her throw-out like a commodity item in case of misalliance and the subsequent return to her legitimate dwelling like a mute battered animal symbolizes her age-long slavery. But what is tragic about it is that her rebellion and initiation to carve out her own destiny to assert her individuality is branded as a moral shame and her silent sufferings win admiration. She is looked upon as the very temple of virtue. The situation grows all the more alarming when man aspiring to be rich loses his humanity during the process. However his actions are never approved of by the author, he ruins his own happiness and of those around him, the woman being the worst sufferer. And this happens when the self is unable to be what it is not.

The novel covers a period of nearly 10 years in the life of the protagonist, Ravi Shanker, when he is in the twenties. The action freely moves backward and forward in time and his waverings and vague
desires are a sure sign of lack of lucidity and understanding of what is human. The key word ‘rice’ in the title symbolizes hunger and the maddening cries of the hungry mob “Rice today, rice today, rice” connect it with the theme of the earlier novel. Ravi Shanker is as much a victim and of hunger and poverty as Rukmani was and in the wake of exodus moves to the city of Madras in search of food and fortune as Rukmani left village after her eviction from the land. He has had little education and thus the chances of procuring a lucrative job is in Darwinian sense an ordeal. However, he is ironically befriended with one, Damodar, who runs underworld racket to earn huge profits by dishonest means. He learns the art of monkey business. The story gathers momentum when one day Ravi in state of drunkenness escapes a policeman and happens to thrust his entry into the house of a poor tailor, Apu. The old tailor has two daughters – Nalini and Thangam. He is beaten and gets moral chastisement but stays to work as an apprentice to Apu who has no son to look after the shop.

“What I need is a man, someone to carry on when I’m gone, someone who would learn from me in a spirit of humility as you might.’

‘I would,’ said Ravi fervently. Apu did not hear him. He brooded and went on, bitterly: ‘A man needs sons... I have none, only daughters.”

Apu’s world-outlook is traditional. Hence there is nothing surprising if he secretly yearns for a male child which is characteristic of the wishfulness of patriarchy. Time wears on, Ravi’s performance during the apprenticeship is rewarding. He shows sense of commitment to the family and the job that wins Apu’s appreciation.

1. A Handful of Rice, p. 39
The period of Ravi's apprenticeship was less troubling, partly for the fact that the family has no male member to depend on in time of need and thus they bore with his weakness with as much ease as if they were his strength. The relation between Apu and Ravi has been strictly as if the master were teaching his disciple the subtle nuances of the tailoring-craft which at symbolic level is tantamount to learning the moral truths of life. The gap between the outlook of the two on life is apparent to presage Ravi's vacillations and wavering in regard to progression of self. Since Apu is to deliver the garments to the customers at their homes, he buys a shiny black Raleigh bicycle and made "him carry everything, either in stiff folds over his arm, or done up in a huge bundle as if he were a dhobi carrying the washing. And they walked, everywhere. The old man was too mean to pay bus or any fares, he wouldn't even take a jutka now that, Ravi told himself acidly, there was a human donkey to hand. To be fair – and Ravi was scrupulously trying to be – Apu did not spare himself either. Sun or rain, his thin spindly legs kept going like pistons, at a pace Ravi found it an effort to emulate."¹

It is not that Ravi lacks the physical stamina, but the deficiency he suffers from is moral commitment and the resultant lack of the consciousness to be different from what he is not. Apu's words,

"you're too soft, you and your generation,... Brought up soft, can't take anything."²

¹. Ibid., p. 82,
². Ibid., p. 83
are less a display of the chastisement of a self in state of passivity and more a gesture of making it to accept life as it comes to be lived by to escape the momentary stay against confusion. It is by avoidance of this state of confusion that one can make life a meaningful spiritual odyssey.

Ravi, instead of appreciating Apu’s philosophy of work and the insights into its commitment lets it pass easily and the anger “we don’t want to take anything and everything”, is a reflection of the darkness engulfing the self. The novelist tells that Ravi “could not see himself at Apu’s age, tramping those absurd distances.”

The ‘distances’ traveled by Apu have their own metaphysics. But they seem to have no moral implication in Ravi’s eyes. The truth is that they signify the two-fold obligations which the self has to fulfil, first toward its ownself and then to the society at large.

Ravi’s imperfect understanding of life being a journey from one experience to another thereby to enlighten the self to be of itself comes on the fore when Apu begins to take him into the big houses of his patrons, “the large bungalows behind high-walled gardens to which his craftsmanship gained him admission.” He introduced Ravi to them as “My son-in-law, he is learning the business. He is doing well too... one day he will step into my shoes.” And then he would, the novelist tells,

“thrust Ravi forward, so that she could take a good look at him and not be fobbed off with some other tailor in the future. Then they would sail upstairs, the lady, Apu, Ravi and bundle –always in that order – and on the way Ravi would peep into other rooms,

1. Ibid., p. 83
2. Idem
3. Idem
catching glimpses of silk hangings and tall windows, gleaming floors and fine furniture, and feel an awe of so much wealth. What did it feel like, he frequently wondered, running his fingertips over satinwood surfaces, sinking an inquiring toe into inch-thick carpets, to live like this, without worry, without wanting, every need and craving satisfied? He tried very hard, but his imagination never quite stretched to cover it."

The visits to big houses instead of serving as the gateway of experiencing life brings disenchantment and disillusionment. Ravi’s imagination takes flight and he begins to dreaming of becoming rich. Apu’s husky voice “Don’t dream” is a moral caution for the self to know its limitations and gain consciousness to be aware of the ‘lack’ so as to fill it for the authentic selfhood. It is the faulty and irrational attitude of Ravi to reality that destroys his vision. Apu’s tailoring-counter is his world within which he has to seek self-realisation. It has its own morality and he cannot come to terms with its reality unless he shakes off the hangover of the illusory pleasures of Damodar’s world or of those of the rich. The desire to be what one is not is the mark of the progression of self but what is central to the quest is the moral sense involved in it. Ravi’s imaginings and driftings between fact and fancy, are symbolic of the stagnation if they happen to be a case of wrong choice.

The novelist further underlines the gap between the attitude of Apu and Ravi to life: Apu being uneducated could visualize the cuts and fashioning of the garments for the satisfaction of the customers by

1. Ibid., p. 83
2. Ibid., p. 84
looking at the alluring picture, being spread on the table, "Woman, vogue, Femina, Vanity Fair, Eve Elle" but Ravi feels rather stupefied marveling if "virtually a whole industry should be devoted to women."

"Apu, unable to read, concentrated on the picture, cautiously recommending suitable patterns but quick to withdraw if the response was lukewarm. Yet if his advice were honestly sought it was shrewdly given, for Apu had developed a good eye for what figure looked well in which creation. This was something that completely baffled Ravi."

Ravi has no problem to understand the taste and the liking of the Indian women but of the Europeans he had little idea as they had always been a breed apart living in another world. He had never looked at European women before and thus had no idea of how they wanted to look – whether they wanted to disguise or display the qualities that seemed unattractive to him, the big raw bones, the square, long-waisted bodies, the long, shaved legs jutting below their hemlines that to him looked distastefully unclothed.

Apu’s words of encouragement and advice have little impact to melt away Ravi’s lethargy and inertia. His inner state of mind is attuned to think in a particular direction which becomes his hamartia. Consequently, the self falters to realize what it lacks. The attainment of the wish for goal, needs persistent struggle and perseverance which, if slackened by a slight tremor of hesitancy and vacillation will be a travesty of the whole process of progression.

"It will come," said the old man serenely. ‘After a while you will be able to tell what will look best on them – even when they can’t.’

1. Ibid., p. 84 2. Idem.
Ravi doubted it. He also doubted whether he would ever match Apu’s skill in cutting out and in copying patterns. Nothing seemed too difficult for the old man. He would carry away a fashion plate cut from one of those sumptuous magazines, and his gnarled shaking old man’s hands would grow steady as he chalked and cut out the pattern, adroitly adapting it to measurements often far from ideal.

‘It will come,’ Apu told him. ‘But you must try.’

This Ravi was loth to do, for if he made a hash of it, the material hacked beyond salvage, half the cost of replacement was deducted from his wages. This arrangement had been foisted upon Ravi, rather than mutually agreed, and every time it was put into operation he rebelled silently, almost hating the old man for the inroads made into his cash-pile.”1

The self in Ravi gravitates towards the life-style of the rich with little realization that it would dry the essence of living and leave it in the state of utter dejection and discomfiture. His desire to have a bed to sleep could be a modest yearning but it is symbolic of the rise of a bourgeois outlook on life which in case it remains unrealized, would pervert the course of the self and destroy the finer values of life. When Apu shares with his wife, Jayamma Ravi’s disinterestedness and failure to rise to the required level of learning she placidly reminds him that “he had wanted a bed.”2 Apu does not discourage the genuineness of the desire:

“That will come, first things first, just be patient,’ he urged her. ‘Once we have a bicycle we can do so much more work, I mean think of the time we waste walking here, walking there!’”3

He fully appreciates the whole problem including his state of poverty but what is interesting about the whole issue is that it is not something which cannot be so easily resolved.

1. Ibid., p. 85 2. Idem. 3. Idem.
Both Apu and Jayamma are totally in the dark about Ravi's antecedents. Sensing Nalini and Ravi developing fancy for each other, their mind begin to think of selecting Ravi for Nalini for the reason that Apu needs someone to assist in the work and no person can be of much confidence than one who happens to marry their daughter. The novelist introduces a familiar device which is the curiosity of the parents to know something about the background and the family of the boy. And thus queries are natural, such as where are his parents, what is his social position, where does he live. Ravi's mother had died earlier, his father is living in the village far away from the city and he does not want to turn to the village since he has bidden a final farewell to its squalor, poverty and humiliation.

"It still sickened him, that life: the misery and the squalor, the ailing babies who cried all night long, the way one was always poor and everyone one knew was always poor too, the desire – the constant nibbling desire – to have a second helping of food, a cup of coffee every morning, a shirt without holes, a shawl made of pure wool to keep out the cold of a monsoon dawn; and to know that one never would."

One day Ravi takes Jayamma and Nalini to watch a procession. On their way back to home, Jayamma proposes to go to his quarters for a nice change. The proposal should have been a welcoming gesture but it is shocking to Ravi because he has no quarters to welcome the mother and the girl whom he has chosen to marry.

"He had no quarters. He worked for Apu from eight in the morning until six or seven in the evening, and then it was a matter of chance where he slept. A bench in the park, an empty six-by-two space in a door-way, the veranda of an empty house, the pavement, all in turn had served to bed down on. For

1. Ibid., p.
the last several weeks, too tired to poke around, it had been the pavement, the familiar stretch of it outside the coffee-shop where he had once worked. Since he had left the railway station, the coffee-house and its pavement frontage had become a second home to him."

Ravi is married to Nalini which is a reward of his honesty but soon it is discovered that it is the union of the two antagonistic selves which for want of reciprocity and involvement will destroy their happiness. The car that brought Nalini to the house where Ravi's father, Ram has settled temporarily for the occasion is used as a symbol to presage her future in marriage:

"If only, Ravi thought passionately, it could have been different! If only the car had not stopped but sped on, whisked them away and set them down at a strange front door that spelled out the beginning of a new life and opened into who knew what exciting future! Instead here they were, back where they had been, nothing changed except perhaps for the worse, nothing to do but put as good a face as possible upon the anti-climax. Enveloped in a sense of incongruity, feeling awkward and slightly foolish, Ravi stepped over the threshold as he had done hundreds of times before."

Why does Ravi not find comfort in the marriage with the girl he once so passionately desire to marry? Or what makes him to assert his maleness in a household where his own existence is still marginal? It is perhaps because of the change that has metamorphosed him into an altogether a different being. He develops a faulty attitude to self and suffering. Ravi can not be oblivious of the past that shows stagnation of the self and its untenability to the creation of higher truths of life.

Nevertheless, Ravi comes into contact of the sophisticated milieu,

1. Ibid., p. 2. Ibid., p. 62
which causes a stir in his mind in regard to the individual versus the outer world. What torments Ravi internally is the quality of life lived by Nalini. It is his inordinate passion for Nalini that is eating him away like a disease. He thinks all the time of her care and comfort. As a victim of hunger and poverty he feels she is losing her beauty day by day. He is caught in a moral dilemma and thinks of joining Damodar to be rich so as to secure a decent living to his wife. He has had a taste of an honest living that has thrown him on verge of nothingness, frustration and failure. This moral vacillation is suggestive of Ravi's bewildered self in grip of machiavellian greed which is no doubt prompted by love for Nalini but it's morality is questionable. The world is wide to tap other hundred means of survival other than what is assured by the world of Damodar.

"He kicked angrily at the stones in his path as he went along. A dog prowled past, sniffing at the gutter. He took a little run at it, aiming for its flea-bitten hindquarters, but the animal dodged his kick and vanished. He cursed. There was a kind of pressure inside him that made him want to break and tear, to do violence although violence was foreign to his nature, simply because of what was pent up in him. Then he saw it: a jagged stone, waiting to be thrown. He bent to pick it up, and a heavy hand descended on his shoulder. He very nearly yelped, but traces of his training lingered: he smothered the sound, and at the same time the fingers that should have closed round the stone began searching out gravel between his bare toes and the soles of his chaplis."1

Ravi feels drawn to the world of money “Relaxed and mellow, he gazed at Damodar with a distant affection, and wondered why he ever considered him sub-standard, unfit for the strait-laced, dull, foolish, craven and killjoy company in which he had landed himself.”2 Though

1. Ibid., p. 70 2. Ibid., p. 72
he does not want to take up with Damodar again yet his steps led him to
his old head-quarters. Damodar's words open a new world of delight
and affluence: "If you like decent money, you know where to come. Of
course, you'll have to get rid of your beggar mentality first, otherwise you
will never want decent money, will you?"¹

Evil has its own fascination. Ravi wants to be rich overnight
through short-cut methods which would be, he little understands,
demeaning and debasement of his humanity. His anger at the evils of
economism is apparent but his protest in the form of choice to act once
again as Satan's emissary verges on comic irony. He is deeply hurt to
see the treacherous modes of exploitation of the capitalist class. The
dominant class earns huge benefits on the production which by right of
legitimacy should go to the productive forces. There is a wide difference
in price tagged on the straw hand-spun waist by the rich:

"Apu took it calmly. 'Of course they get twenty times
what people like us get. That's because they're not
people like us.'
'What sort are they then, devils? Gods?'
'Different, that's all.'
'Then the sooner we become like them the better.'
'Just you try, my lad. Just try and see how far you
get!'²

And thus he harbours a dream to be rich which is very much human but
he is less conscious of the evils of class-antagonism. That is the super-
structure of the proletariat class works as an antagonistic force against
the economic domination of the capitalist class. The individual is week
to strike at the very base of capitalism. The need is to revolutionizing

¹. Ibid., p. 73, ². Ibid., p. 69
the consciousness of the working class which can be made possible by having the capitalist economic structure replaced with a socialist one. Ravi has to understand the ironic implication of this existing situation. The idea of change in the attitude to the science of social economy is a mark of progression but its morality turned into a sick joke when man begins to hold a woman responsible for everything in poverty. The minor scuffle between Nalini and Ravi is symbolic of the encounter between the rational and the irrational, the domestic and the commercialization, lucidity and confusion.

"You are getting high and mighty, putting yourself on a level with high-class folk. How can we ever be like them? Why can't you be content with what we have?"

'Because I want more,' he cried, his temper rising. 'I want a bed for one thing! I'm fed up sleeping on the floor. *They* all have beds, the people we slave for, do you know that? Day-beds, night-beds, double-beds, divans -'

'You've been corrupted,' she said. 'You go into all these big houses, see all these things, it gives you impossible ideas.'

'They're not impossible ideas.'

'They are. How can people like us ever be 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 a different class, that's all,' she said with a catch in her voice that should have warned him. 'Ordinary folk like us can never be like them.'

'Oh yes we can.'

'We can't.'

'We can, if we stop thinking like stupid water-buffaloes.'

What is irksome and mortifying for Nalini is that she, as every woman would have it, does not want Ravi to be addressed as a

1. Ibid., pp. 75-76
‘vagabond” again, he also in moments of dark broodings appreciates her stoicism and courage to bear with his humour. However, life becomes an ordeal after Apu’s death. Ravi is left as the only male member to share the entire responsibilities of the household which he does with sense of excitement and passion. He keeps the singer buzzing ferociously to tide over the economic crisis but things go off unwieldy and he concedes “defeat at the end.” The reason is the want of skill and concentration that the craft of tailoring involves. Complaints of the customers began pouring in, Ravi turns into a rogue in their eyes, having no skill even of a barber when the cut-out is not to their satisfaction and spoils the costly garments. An Indian memsahib snubs him for the spoil and refuses to pay stitching charges which brings a crushing realization of the gap between the rich and the poor. The rich could buy costly clothes “and why not, since they had money and money was power. Money, he thought, with a craving that crawled like a disease in the bones and marrow of his body, if only, if only... and in his mind it took on the shape of a dark flame over which men crouched like opium-eaters to taste the savours of life.”¹

Ravi moves gingerly like a tiger tightly napping, not because the business is dwindling but because he fails to see through the psychology of class antagonism. The spoils of the rich garments mean little to the rich but its stitching charges, if denied for a minor defect, means everything to a poor tailor. Nalini is in the state of pregnancy and well understands what the loss of money means. Thinking that it is not wise

¹ Ibid., p. 102
to be critical of an artist for the outlook of the rich Nalini keeps silent but her silence is misconstrued and the result is scoldings, abuses and beatings. Ravi is a case of split-up consciousness, he feels estranged even from his son, Raju whose consciousness is exploited to record the inhuman beatings inflicted on his mother. In the words of the novelist Raju loved his mother, he "loved her almost unbearably now that he saw her so cruelly hurt and he clung to her, not allowing even Ravi's shadow to fall across his path."¹

It so happens that Raju suffers from earache. He grows restless and needs immediate medical aid but their impoverished condition renders them helpless to send for a doctor:

"A doctor,' he cried, 'What are we, memsahibs or something to send for a doctor for every ache and pain? Will you pay his bill? Five rupees before he even steps out of his house!' 'I know,' Nalini's lips began trembling in a way he knew so well and hated, 'but it may be serious. I-' 'We'll see when he wakes,' said Ravi. 'Don't drive me to distraction. I've said, we'll see when he wakes,' and he flung out of the house."²

For want of proper treatment Raju succumbs to sickness. The doctor rebukes them for not calling him earlier. Ravi feels highly distracted by his rational and sane rebukings:

"That because you had two already and one on the way the loss was less. And going on: that because you had a dozen, and because you were poor, you could not care that much for one."³

In desperation Ravi lashes out at the impersonal 'them' the invisible enemy. "I don't blame myself for not getting the doctor. I blame them.

¹. Ibid., pp. 187-188.
². Ibid., p. 228
³. Ibid., p. 231
Them. Society. Guilty of casual murder."¹ In stead of thinking patiently on the tragedy that has befallen and striking at the genesis of the evil, Ravi hastily resolves to turn to Damodar’s world which is symbolic of his further estrangement from the self.

“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.”²

His vacillations between the two worlds is a clear attestation of the ‘Being’ in state of distraction and directionlessness. It needs illumination which will enable him to make the right choice being prompted not by impulse but by reason thereby making him to escape the further loss of self.

The Puttamma – Thangam affair is another factor responsible for the creation of dimensions of disorientation and disharmony. Nalini is more accommodating and takes things “stoically. She was used to obedience and saw no point in banging her head against a stone wall.”³ Puttamma is a wastrel, a good for nothing fellow who shirks work and chooses stealing money from Apu’s purse rather than adding something to the family earnings to ease the economic tension. When he is asked to leave the house Nalini’s moral sense feels wounded in that the throw-out will take them to gutters. Ravi’s attitude to Thangam generates waves of cynicism and utter savagery.

“You’re always getting at her! What’s the matter with you? She’s eight months gone and you grudge her even a little fresh air.’
'But it's our shelter,' he said, deeply wounded. The only place we have... let her up once and she'll make it a habit, you know what she is.'

'She's my sister,' said Nalini, offended. 'All this fuss simply because she's my sister. If it were your sister would you grudge her also?'

'That's nothing to do with it!' cried Ravi. 'I just want some-where we can be on our own, without your family or my family -doesn't that make any kind of sense to you? It's our shelter, built for us.'

'Well, what of it? The house doesn't belong to you, does it?'

He seethed."

In the scale of richness - poverty complex a man's poverty becomes richness when he looks downward, and richness turns into poverty while looking upward. If Ravi finds no morality in the relational antagonism of haves and have-nots. What is the justification of his attitude to Puttamma Thangam relationship which is as much tied with Apu's housshould as his. His tirades and outpourings are not human. Their morality clashes with Nalini's socio-cultural upbringing. Hence mistrust and misunderstanding. The beatings in advanced state of pregnancy causes profuse bleeding which is feared to be a case of miscarriage. Nalini is saved by timely medical aid in the hospital. They are a loving pair in the eyes of the doctors but they know reality better. Nalini gives birth to the twin girls and is brought back to home. Soon she is lost in usual household chores. Signs of exhaustion and fear are visible on her face. Ravi turns totally blind to her state of distress and disconsolate. His male-egotism and the utilitarian attitude to man-woman relationship is reflected in his idiom and conduct. The novelist tells that he

1. Ibid., p. 100
“seldom, now, proclaimed the inviolable rights of human beings as he had once done, nor spoke of the retribution they were entitled to exact if these were violated; he felt rather less passionate over them, and accepted passively much that he knew he should have forcibly rejected.

It diminished him. He knew that too but felt too beaten to reach for the justice and dignity that had once given him stature.”

Ravi by nature is not wild and savage but he develops bitter feelings against class-antagonism and resolves revenge. But it is irony that the anger is directed against poor Nalini being a weaker vessel rather than against the rich whom he can not so easily unnerve. The period of gloom, silence, resentment and quarrels can easily ruffle one’s humour and can make a fiend of a saint. Nalini’s trouble are aggravated by Ravi's perverse state of mind. The self has reached a state of inertia that even the same and human advice seems too weak to create a stir. Even a slavish suggestion or the sardonic observation of Apu’s nephew, Varma are ineffective moral injunctions to enable Ravi to reorchestrate the broken bits of his psyche.

“You're losing your grip brother, you know that?”

“What in hell do you mean?’ Ravi rounded on Varma. His reactions to family needling were still fairly healthy.

‘Not so high-horse,’ Varma elaborated. ‘Fat’s melting down, as they say. It’s the rich fat globules in the body turns to pride in the head. The condition was well marked in you, brother.’

‘And so it ought to be,’ said Ravi, allowing his eyes to travel scornfully up and down Varma’s flabby body, ‘in anyone who calls himself a man.”

That a woman’s self disintegrates in a hostile milieu is manifest in Nalini’s plight. She retretes into a terrified silence. What an irony that

1. Ibid., p. 200 2. Idem.
in her own house she fears the sting of the threats of male egotism to her individuality the nature of which she fails to comprehend! It is hard for her to feed the family on a straightened budget but she well knows the implication of ‘asking for more’ money. It would mean asking Ravi “for extra money, and perhaps he would shout at her, she thought, take her by the shoulders and shake her while he shouted as he often did; and it made her feel afraid and a little sick. She frequently felt this way, and she wondered, a little bleakly, what it would be like to have no fears at all, like a memsahib say, who could not possibly have any fears about milk or money or the future, or the heavy hand of a moody husband.”

Can a woman in such situation seek fulfillment? It is a hard-fought struggle to overcome the limitation of the self in face of an impersonal and absurd milieu that generates gender-discrimination by way of pushing the women to secondary position. In a bid to assert his supremacy Ravi does not let go any opportunity unavailed that comes to him by accident or by choice to shout at Nalini. Consequently he loses sense of direction, the familial obligations cease to have any meaning in his eyes. Markandaya gives him full opportunity to give a vent to his irrationality and moral wantonness. A minor incident takes place that brings Nalini’s ‘ouster’ from her own place. It is the fan that Apu gave to her which is mistaken by Ravi as a gift of one of her admirer. She uses it to ward off the heat. In moments of confusion and recklessness he feels his maleness badly wounded and wantonly accuses her of infidelity. He catches hold of her wrist in such a wild manner that the glass

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bangles break and the blood spurts and seeps between them. She tells that it was her father who gave the fan, she grows wild and cries out:

"You bitch," he said. He picked up the fan and crushed it; the fragile bamboo ribs splintered between his fingers, poking through the silk like thin white bones. He threw the broken mess down.

Nalini bent over it. She was crying, her tears fell on the pale silk. 'It was so pretty,' she said. 'No one gave it to me, I bought it. I don't know why, I knew it was wrong when money's so short. But it was so pretty. Why did you have to destroy it?"1

The novelist tells that "some where in the ether, there voices reverberated

"I Can't go on, I can't
Get out. Get out."2

What a plight that Nalini slips away from her own humble dwelling in the darkness of the night! She carries children with her to seek refuge in Thangam's house leaving her mother, Jayamma to Ravi's lecherous appetite. Nalini is to stake her own personal existence for the restoration of love and reciprocity in the household. But the walls of the absurd universe seem to tighten their grip around her and the territory within which she has to seek fulfillment suggests at symbolic level the shrinkage of her femininity.

Markandaya gives a twist at the end to effect their union in a manner which to an ordinary eye, seems to be engineered. Ravi goes to Thangam's house to take Nalini back and she rises to follow him meekly like a disillusioned being at the simple utterance of the word 'come'. There is no feeling of remorse or regret, nor does he feel apologetic for his

1. Ibid., p. 219 2. Idem.
so morally a refractory conduct. The coming of the two selves into togetherness at the end is the strength of the book but one can ask: will the union be enduring? There is no antagonism but what they need is illumination to rise above the moral imperfections of the self.

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The Nowhere Man

The novel in term of ontology is a subtle explication of how the self for want of consciousness which, in Sartrean sense, is the consciousness of nothingness fails to stand out from its own self and be what it is not. The word ‘nowhere’ in the title shows the shrinkage of the self in an alien milieu which equally affects a woman's femininity. Man has to surmount the racial prejudices and colour discrimination in order to foster human values. The creation of communitarian value structure generates a healthy world outlook and prompts the feelings of universal brotherhood and understanding between a man and a man and nation and a nation.

The novel begins in a dramatic manner with the setting of a doctor's clinic in England. The opening paragraph is read as a chorus to mark the possible direction of the action of the novel.

“There was a screen behind which patients dressed and undressed. Usually they did not take long: but his Indian patient would. Dr. Radcliffe surmised, from the layers of clothes he would now be resuming against the chill English evening. There had been, he thought, no need in fact for the stripping ritual, because while a whole spectrum of illness could present bewilderingly similar signs and symptoms, there were some whose pointers were as coldly and precisely aligned as those of the Pole Star. The two stars, a and b of the Ursa Major constellation for which navigators looked. Which pointed unmistakably. Uncompromisingly, as in this case.”

The Indian patient is the 70 years old Srinivas the protagonist and the doctor to examine him for the disease is Dr. Redcliffe. The disease is leprosy. On the basis of its clinical features the doctor suspects it to be

1. The Nowhere Man, p. 1
a disease people develop in the tropical regions. Dr. Redcliffe, it is told, served in India for a brief period and there he came across such few cases. The case is thus referred to the Hospital for Tropical diseases for further investigation. Thus in the beginning the stage is set to dramatize the 'nowhereness' of a non-native being in an alien setting. The indifference, apathy and suspicion of an inhospitable milieu is metaphorically suggested by the very nature of the disease the symptoms of which has made the case as conspicuous as the visibility of Pole Star against the vast stretch of the sky.

The action swings back in the past to acquaint us with the circumstances which perpetrated Srinivas's exodus from India. It is a South Indian Brahmin family which suffered under the British rule for their patriotic feelings and nationalistic sentiments. It was the year of the Great War. The Britishers were fighting the Germans and justified the war in the name of freedom against the militaristic Germans and the perpetrators of unthinkable atrocities. But a voice of protest was also heard bringing out their ambivalent attitude to war. In Europe war is fought for human freedom, but in India it is the war to enslave man:

"If the British were so passionate about freeing other peoples, why did they keep such a tight hold on India? But it was a lone, older, cantankerous voice to which, in the full flush of generous and outgoing young adolescence, they did not listen."^{1}

That is they wanted to keep their hold tightened on the Indians for business interest, India being one lucrative economic unit of the Empire. And the struggle to be free from this alien Yoke would mean

1. Ibid., p. 107
“sacrifice, of home and family and career and ambition, and discipline of mind and emotions; it meant cutting free, now and illimitably, of that robust human stanchion, me and mine first. So the father and grandfather and the older members of Srinivas's family devoutly asked to be spared, and clung to the manner of their living which, in these shifting times, had become doubly precious. Involvement, however, already lay waiting, just around the corner, where they could not see what form it would take, only the amorphous shadow.”

The grandfather was the first victim. The British Government wanted to construct a 53 miles road through the area and destroyed the teakwood forest owned by the grandfather. They wanted to pay some "compensation" which is a reflection of what they thought of the Indians. But the offer was irksomely rejected:

"Compensation," the old man said, without vehemence, with the bleak acceptance of his age, which knew that the rebellion which was called for was only for the young. "What compensation can they give us for purloining what has taken a hundred years to grow?"

The felling of the trees and the loss and indignities heaped on him resulted in his death. The second casualty is Srinivas's father, Narayan who teaches in a government college. What an irony that he is denied promotion for the simple fault of his being "an Indian". It was the time when the entire country was seething with anger and protestation against the Britishers. The frenzy and enthusiasm of freedom struggle movement swept over the land and all around there were scenes of boycotting everything, branded as alien. Narayan chooses to wear Khadi-dress in place of the prescribed Alpacca coat. His dress is

1. Ibid., p. 110 2. Ibid., p. 111
symbolic of Indianness which is taken as an eruption of moral violence and a case of disobedience.

The Governor is to visit the college. The hall is full of Indians and a handful of English men. They wanted their anthem sung which was "God was duly petitioned to save the king." The singing finished and Narayan's spirit rose in rebellian to sing his country's anthem. But unfortunately he did not know its text precisely and thus advancing to the platform began to sing one those hymns that he saw her mother sing in the house and the ordinary men the same outside. In the eyes of the rulers Narayan was the unexpected man who "created unexpected situation." Narayan's distressing sound strikes harsh to the Governor's imperialistic sensibility and under impulse his hand falls on the singer's shoulder which is less a gesture to suggest 'stopping' and more an act of chastisement for such a refractory and rebellious gesture. The sight of falling of hand on his father's shoulder rouses the rebel in action, Srinivas feels his pride hurt. His words "Your Excellency, take your bloody hands off my father", create a stir. The usual decree for such cases of indiscipline and revolt is the expulsion from the college or the denial of admission.

The Vice-Chancellor wanted to sack Narayan for his nationalistic feelings and sentiments but fearing his popularity in the college and the very likelihood of eruption of students' riots he is hustled off to a lunatic ward of the municipal hospital. This was, the novelist tells, "the best thing they could have done."
Narayan advises the son to leave India and go to England to seek future because here he “will be black-listed in every school and college throughout the country. Government service is out too.

“You could still have a career,” said his father, “elsewhere. They say that England is not a bad place. Platt says in many ways it is better than here. Especially for someone like you.”...
“I’m willing to try,” he said.
“Then, the sooner the better.”
“Yes.”
“Don’t tell your mother.”
“She has to know, sooner or later.”
“That I – that I suggested it.”

Can the self elsewhere seek fulfillment and be of itself? What an irony that an Indian has no future in India and is advised to seek one elsewhere! Srinivas’s mother comes to know of this unexpected displacement of his son and expresses her fear and doubt if her son would have a smooth sailing at a place which is not his by inheritance.

“All my life,” she said, “we have lived under foreign rule. At least half that time we have opposed it, but we have lived with it. Why has it suddenly become unbearable?”...
“If they are bad to you here, what makes you think they will be good to you there?”
“If they are bad to us here it is because they have bad consciences about us,” said Narayan.
“The same thing may happen there,” said Nirmala “Who is to say? Can guarantees be given? If it does happen there will not even be the strength we have had from our family.”

However, Nirmala’s dried eyes sees the terminus. They cannot escape its inevitability. Preparations are made for the departure which includes his hasty marriage also with Vasantha, the daughter of a neighbouring family which is also involved in freedom struggle movement.

1. Ibid., p. 2. Ibid., p.
The scene shifts to the 'thirties' when at Gandhi's call to boycott the British goods people came forward to burn the bonfire of everything that was not native. The women-folk burnt all British-manufactured articles. Vasantha's family is the family of lawyers who resigned from the government job as a protest in the non-cooperation movement. Vasantha’s brother Vasudev is the students’ leader and is imprisoned for organizing protest-march. The two families are the sufferer of the colonial prejudices. All higher posts are assigned to the Britishers who were holding lower degrees than the Indians. Even the Vice-Principal of the College is simple B.A. under whom the college teachers of academic excellence have to work.

The unusual circumstances oblige the two families to live together so as to help each other in time of need. Srinivas in indulged in subversive activities and any question shot at him to find out the truth is properly answered. The two incidents – the police raid on their house during which Vasantha is insulted and the death of Vasudev – leave a scar on Srinivas’s psyche. Nobody knows why the raid was conducted and how Vasudev died. Vasudev and his friends were blacklisted and thus to escape the anger of the government machinery, they stayed underground. The reality is manifest in the utterance of Vashudev's father.

“It has always been my submission that when people are activated by overriding emotion their action follows a course foreign to their character.”...

What happened happened far away, hundreds of miles away, in Amritsar in the distant Punjab. The facts were fairly straightforward though terrible; the interpretations varied and the repercussions no one could calculate.”... “A hundred Indians for each Briton. That is their scale, the scale by which they
value themselves and against which we are measured. That is what we are up against: not their greed, or their anger, nor land hunger, nor the need to trade, but their arrogance, the mentality that produces such policies and acts.”¹

The entire country was shaken by wide-spread violence, killing, protests and demonstrations. Srinivas could not concentrate on his studies partly because the people dressed in spotless white coats in the college looked to him as devils in disguise:

“Observe, notice, the interesting changes. That modulated voice, how it conned you! You would never have suspected that what it was talking about was cruelty, methodically practiced on a living creature until it lost its instincts, its purpose, its place in creation and finally its spirit for life. Well, no doubt it was interesting – if you didn’t think, never put yourself in those helpless skins, if you rode on surfaces for fear of going under, what you might find there.”... That is the truth of it, he acknowledged at last; whether one likes it or not, that is the truth.”²

The predicament of Srinivas and Vasantha which they share in England is the same as they shared in India. Soon they find the same treatment meted out to the Indians there in England. They are looked upon what Kipling prompted ‘the lesser breed’ and the white man’s burden. They are treated as inferior and impoverished specimen of humanity. One is reminded of Prospero’s relation with Caliban, the dispossessed native. Finding a job for an Indian of not much education is difficult in England. Srinivas, being a non-graduate, chooses to establish his own business in spices which turns out to be flourishing and lucrative. They also buy a flat – No. 5, Ashcraft Avenue which generates waves of facile optimism and satisfaction in Vasantha’s mind. She feels proud of owning at least

1. Ibid., p. 122 2. Ibid., p. 135
their own house.

"At last we have achieved something. A place of our own, where we can live according to our lights although in alien surroundings: and our children after us, and after them theirs."\(^1\)

Vasantha is perhaps blind to the ironic implications that by owning a house in a non-native country will not create miracles unless the self becomes transcendence-transcended.

"Chains, said Srinivas, glum amid the tea chests and buckled fiber suitcases. We have chained ourselves to four walls and a roof. But these restraints were as nothing, compared to those twisted if invisible shackles that were later to be forged."\(^2\)

It is as much the religio-cultural alienation as racial that creates sense of loneliness. The barriers of religion are vital to widen the chasm between a native and a non-native. Srinivas has his own fear of assimilation as his words to Vasantha suggest: "Can you really imagine I am a Londoner?" The outward trappings are a weak strategy to overcome the existential crisis born of the east-west encounter.

"Vasantha was a Hindu, born and bred in a subtle religion whose concepts, being on the cosmic scale, made no concessions to puny mankind: a religion that postulated one God, infinite, resplendent, with a thousand different aspects but One: God the creator, preserver, destroyer, union with whom was the supreme purpose and bliss. She found herself accosted by practitioners of a religion that appeared, by contrast, to be positively parochial, riddled with good deeds and childish miracles."\(^3\)

It is this inherent dualism in Hindu religion which is largely responsible for shaping one's outlook on life. It's espousal of a philosophy of contrariness and of the opposing attitude to violence and

1. Ibid., p. 21 2. Idem 3. Ibid., p. 18
non-violence, materialism and spiritualism, acquisition and renunciation, involvement and detachment do not prescribe a clear worthwhile philosophy of life on moral issues. One’s psyche forged in tradition and orthodoxy will hardly be open to waves of religious reforms. Vasantha, the novelist tells, has discarded certain Indian ways but even after she “remained Indian in matters of religion as well as in dress.” Her world outlook is medieval, the ‘otherworldliness’ in contrast to that of Srinivas’s – of “this worldliness”. He believes in the value of “now and here” and not beyond the present whereas Vasantha’s ideal is the purity of the next birth without being ever certain of its rise. This complex of religio-cultural construct makes the two look strangers to each other and to the outer surrounding.

The problem of assimilation and accommodation differs from generation to generation. The value-system suiting one generation may be retrograde to the other, thereby creating the sense of alienation, not between a native and non-native but between a native and a native. The crisis of ‘nowhereness’, it is feared, is not limited to one generation alone. It’s tragic gloom casts its shadows over the succeeding generations. The two sons of Vasantha, Laxman and Seshu are also the cases of cultural alienation. Laxman’s claim to belong to England is out rightly disowned by those whom he loved as his own.

“Coming to this country,” said the woman who had set out to support her daughter through the ordeal of eviction, “acting as if you owned it, oppressing us.”
“If we do, we have learned from our masters, madam,” said Laxman, selecting from his armory.
“Go back where you belong,” said the woman.
“I belong right here,” said Laxman.”

1. Ibid., p 273
The rupture in one's own blood is also reflected in what goes on between Srinivas and Laxman which makes Srinivas's story more tragically ironic:

"I have been – deeply touched," said Srinivas, with difficulty, because it was no easier speaking to his son now than ever it had been, "that you should have come down to see me through my troubles."

"Do you think I had much option?" cried Laxman. His eyes were starting out of his head, confronted with innocence of quite this enormity. "The papers have already got on to the fact that I am your son!"

Your son, your son, the wafers of the old house trembled and whispered, and Srinivas shivered with them, and bled, and the white drops fell within him where they could not be seen, for the fissure that gaped between him and his flesh, though it could also have been between himself and the country which had, until not so long ago, been loved as his own."1

Kamla Markandaya is sometimes criticized for lack of solidity which implies her "failure to establish the context". The self is deluded if there is no reconciliation between the two warring value system – one acquired, the other inherited, Laxman and Seshu are caught in a dilemma for the reason that neither they identify themselves with what they have inherited by birth, nor are they fully assimilated into what is acquired. This is the inner tormentation of the spirit that keeps troubling Srinivas's imagination at a time when he needs someone to call his own to look after his comforts and overcome the problem of isolation and nihilism.

Laxman is an engineer with REME, Seshu is a navigator with the Royal Air Force but he is dismissed for his sentimentality which is something relishing for his mother: she sees "an end to her son's

1. Ibid., p. 273
complicity in murder.\textsuperscript{1} Later while evacuating the wounded from the field he was hit by a German shell at the age of 21. Her love for Seshu is greater than that of Laxman. Hence her death leaves Vasantha a broken and ruined woman. Laxman chooses an English girl, Pat, to marry. She works in a munitions factory in Plymouth without the consent of the parents. Srinivas reconciled with the situation but the woman in Vasantha felt injured since, she has not been able to shed away the traditional notion associated with motherly privileges especially in choosing a bride for her son. If Vasantha were to choose the bride, perhaps it would have been different but this much-fancied pleasure of making a choice is denied to her.

\begin{quote}
"Only to have been able to select," replied Vasantha, and leaned against the bolster he had provided, "since I would have selected the best."
\end{quote}

"As this girl may be, "Srinivas ventured to say. But he knew that it would not do, since what was upset was not concerned with Pat, but with certain maternal rights which Vasantha had believed were hers."\textsuperscript{2}

Things take a blighted turn when Laxman does not think on point of shame to invite his Indian parents on marriage. It was a formal two-line information, not invitation. They experience the sickening tremor to know that they, being Indian are looked upon as misfit. The words of their own son "I find them impossible to talk to" are a harsh but frank confession of a person who has lost his roots to exist.

If Srinivas is a nowhere man by virtue of his colour and nationality, what of Vasantha’s nowhereness? She becomes a nowhere woman in her own house when her own son disowned the familial

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] Ibid., p. 27
\item[2.] Ibid., p. 28
\end{itemize}
obligations and loyalty. In the wake of the decaying of human relation for want of sympathy and fellow-feeling Vasantha sees no one near to talk to except her own self.

Life is reduced to the level of comicality and Vasantha is left a study in isolation which is further intensified when she is wittingly kept away from the scene of her grandson's birth. A son is born to Laxman but Vasantha is directed to stay away from having a look at her own grand child. This is sufficient to destroy the cherished dream of an orthodox grandmother whose only bliss is to see a male child in the household to continue the family line in patriarchy. Her mind keeps wandering feverishly imagining of the birth-day celebrations and festivities if the child were born in India. Even the customary visit is denied. Laxman writes his parents not to visit them for want of sufficient accommodation whereas, we are told, that Pat's parents are already staying with them. Pat develops complications after delivery and there is only one spare bed room. Such a treatment is shocking to every mother and its agony finds expression in Vasantha's protestations to Srinivas:

“What does that matter?” asked Vasantha, bewildered. “Is a room essential? I would have slept anywhere. In a corridor, or the kitchen. Just to see the baby.”

“They don't do things like that in this country.” Said Srinivas.

“A dozen people, sleeping in one basement, during the war,” she reminded him.

“The war is over,” he said.”

It so happens that Vasantha develops tuberculosis and dies without having a fond look at her grand child. It is on her plea that

1. Ibid., pp. 36-37
Laxman extended the invitation after six months but destiny had willed it otherwise. It is true that the outer milieu is hostile to the growth of intimacy and healthy relationship but what of inside – story? She is helpless to set things right in a world in which 'I - Thou' relationship is degenerated into 'I-It' relationship. Vasantha is a woman, unwanted, unaccommodated and thus her yearnings to be back in her place of birth create gloom and poignancy of realism. She said to Srinivas, "When I am better we must return to our country. There is no reason, now that India is free why we should not. Nor, she said painfully, is there anything really, to keep us here any more."¹

With the loosening of the hold of imperialism on its establishment, the political climate began to change its colour. The nationalistic feelings and patriotic sentiments found free and fearless expression. The tremor reached England also which surfaced in the form of the anti-black movement. The feelings of hostility and anger were discernible in the white man's eye. Vasantha's death leaves the Indian merchant of spices, in state of dangling. Before he can think of shifting the business somewhere else to be of himself, the flat is burnt down by one, Fred Fletcher. But it is sheer irony that the chance appearance of Laxman on the scene saves Srinivas but Fred is destroyed in the fire. What could have happened with a man of seventy in such a situation can be anybody's guess.

The novel thus remains a sad comment on the predicament of man in state of rootlessness which is orchestrated by evils of

¹. Ibid., p. 38
colonialism and racial prejudices. The self continues to be the same as it is in the existing situation unless the stir shatters the mask of impassiveness and inertia.