“For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as of your very vitals were being devoured…."

*Nectar in a Sieve*
CHAPTER – IV

THE NOVELS OF

KAMALA MARKANDAYA

Kamala Markandaya has occupied a prominent place among Indian English writers as one of the leading woman writers in English. All her ten novels deal with the themes of East-West encounter, rootlessness, human relationships, poverty, hunger and exploitation. The present chapter aims at studying only those of her novels which deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation as their major themes. Though her other novels too refer to these themes, the references are merely abrupt and not major.

Nectar in a Sieve

Kamala Markandaya derives the title *Nectar in a Sieve* from Coleridge, whose lines form an epigraph to the novel:

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

(qtd. in Iyengar, 438)

Kamala Markandaya has used the couplet by Coleridge because these lines adequately express the theme of the novel. When work is done without any hope it becomes as futile as nectar in a sieve. If there is no object or goal in life, life becomes futile. Markandaya shows that for a peasant his work is his life. If he is separated from his work he either withers with poverty and hunger or dies. He has neither hopes nor any goal in life. Markandaya also shows that happiness that stays in life only for a short while is like ‘nectar in a sieve’ for the peasant.
M.K. Bhatanagar in his essay, “Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-outsider” rightly observes,

Markandaya’s first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist–narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve. (Bhatnagar 3)

The Indian peasant works without hope and leaves everything in the hands of God and bears all sufferings with a sense of fatalism.

Kamala Markandaya has subtitled the novel as *A Novel of Rural India* to disclose the very characteristics of rural India through the life of countless Indian villagers living in dire poverty, hunger and exploitation. She has not named the fictional locale to make a village microcosm of rural India. Kai Nicholson in *Social Problems in the Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian Novel* says,

With her impeccable representational realism and innovative description of Indian arcadia, Markandaya achieves a perfect poise between the rural reality and the disciplined urbanity of art. (120)

The novelist has made Rukmani, the protagonist; narrate the tale, in order to show the subtle intensities of the emotional fabric. She has made a woman the central character because she knows that woman is at the centre of the socio-economic structure of the Indian peasant families. Rukmani is a symbol of an Indian rustic woman. Her views are reflections of typical socio-cultural ethos which is designed to make an Indian woman tolerant, submissive, innocuous and easily satisfied with her lot.
The story takes place in one of the small south Indian villages of India. It is difficult to pinpoint the time and the place in which the action of the novel takes place. The historical references reveal that it occurs at the backdrop of India’s attainment of independence. However no matter what the setting and time are, the novelist’s portrayal of the Indian social system has a timeless appeal. Chandrasekharn in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* says,

She draws her raw material from reality without sacrificing what Charles Dickens regarded as ‘the poetry of fact’ (Chandrasekharn 36-37)

Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a once prosperous village headman is married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, who is poor in all respects. By the time of her marriage the hay days of her father come to an end resulting in her marriage with a poor peasant. Rukmani becomes the victim of the dowry system as her father is unable to pay her dowry. The fourteen year old Rukmani comes to her new home, the sight of which sends a chill down her spine. “This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch was my home.” (14) She cannot adjust herself to such a poor insecure abode. But when she comes to know that the hut has been built by her husband with his own hands, her fear and humiliation turns into pride. The Indian dowry system throws her in poverty and Indian value system makes her to accept it as her fate.

The first six years of married life are spent without much difficulty. However with the birth of every child their poverty starts aggravating. Rukmani says “we no longer had milk in
the house except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions” (24). Till the birth of the sixth child their economic condition worsens to such an extent that they have to remain half fed though not starving till they grow vegetables in their own field. The rise in prices of the essential commodities compels them to sell the cattle. When Irawaddy, her only daughter turns fourteen she marries her to a farmless labourer by spending all her savings on her marriage. Unfortunately the flood destroys their crops in the same year and they have no other way but to survive on roots, leaves and plantain till the next harvest. To make the matters worse, four years after her marriage Ira returns to her parents as her husband abandons her for not giving him an heir.

Arjun and Thumbi, her two sons start working in a tannery and improve their economic condition. But soon they lose their jobs and go to Ceylon in search of daily bread. The rains fail, the year they leave destroying their hopes. As a tenant Nathan is compelled to pay the revenue in order to save their tilling land for which they sell their household material and bullocks. Rukmani’s third son Raja dies of brutal beating by the tannery watchmen. The condition of the youngest child Kuti becomes more and more critical. Ira becomes a prostitute to save her brother; her sacrifice however fails to save Kuti. Old Granny, a well wisher of Rukmani’s family, also dies of hunger in the street.

Kennington, a doctor, another well wisher of Rukmani gives a job to her fourth son in his mission of building a hospital in the village. One day the landlord gives a notice to Nathan to vacate the land within a week to which he does not protest. The landless Nathan
and Rukmani find no other alternative but to go to their son Murugan in the town for their survival. Selvam and Ira however decide to stay back.

As Rukmani and Nathan fail to find out the address of their son in the town, they take shelter in a temple. When they come to know that their son does not live in that town anymore they return to the temple and stay there like beggars. They plan to earn enough money to travel back home within forty to sixty days. But Nathan’s health continues to deteriorate day by day and he dies on the very day on which they collect enough money to return. Nathan loses the battle against hunger but Rukmani does not surrender. She returns to the village with her adopted son. Selvam and Ira welcome them. Rukmani regains her tranquility.

The novel appears circular in structure as the story ends where it begins. Bhagwant Goyal in his book *Culture and Commitment* rightly says,

> It indicates the endless cycle of despair and deprivation in which India’s rural and urban poor are eternally trapped. (Goyal 98)

The novel deals with the peasants, their activities, hopes and expectations and joys and sorrows. It is a portrayal of goodness living in poverty, hunger and despair. It is a story of landless peasants who are exploited by their landlords and destroyed by the cruelty of nature. Almost all the characters in the novel lead the miserable life and most of them fail to survive.

Rukmani is a tragic character but she has no personal hand in any of the misfortunes which befall her and her family. Throughout the novel she struggles against the heavy odds imposed on her by the
society and nature. Rukmani is silent, submissive, easily satisfied with her lot, ready to accept everything that comes her way with a calm resignation. Her unflinching faith in God, her strong will power and morality give her strength to face vicissitudes of life. Even during the days of adversity her spirit does not droop. She does not lose her patience even in the most adverse situations. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says,

But the heart that is tempered in the flames of love and faith, of sufferings and sacrifice, will not easily accept defeat. Rukmani the narrator heroine is also ‘a mother of sorrow. (Iyengar 438)

Her most prominent feature is her serenity and the sense of balance even in crisis. Poverty and hunger cannot dehumanize her. Calamities of the flood call for major attack of starvation, but Rukmani does not show any emotional outburst. She considers misfortunes and sorrows as essential ingredients of life and accepts poverty and hunger as constant companions thereof. She considers that there is grandeur in endurance and she looks at hunger in a philosophical manner. She says, “Our priests fast and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed” (114).

Shiv K. Kumar in his essay “Tradition and change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya” rightly observes,

Markandaya seems to suggest by the resilient humanism of an individual like Rukmani, whose unbounded faith looks definitely beyond all physical suffering and partakes of that peace that surpasseth all understanding. (Kumar 206)

She remains a symbol of Indian rustic poor peasant, who has been trained to believe in the virtue of simplicity, of living with the
minimum of needs and desires throughout her life. Balaram Gupta, one of the critics, in his book *Indian English Literature* observes,

Rukmani the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth, is the virgin soil, the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher and even more, the last resort, the consoler, the healer. It is the positive sustaining force of life... Her integrity is never on the brink of collapse. (Gupta 92)

Nathan, the husband of Rukmani represents an Indian peasant. He is a stereotype character. He is a passive sufferer. There is ‘an emphasis on rural ethos and rural value system, Nathan fits in this framework, a poor peasant in every sense. On the very day of the marriage he tries to soothe her by showing a dream of bright future. But while doing so he cannot hide his helplessness. It can be easily seen on his face. Rukmani says, “There was something in his voice, a pleading, a look on his face such as a dog has when you are about to kick it” (4).

Throughout the novel he remains the shadow of his wife. He shows great concern for her. He works for his family but cannot get enough to eat. His hard work and starvation make him ill. He stands only on his wife’s emotional and physical support. Nathan accepts his poverty, hunger and exploitation as his destiny. He does not raise his voice against the exploitation by his landlord, when his agent comes to collect the tax. Nathan’s comment on the exploitation of the peasant by the landlord is noteworthy:

“That is why he and his kind are employed,” Nathan said bitterly. “To protect their overlords from such unpleasant task, now the landlord can wring from us his moneys and care not
for the misery he evokes, for indeed it would be difficult for any man to see another starve and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born of such travail.” (73)

Irawaddy, Rukmani’s first child, is another silent sufferer like her parents. Born as an unwanted child, she remains unwanted throughout her life. The parents do not pay any attention to her before her marriage. The gravity of her state can be easily understood by Rukmani’s words. She says, “Poor child, she was bewildered by the many injunctions we laid upon her and the curtailing of her freedom tried her sorely, though not a word of complaint came from her” (30).

At the age of fourteen, she gets married. After five years of marriage, her husband abandons her as he considers her a barren woman. She accepts it as her destiny and returns home to live with her parents. She does not raise her voice against this exploitation. She withdraws herself from others. She accepts her future with utter hopelessness. Rukmani says, “With a dowry it was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren.” (62) Here too she has to suffer a lot due to hunger and poverty that the family faces. When she realises that her younger brother is dying of hunger, she takes to prostitution. The prostitution cannot save her brother, only it makes her pregnant. She gives birth to an albino. But she becomes happy because the birth of a child proves that she is not a barren. She manages to survive turbulence one after another and survives till the end. In fact it is Ira who gives moral support to her mother in the end.

Dr. Kennington is portrayed as a kind hearted doctor who has sympathy for every poverty stricken villager. He tries to make them aware of the negligence of the government. He criticizes the dump peasants for not raising voice against their exploitation. Though he is
an English character he is not portrayed as an exploiter. K. R. Chandrashekharan in his essay “East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya” points out that the novelist has projected,

…a good missionary and philanthropic spin doing his best for a backward country without ostentation or vanity. He is also neutral observer of life in India. (qtd. in Parvati Misra 7)

Arjun and Thambi symbolize both positive and negative sides of industrialization. By working in the tannery, they bring money and happiness to their family. But when they raise their voice against the exploitation by the tannery owners, they lose their jobs. Unable to stand the miseries of unemployment and poverty, both go to Ceylon in search of job. By leaving the village they reduce the possible economic burden off their parents, however by deserting their parents they deny possible financial support to their family. Kuti, the youngest member of the family, is a mute sufferer of poverty and hunger. The agonies of hunger he suffers are beyond his tolerance. Hunger works like a slow poison with him. He symbolizes all other poverty stricken children who try to survive the battle against poverty and hunger.

All the members of Nathan’s family contribute to the realistic portrayal of the poor and suffering India. So the novel, rightly described as ‘a novel of rural India’ is an authentic picture of the Indian rural society, in which most people live in perpetual poverty and hunger and often die of starvation. The problems of rural India and tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with a moving sincerity. But a number of critics allege Markandaya that she has over simplified the rural Indian scene as an absent narrator. M. K. Naik in A History of Indian English Literature says that “Rukmani’s village exists only in the expatriate’s imagination of her creator” (Naik 263). She is also accused of making conscious effort to make her work
acceptable to the Western eye. However, her picture of village is well-grounded in reality. She may be careless about minor details but she focuses her attention on so many social evils of Indian society

The novel deals with a number of themes such as beggary, prostitution, lack of family planning, zamindari system, dowry system, superstitions, low status of women and evils of marriage system. Parvati Misra in her Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya observes:

*Nectar in a Sieve* is a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, negligence of female child, slavery, landlessness, casteism and illiteracy.”(Misra 2)

All these themes move around the central themes of poverty, hunger and exploitation.

The exploitation leads to poverty, poverty creates hunger and hunger again reverts to exploitation. Thus it becomes an unending vicious cycle. An old woman, Rukmani who had lost her husband and five of her six sons, who live in her mud thatched hut, narrates her extremely painful life’s story which fills us with deep sorrow. Being a daughter of this soil, she knows what it means to be poor. She considers it as the ‘sixth great sin’. Poverty breeds hunger. Anil Kumar Bhatanagar in his Kamala Markandaya : A Thematic study says,

She makes her readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation. True one cannot judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry. Markandaya lived in South-Indian villages and shared
the sufferings of villagers as independent observer. (Bhatnagar 21)

She shows her minute observation by describing the effects of hunger on the human body and the human mind. Rukmani says,

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as of your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment’s respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this, you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain all desire only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in draught and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid, tax you to the uttermost. (87-88)

Markandaya gives a detailed description of their efforts to make their two ends meet till the next harvest. They struggle for survival facing the hardships of living like being fed with the food that even animals cannot eat. She says,

Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear; a sweet potato or two, blackened and half rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hands; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with
a few bamboo shoots, a stick of sugarcane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town... for every edible plant or root there was a struggle - a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity. (87)

No wonder, hunger turns them into beasts. This description makes us feel the agony of the poor. Rukmani describes the effects of hunger on their bodies. She says “There flesh melted away and their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin” (88). The youngest Kuti could not digest the things brought by the elders to eat. Being a weak child he suffers. Rukmani says,

At first he asked for rice-water and cried because there was none. But later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even in his sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, permitting no one to rest. (88)

All of them become so weak that on the death of Raja, her son Rukmani does not cry and does not allow her daughter to cry. She says, “What are you crying for?... you have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears”(89).Kuti turns so weak that he stops wailing. Ira cannot see her brother dying of hunger and she takes to prostitution. Nathan shows his parental anger, “I will not have you parading at night” Ira’s reply “Tonight and tomorrow and every night. So long as there is need, I will not hunger anymore”(99) makes Nathan speechless. Ira’s prostitution increases the life of Kuti by a few more days but it cannot save him. Kuti dies of hunger. Rukmani, the mother feels relieved as she says, “I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart and could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to
Rukmani feels that her son has escaped from the cruel trap of hunger. She feels that her son should not continue his battle against hunger. She does not want him to struggle again for survival. Thus Markandaya shows her characters willingly accepting the death of their near and dear ones as a permanent escape from the eternal feeling of hunger.

Markandaya brings out the fact that poverty and hunger can lead to degradation. At the root of the acts of immorality there is poverty. It is poverty which drives Kunthi the neighbour to prostitution. It is hunger which provokes Kunthi to blackmail Rukmani. But through some characters like Irawaddy, Markandaya wants to project that not all choose the immoral path to overcome their poverty. Ira’s choice of prostitution is not due to her own hunger but to save her brother’s life. Even in the direst poverty, Rukmani does not lose her morality. She shows her willingness to share her meals with her neighbour Kunthi. She even adopts a poor orphan child.

Markandaya tries to show that lack of family planning is one of the reasons of poverty in the rural India. When Rukmani gets married, they have enough to eat and store. But with the growing number of children poverty also grows. Even literate Rukmani is shown helpless. She knows that the growing number of children is the root cause of their poverty but she feels proud of being a mother of six sons. Markandaya emphasizes the fact that one of the recurring blights of Indian poverty is their inordinately large families. Most of the rustic Indian women are illiterate. By making Rukmani literate the novelist has made the point that though literacy cannot overcome poverty, it can help the women to face the problems successfully. Literacy helps Rukmani to anticipate the possible problems and plan accordingly. It
is her literacy which helps Nathan and Rukmani to survive in the city.

Exploitation of women is one of the common themes of Markandaya. She knows that a woman is at the centre of rural economy. She is eternally trapped in the endless cycle of poverty, hunger and exploitation. Her exploitation starts on her wedding day. She feels humiliated when she gets married with a poor, illiterate peasant like Nathan. A girl from a well to do family is compelled to marry such a man who has neither land nor money. Poverty is imposed on her by the social system. Rukmani accepts it and adjusts herself with new surroundings like any other Indian daughter of her age. She continues her married life as any other Indian superstitious, conventional rustic woman. Even in poverty she celebrates the birth of her first child but also expresses her disappointment over the birth of a female child. Unfortunately the history is seen repeated in the marriage of her daughter, when Rukmani has to marry her beautiful daughter Ira to a poor person due to her inability to pay the dowry.

Markandaya also succeeds to portray the feudal exploitation that is another important characteristic of rural India. Nathan is compelled to pay the land taxes of the Zamindar, even after the failure of the harvest. After nature’s wrath, human assault comes like a bolt from the blue. The landlord orders Nathan to vacate the land within two weeks. The tenant who has been tilling the land for more than thirty years is asked to vacate it within two weeks, without any compensation or any provision for his future. The land is sold to the tannery owner without the consent of the tenant. Nathan mutely succumbs to the exploitation. He has his own fatalist philosophy that is representative of all Indian farmers. He feels that the land never belonged to him neither could he ever buy it. As a son of a landless man, he inherits nothing. Nathan symbolizes the plight of the Indian peasants when Rukmani says,
To those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty? This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune. (134,135)

Her son, the representative of the younger generation expresses his anger over the exploitation but keeps mum when Nathan expresses his helplessness for not having any law against it. He says, “We may grieve, but there is no redress.”(136)

Rukmani blames the tannery for their exploitation. The tannery becomes the symbol of economic or industrial exploitation. Shiv K. Kumar in his essay “Tradition and Change in novels of Kamala Markandaya” compares it with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. He says,

Rukmani, the devoted wife of a tenant farmer, living in the soulful quietude of her little village, suddenly finds within this garden of Eden a serpent in the form of a tannery that begins to rear its ugly head, devouring green open spaces, pollution the clean, wholesome atmosphere and tempting simple gullible peasants into greed, ambitions and immorality.(Kumar 205)

The tannery thus lays the foundation of industrialization based on the principles of exploitation of labour and absenteeism. The very existence of the rural life is endangered by the advent of tannery as the
industry brings prosperity as well as its ill effects. Through the character of Nathan, Markandaya shows the picture of Indian peasant at the advent of Industrialization. Industrialization makes peasants landless. Peasants know no other skills but for tilling the land. Industrialization makes them rush to the towns and cities. But due to their illiteracy and lack of any other skill they either turn beggars or die. When Nathan becomes landless he goes to the town. He loves his land more than anything else. Knowing no other skills, he becomes helpless when he is compelled to live in the town. He has to become a beggar in order to survive in the town. His hard work on the quarry aggravates his illness and brings him closer to death. He dies on the very day they plan to return. His fight against poverty and hunger comes to an end only with his unfortunate death.

Markandaya thus succeeds in proving through this novel that it is the socio-economic condition that is responsible for various kinds of social evils. Poverty, hunger and exploitation can give birth to the social evils like prostitution, disintegration of family, and a mad rush towards city. So long as poverty exists various social evils and malpractices will continue to thrive. The hope for betterment lies only in the surviving morality in a few human beings.

A Handful of Rice

This novel seems to be a sequel to Nectar in a Sieve. Markandaya continues to carry her impressions of poverty. In her first novel the protagonist Rukmani’s son Murugan leaves the village for the town to make a better living. Murugan, as readers perceive reappears as Ravi, the protagonist of A Handful of Rice. This idea
germinates in the readers mind when they take leave of Nectar in a Sieve seems to have reborn in A Handful of Rice.

If Nectar in a Sieve deals with rural economics, A Handful of Rice deals with urban economics. However both deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation in the ruthless society. The very title of the novel A Handful of Rice is suggestive of poverty and hunger. Every character of the novel struggles to get a handful of rice. The novel begins and ends with the protagonist’s struggle with poverty and hunger.

The novel seems to be set in the late fifties, the period of Independent India, trying to achieve economic stability. The story moves around a rustic boy, Ravi, who comes to the city to earn his living. Ravi, the protagonist of A Handful of Rice runs away from the village as many do to escape from poverty. Ravi tries to escape from the impoverished conditions of the countryside, when financial constraints grip him by the neck. Poverty and hunger follow him like shadows. A boy who comes with the dream of a bright future fails to face the ground realities of the urban life. He does not even get a shelter in the city. But he comes to know that he cannot return to the village. The village has nothing to offer to the son of a small rack-rent tenant former. “It held out before them like an incandescent carrot. The hope that one day, some day, there would be something” (26).

He becomes one of the several thousands who throng the city streets for suitable jobs and get ultimately disillusioned. Wherever he goes he faces unemployment and disappointment. The poverty and hunger trap him into the criminal underworld. He joins the gang of aimless loafers and criminals like smugglers, bootleggers and blackmarketeers. Ravi starts thinking that he has a bright future:
...his passport to a world shot with glitter and excitement: a world that revived the incandescent glow the city had once kindled; and suddenly the terror and the loneliness were gone, lifted from the load whose other components were hunger, the lassitude of hunger, and the terror of losing his identity in an indifferent city which was akin to death. Of course much of this world, this dazzling world, lay in the future: but every kind of fear and privation became bearable in the light of its bright promise. (27)

Living in abject poverty, he drowns his morality in drinking. Once, heavily drunk he falls into the hands of the Police. To escape he slips into the house of a tailor. Ravi dares to enter the house and threatens the old man, Apu, the tailor only because of his hunger. He says, “I am starving... I am hungry I want a meal. You let me in...”(6). This incident changes his life. The lower middle class house in which he stays for the night attracts him. The family which satisfies his hunger arouses Ravi’s dream of his own family and delicious meals.

Later, his love for Nalini, the daughter of Apu and his urge to survive in the city makes him accept the apprenticeship in tailoring offered by Apu. He finds in Ravi the successor of his trade. He accepts the proposal of Ravi’s marriage with his daughter Nalini as he sees in him the support of his old age. The poor lower middle class Apu is not left with much choice and he accepts the vagabond, reckless burglar as his son-in-law. It shows his helplessness which is an outcome of his poverty.

Ravi’s father is so poor that he has to raise money for the journey to the city. He mortgages his land, his only source of income for the betterment of his son. Though Ravi gets a house to live in, he is made to pay for his stay by Apu’s wife, Jayamma. The marriage offers
Ravi a better way of living. For the next few years he forgets the pangs of hunger, but not of poverty. He keeps on dreaming about a better life.

The increasing number of family members in the large family disturbs Apu’s economics. The growth of the textile mill and machine production pose threat to Apu’s tailoring business. Even a skilled worker like Apu struggles hard to survive in the competition. The garment workers are exploited by the shop-keepers. The big fish swallows the small fish. When Ravi discovers this exploitation made at the hands of the shop-keepers, he gets furious but the experienced Apu tells him the law of ‘the survival of the fittest’. It is better to live than perish.

The whole horror of this jungle law haunts Ravi’s life, when he finds himself at the receiving end with the business slipping through his fingers. The paralysis of Apu paralyses him too. He finds himself all alone in the jungle. The hard buffetings of this jungle law makes him aware of the reality. After the birth of the twins, the economic condition worsens. There is neither food nor clothes. He cannot even buy milk for the new born babies. They cannot celebrate the festivals. The death of Apu comes like a blow. Ravi takes charge of Apu’s business. The members of the family humiliate him by commenting on his failure to run the house. This time poverty strikes so severely that Ravi collapses. The slackness in the business is followed by the hike in the prices of the essential commodities.

Ravi finds it difficult to cope up with hardship and poverty aggravated by the ever increasing prices of essential commodities. The backlog of debts and arrears grow heavier day after day. The frustration of his failure again takes him to Damodar. This time he goes with determination to follow his path. Damodar suggests him to
go back to his village. Ravi responds “The village... what do you know about it? It’s not fit for cattle, not even the sort of cattle, you think I am” (214). Damodar makes him realize that urban life is worse than that. “I know what a city’s like, I have been scavenging in it since I was so high, ever since they found me crowing on a garbage heap and throw me right back onto it.” (214) Damodar agrees to give him a job. But again Ravi returns home.

The frustration of the poverty stricken Ravi increases day by day. He suspects the chastity of his wife. Nalini cannot tolerate it and leaves the house. The frustration, due to failure in the fight against poverty, and constant humiliation by his mother-in-law thrst him to such a length, that once he even rapes his mother-in-law.

In the meanwhile, Nalini who goes to her sister in protest against her husband’s charge of immorality, returns home realizing that she cannot stay in her sisters house who herself is living in sheer poverty. Ravi decides to fight against poverty with new plans. He gets engrossed in his work to such an extent that he fails to understand the gravity of his son’s illness. He neglects his son’s fever out of the fear of the doctor’s bill. But Raju’s condition deteriorates. He is compelled to call the doctor. When the illness turns out to be meningitis he forgets his “earlier obsessions, work, earnings and equations that never worked out.” (229) He hopes that his darling will survive. He thinks that to be poor is a sin.

When Raju, his son, who is on the verge of the death asks him questions ‘Do you like me? Why do you like me? (229) Ravi turns speechless. Ravi loves him from the depth of his heart. But in his struggle against poverty and hunger he forgets his son. He feels that it is not he but the society in which he lives is responsible for the death of his son. He finds the society guilty of the murder. He decides to
free himself from betraying ramshackle codes. He decides to give children their rights. He begs Damodar to give him some job. Earlier Damodar had offered him a job every time he asked but this time he refuses to give him a job.

He happens to join a hunger march next day unknowingly. A voice, ‘Rice today, rice. Rice today, rice!’ makes him aware of the purpose of the march. He rushes with the crowd towards the Government godowns of rice. In the godown the sight of the rice, the sound of the rusting of the grain turns him mad. Kannan, the blacksmith makes him aware that it is a crime to rob the rice of the innocent people. But Ravi thinks it is his right to take his share of rice. It is his children’s right. But on the arrival of the police he runs away without even a handful of rice. He joins another mob of rioters considering it as another march. When he realizes that they are attacking the rich shops he refuses to throw the brick. He finds it insensible as it will give him neither rice nor grain.

Throughout the novel Ravi’s mind is a battleground of honesty versus dishonesty. Finally honesty wins. Kamala Markandaya through her novel portrays two types of characters: the exploited Indian labourers and the long suffering woman which is found in her *A Handful of Rice* too.

As in many other of her novels, Markandaya has chosen the South Indian background for the story of this novel. The South Indian names such as Ravishankar, Kumaran, Jayamma, Puttana and references to the South Indian customs and traditions create a realistic picture of the people and locale of the South.

Through the character of Ravi, she shows that most of the young men who come to the city are always in two minds whether to
go for easy money or work hard to earn their living. She throws light on the plight of the youth in rural India through Ravi’s unwillingness to accept the craftsmanship like smithy and tailoring. Even the village youths like Ravi aspire for a white collared job that can give monthly salary and a pension. They are ready to accept hunger but are reluctant to use their hands to earn their living.

Ravi and his friend Damodar begin a life together in the gutters of the city of Madras. Damodar chooses the darker side of life and grows rich by squeezing people’s throats. He defeats poverty and hunger at the cost of his morality. Damodar offers Ravi to join him several times but Ravi prefers to remain poor and does not lose his morality. Markandaya uplifts the character of Ravi by showing him firm on his ways of morality. Had he accepted Damodar’s offer, it would have been the possible future of Ravi.

Marrying into Apu’s house Ravi solves his three basic needs of shelter, food and sex. However he does not feel happy or satisfied with his lot as he always wishes to be richer. When he goes to the sea-beach with his wife, he regrets for not going to a coffee bar, a place where rich people go. He feels unlucky for not getting the life of a carefree rich young man. Thus Markandaya, through her portrayal of the anxiety of Ravi, focuses on the discontent of the youth in India then. A.K. Srinivas Rao in “The Novel of Kamala Markandaya : A Study” says,

Markandaya is not content with mere human misery; nor is she satisfied with survey of the superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country.(Rao 81)
Due to his inability to cope up with the economic failure, Ravi’s mind constantly plies between honesty and dishonesty. Each time he gets defeated in the war against poverty, he is drawn towards Damodar. Damodar is brought up in city slums which are the breeding places of violence and crime. Poverty and hunger make Ravi think about surrendering to Damodar’s way of life but the basic humanity or the value system in him always makes him retreat to honesty.

When Ravi’s son dies, he becomes aware of the hollowness of moral values. He decides to renounce the moral code for the material prosperity. “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 beaying ramshackle codes “(231). His long endured poverty and hunger, his economic exploitation by the society make him take the decision of joining Damodar. But this time Damodar refuses him an entry into his underworld telling him that he is not fit for anything.

“--I see nothing”, said Damodar. “You are empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts something’s been at them.” He began to laugh, a high sharp ugly laughter. “What was it, termites?” (232)

At the climax of the story, irritation, anger and humiliation of poverty and hunger make him join the ‘hunger march’. He goes with them, “marching along six students and workmen, and petty craftsmen like himself with the same fires burning their bellies” (233). Kannan the blacksmith, poorer than Ravi makes him aware of the crime he is going to commit. Ravi flows with the tide but fails to get even a handful of rice. Finally, his conscience forces him to return to his senses. He refuses to commit an immoral act and accepts the poverty and returns home. The ultimate triumph of conscience shows
Markandaya’s belief in the essential goodness of man.

Nalini represents the lower-middle class women in the urban society. In the conditions of exploitation, she symbolizes power of endurance, patience, inexhaustible love and tenderness. She is emotionally matured. This emotional maturity enriches her sense of values and strengthens her hold on conscience. It helps her keep rapport with her husband and society. She understands the world. She has none of Ravi’s childish cravings. She knows “ordinary folk like us can never be like them” (75). That is why she survives the pressures of the deteriorating financial position and the angry outbursts of her proletarian husband. In most of the financial crisis she remains firm. With sense and sensibility she guides her husband. She is a practical minded woman but her husband’s hyper-ambitious nature frightens her.

Apu is yet another exploited Indian labourer. He is a skilled labourer earning as much as the family requires. He knows that he is being exploited by his customers but he is happy with his lot. He appears to be self centered but he takes care of every member of his family. His calculated economics keeps his family away from poverty. But as soon as he gets paralyzed, poverty and hunger dawn upon his family. He is aware of the gulf between the rich and the poor. But he does not get excited at the pompous show of big houses. He understands Ravi’s anger against their exploitation but he convinces him that unless they stand united they cannot raise their voice against exploitation. Markandaya depicts the miseries of the lower middle class in the transitional period in the Indian social history through the portrayal of Apu and his family. S. John Peter Joseph in his essay “Need for the Coexistence of Spiritualism” rightly says,
The most striking feature of Kamala Markandaya's fiction is that it reflects the changing ethos of the post-independent India. Her accurate delineation of the social, economical and political changes with special focus on the concept of cultural continuity reveals her extraordinary sense of historicity. (Joseph 123)

Human relationship has been one of the common themes of Markandaya’s novels. She shows disintegration of their relationships in the family due to the economic strain. There is not any emotional bond among the members of the family. Jayamma, Apu’s wife neither loves nor respects her two sons-in-law. She calls Puttana her elder son-in-law ‘a good for nothing fellow’ and hates Ravi for his vagabond nature. Puttanna calls his mother-in-law ‘She devil’. He expresses his anger before Verma, another parasite on the family “Do you know she even grudges me a handful of rice” (95). Her constant scolding for not contributing to the household makes him retaliate. He robs the savings of his father-in-law. It makes him leave the house but it cannot remove his poverty. A.K.Srinivas Rao in “The Novels of Kamala Markandaya – A study.” Says:

Markandaya is not content with mere human misery; nor is she satisfied with survey of the superficial situations of social injustice and economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country. (Rao 181)

Through the deterioration in the relationship of Ravi and Nalini, Markandaya shows how the economic strain can affect even their love. Nalini is all the time preoccupied with the thoughts of her household. She cannot look after her husband’s
emotional and physical needs. The feeling of being neglected makes Ravi so furious that he beats his wife. Even the pregnancy of his wife does not give him much happiness. In order to buy material essential for the baby, he has to forget his simple desires of buying a new bed, bicycle, shirt and a mouth organ for himself.

Through the protagonist Markandaya rejects the hypothesis that parents love their children in all circumstances. Usha Pathania in, Human Bond and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya says,

It suggests that poverty and deprivation make a monster of us all. It is not the children only who desert their parents, even parents ignore them. The inability to provide for them is killing for father also. Ravi whiles away his time sitting on the roadside, when Nalini is in labour. To get rid of the boredom and tension of the moment, he starts talking to the stranger sitting nearby. The man informs him that having children no more pleases him. With nine children to take care of, he has really become sick of them all. (Pathania 162)

The impact of poverty is so intolerable that it makes the poor lose their energy and the very instinct to live. At the age of thirty Ravi feels that he should die. In an attempt to make both the ends meet he neglects his son to such an extent that his son dies of meningitis. The question which Raju, his son asks him in his illness ‘Do you still like me?’ makes the reader brood over the declining human relationship.

Markandaya throws light on the poverty of the lower middle class families in the city by giving a number of small incidents. By the detailed descriptions of the big houses and accompanying them, with those of the dilapidated houses of the poor on the other hand, she
throws light on the wide gulf between the rich and the poor. She gives voice to her criticism of socio-economic system with explicit bitterness. She is critical of sharp social inequality in the urban society. But she knows the gap is so wide that it is difficult to bridge it. She shows, how a rich man can afford to spend fifty rupees on a little jacket for a little girl when others are unable to afford even daily vegetables for their dependants. She makes her protagonist raise her voice against the exploitation but she makes us realize how impotent his rage is.

The tragedy of Ravi is a tragedy of all those rustic small rank rent tenant farmers who turn to cities in order to earn their living. Through the description of poverty in the countryside Markandaya shows what makes them desert the villages, she says,

As far back as he could see they had all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty - the kind in which the weakest went to the wall, the old ones and the babies, dying of tuberculosis, dysentery, the falling fever, ‘recurrent fever’ and any other names for what was basically, simply nothing but starvation.

(12)

There are many such descriptions of poverty and hunger for which she is criticized by some Indian critics for her over simplification of village life in India as an absent narrator. She is accused of over-playing poverty in rural India with a conscious effort to make her work more acceptable to the readers in the west. Elina Kalinnikova comments that Markandaya’s presentation of India as less civilized than it is, is out of her “desire to cater to the taste of a reader in the west.” (Kalinnikova 47) Rocheele Almeida feels,

she is unable to portray real India as her privileged position separated her from real India, the India of custom and tradition,
religious orthodoxy and conventions, poverty, hunger and degradation. (Almeda 251)

Uma Parmeswaran seems to agree with her that Markandaya’s distance from their native country accounts for the inaccuracy and the lack of authenticity of sociological and cultural details in her novel. She says,

She knows English in India better than she knows peasants clerks of India. The English belongs to the world in which she has lived herself. (Parmeswaran 197)

Some critics look at Kamala Markandaya’s expatriate status positively. According to these critics her expatriate status allows her the required detachment and objectivity to deal with. As an Indian, settled abroad she has the first hand knowledge of both the East and the West so that she can be the most dispassionate observer. Her art is free from propaganda and didactics and is inspired by welfare of humanity and the alleviation of human sufferings. She has a flair for virtuosity and ambivalence in her attitude to society. Pravati Misra in Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya, says,

Kamala Markandaya’s perception of Indian ethos is strikingly similar to that of contemporary social novelists, there is nevertheless a unique sensitiveness in her novels in terms of the extent, range and depth of perception. (Misra 8)

A thoroughgoing study of her novels clearly reveals that though she appears to be inadequate in her description of Indian social reality, her very intention in portraying the reality is not to give microscopic descriptions of the reality but to sensitize the readers about the root causes of poverty, hunger and exploitation. She goes to the roots of the social realities to explore the economic and social structure and its
impact on the human mind. She gives description in order to probe into human psyche than to allure the readers with the superficial observations. When Ravi leaves his village, Markandaya says,

The village life 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 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 the monsoon dawn; and to know that one never would.

They always knew: knew that things would never be any better, they were lucky to stand still, for the only other way was downward. It was this knowing the worst, the hopelessness of it, plus the way people accepted their lot and even thanked God it was no worse - thanked God! - that sickened him... so he had got out, the very first moment he could, before he too got stuck like them, like flies on fly paper (P.49)

After presenting the grim picture of poverty, hunger and exploitation in the countryside through *Nectar in a sieve* Markandaya wrote *A Handful of Rice* to show that the picture is not much different in the urban India. *A Handful of Rice* is a lesson for the youth who blindly rush to the cities to earn their living. She shows that if there is nothing to offer to the young men in the villages, even the cities too have nothing in their store for them. The peasants, with their meager education get trapped into the urban evils. Those, who succumb to the evil practices like that of Damodar, do get name, fame and fortune but not a family life. On the contrary, those like the protagonist Ravi who stick to honesty do get an average, though not happy, family life but do not get name, fame and money.
Despite Ravi’s attempts to work hard by achieving the skills of his father-in-law, due to the lack of funds and a cutthroat competition in business on the account of the advent of the machinery and new trends in business do not allow him to stand in it. Rochelle Almeida in *Originality and Imitation*, says,

Though Ravi struggles to make two ends meet, circumstances beyond his control continually deter him: the birth of children he can ill-afford, the competition offered by skilled workers with a larger investment capital, the parasitic demands made on him by idle members of his family and society’s callousness towards his plight Ravi differs radically from Rukmani in his reaction to poverty. While Rukmani is fermented, she remains calm and self-possessed throughout, Ravi’s degradation and state of want provoke him to contemplate violence (Almeida 114).

In the climax of the novel Kamala Markandaya takes her protagonist to the highest fatal moment of his life. Ravi joins the mob to get rice or grain, but coming back to his conscience, later, clearly shows that though poverty makes him lose his temper for the time being his conscience remains intact. Though most of the poor lose their grim battle against poverty they do not lose their conscience.

Markandaya makes the readers aware of the exploitation of the labourers but she does not give mere superficial description. She peeps deep into the human psyche. A. K. Srinivas Rao in” The Novels of Kamala Markandaya – A study,” remarks,

Markandaya is not content with mere fatalistic poetic explanations of human misery; nor is she satisfied with summary of the superficial situations of social injustice and
economic inequality that continue to plague our society. She seeks to probe rather deeper into the moral dilemma that an individual is forced to face in a developing country (Rao 226).

Unlike most of the social novelists who hold the rich largely responsible for the exploitation of the poor which results in poverty and hunger, Markandaya in her novels blames more the vagaries of nature and the entire social structure than merely the rich for the declining conditions of the poor. It is the natural social condition in which her characters are born, that is responsible for their destiny. Though it appears that she probably wants to show that the dreams of the poor are simply the illusions which will never turn into reality in the present social structure, it is actually her intention to value morality more than money. Ravi’s aspiration for a better future represents every average rural youth who has rosy ideas about the city life. However it is a point worth considering that she wants to show that such ambitions can never turn into reality by following the unfair means in life and it is not necessary to be immoral to change one’s own destiny. Markandaya seems to reveal the truth that there is no place for immorality for the eradication of poverty, hunger and exploitation from the society.