CHAPTER IV

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004)

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CHAPTER IV

Kamala Markandaya’s (1924-2004)

**Nectar in a Sieve (1955) and A Handful of Rice (1966)**

IV.I. Preliminaries:

This Chapter discusses two novels by a famous Indian novelist, Kamala Markandaya, a mature of Mysore city and a graduate from Madras University. She is well-known for writing about culture clash between Indian urban and rural societies. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* was published in 1955 and was a bestseller. Some of her other novels are *Some Inner Fury, A Silence of Desire, Possession, A Handful of Rice, The Nowhere Man, Two Virgins, The Golden Honeycomb and The Pleasure City*. This Chapter deals with two of the most appreciated novels of Kamala Markandaya, viz. *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*.

Kamala Markandaya belonged to that pioneering group of Indian writers who made their mark not just through their subject matter, but also through their polished literary style. *Nectar in a Sieve* depicts the sufferings of farmers in rural India. Other fictions of Kamala Markandaya depict the Quit India Movement of 1942, the clash between the East and West, and the tragedy that resulted from it and the problems of ordinary middle-class Indians like making a living, finding an inner peace and coping with industrialization and modern technology.
IV.I.1 Nectar in a Sieve:

A Brief Outline:

It is the story of Rukmani, the youngest daughter of a village headman. She is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer, at the age of twelve. When the novel begins Rukmani is an elderly woman who narrates the story of her life in the first person. She looks back over the past events, right from her marriage to Nathan until his death many years later. She begins the story by describing what it means to be desperate and poverty-stricken in rural India, in the first half of the 20th century.

Her father once held an important position as a village headman, but with the changing political circumstances, his wealth and status dwindle. His first three daughters are comparatively fortunate as he could afford to pay dowry (a gift made to the bridegroom in cash or kind at the time of marriage for accepting a girl as a bride) but being the fourth daughter, Rukmani has to accept Nathan, a poor, landless farmer. He is very kind at heart and loves his wife dearly. Rukmani accepts her lot and settles happily in her married life.

Six years after marriage, she gives birth only to a daughter Ira, and like a typical Indian husband Nathan wants a son. Having a son is considered to be a matter of pride in Indian culture. A son is also necessary to continue the family heritage. Rukmani had met a white doctor, Kennington, when she had visited her parent’s house at the time of her mother’s death. Rukmani takes treatment from the doctor secretly, and bears five sons. The family grows but their savings decrease with so many mouths to feed. Their life is totally dependent on agriculture. Nathan is a good
and enthusiastic farmer who hopes to purchase his own land some day. The possibility is ruled out gradually as calamities follow one after another.

Monsoon rain plays an important role in Indian agrarian economy. It could be a friend or foe, villain or a hero depending upon its whims. The peasants in rural India fall a prey to the cruel vagaries of Nature. It can bring havoc and destruction to the lives of peasants. The people in the village face severe losses of crops not only because of incessant rains but also because of frequent droughts. Nathan is lease-holder. He has to pay his dues to the landlord for using the land irrespective of weather prospects. The flood, droughts and other natural calamities destroy the crop of rice. He says,

“…..there was no money left – every pie had gone to pay the land dues. Nothing left to sell.”

The crop be produced or not the landlord must get his due because the land belongs to him. Nathan laments as a tenant farmer. The entire family is in the grip of devastating hunger. Rukamni realizes that hunger and fear have become a part of their lives. They cannot easily overcome the malignant forces as they are always the outcome of the unpredictable prospects of Nature and the evil feudalism.

Two important events which bring about change in Rukmani’s family are Ira’s marriage and the construction of a tannery in their village. As the village gradually transforms into a throbbing town, draught and famine attack the harvest. Rukmani’s granary, which used to be full, is emptied and food becomes scarce. Few days of plenty are enjoyed when the two eldest sons take up jobs in the tannery. Departure of
members and possessions begin after that Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon. The third son Murugan goes to another city to work as a servant. The youngest son Kuti dies due to starvation. Possessions have to be sold to pay the dues to the landowner. Ira, unable to bear a child, returns to her parents.

The neighbouring families fare no better. Janaki and her family quit the village while Kunti becomes a prostitute. Ira also takes treatment from Kenny and gives birth to an albino boy. It was an outcome of an illicit relationship with one of Ira’s customers from the tannery. Selvam gets attached to Kenny in his venture of constructing a hospital in the town. The final blow comes when Sivaji, the man who collects dues for the landowner. He announces that Nathan’s land is purchased by the tannery and they have to vacate the house in which they had lived for thirty years. Selvam takes the responsibility of Ira and her son while Nathan and Rukmani leave for the city to find Murugan.

It is a long and difficult journey and they are robbed of all their cash and possessions. They arrive in the city to find that Murugan has left the place and no one knows his whereabouts. Nathan and Rukamni meet his wife and their only grandchild for the first time, with nothing to offer. She has to fight for her own survival so they leave her and begin to work in a stone quarry in order to save money for their journey back to their hometown. They meet a small boy Puli who gets himself attached to them.

Nathan falls ill and dies. Then Rukamni returns home with Puli where they are gladly received by Selvam, Ira and Sacrabani. Selvam is full of hope and assures his mother that they would find some way to manage.
IV.I.2 Caste:

Most of the village folk mentioned in the novel are farmers. Few are shopkeepers or traders dealing with essential commodities. When a tannery is constructed, Nathan and Rukmani are rather disgusted with the idea of their sons working in a tannery. Those engaged in leather profession are called Chamars (cobbler) and belong to a very low caste. Hence, Rukmani does not wish that her sons should have anything to do with a low-caste job. However, the sons are of a different nature. They have no interest in toiling land that belongs to another. They prefer to work in a tannery, regardless of the kind of the work. This shows the change of attitude in the new generations. Moreover, as far as hunger is concerned, one does not hesitate to stoop to do any kind of work. Generally, the upper caste people consider it beneath their dignity to associate themselves with professions of the low-caste people who are mostly bhangis (sweepers – those who clean latrines), chamars i.e. tanners, kamars (blacksmith or iron-mongers) and others who do dirty jobs or menial work.

Rukmani’s family suffered heavily due to the establishment of the tannery. The tannery turned out to be the root cause of the total disintegration of her family. The dire poverty and fierce hunger compelled Rukmani’s eldest sons to work in the tannery. The tannery attracted Rukmani’s sons to give up their traditional profession of agriculture. The economic change from agriculture to industry changed the norms of their life. Change from agriculture to industry changed the norms of everyday life. Before the establishment of the tannery, the farmers preferred to work in the fields. The tannery provided an opportunity for cash. It also changed the priorities of people. One major change indicated by the industrial economy was that people gave
up an idea of traditional work. The work culture changed. No work was considered low, provided it brought handsome wages. Work ethics changed. Nobody worked for others without thinking about money. The birth and the profession of the man were closely related to each other in caste-ridden Indian society. The profession was inherited from their forefathers. The farmer’s son worked as a farmer. Though Rukmani opposed her sons to do the work of the lower caste tanners, she knew the value of money. The money was more precious than the prestige of the caste.

**IV.I.3 Class:**

The clash between the rich and the poor is the chief focus of this novel. The story of Rukmani is the story of thousands of women in India, who have to struggle and have very few expectations from life. Kamala Marandaya expresses the strange attitude of the people that prevents them from breaking the class and social barriers and rising to the top, through the channel of Kenny. Dr. Kenny is always impatient with Rukmani. He sees a woman with great potential and a lively spark in her, but she shares the same attitude as others. Each time the situation worsens, Rukmani endures quietly. She believes that a person’s spirit is the most important factor in overcoming the harsh relations of life.

“*Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man’s spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?*”

( pag. 111)

Calamities attack the life of the villagers in two forms – a natural calamity like famine or drought and a man-made calamity in the form of the tannery. The tannery
is a symbol of industrialization, of modernity and change. It transforms the face of the village which soon expands into a town. It affects the personal, social and financial aspects of the life of the villagers. For Rukmani, it brings fear and destruction. Margaret Joseph says, “…certain nouns are used in connection with the tannery to indicate the destructive role it is going to play in the life of Rukmani: its clatter and clamour and din, its brews and liquors, its kites and crows, replace the ‘clear, soft greens that had once coloured our village…..Cleaving its cool’ silences with clamour”3 (Joseph: 1980, 211) (pg.134) According to Ramesh Srivastava, “The tannery represents a world of immorality, greed and corruption invading another which is moral, happy and pure.”4 (Prasad: 1984, 74)

Its image is evoked as an agent of wrath. It had ‘frowned on’ Rukmani’s sons, that’s why, they had left the village.

Kamala Markandaya has a thorough understanding of women’s position in contemporary society. She shows that social and economic factors affect women more than men. Shantha Krishnaswamy observes, “Kamala Markandaya portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to: between tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western ways of living and values, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother…”5 (Krishnaswamy: 1984, 354)

Rukmini, like most of Markandaya’s women characters is strongly rooted in tradition and is a conformist to a great extent. Yet, she accepts the changes mutely, and struggles for survival resolutely, with undaunted courage, determinations, fortitude
and an indomitable spirit of endurance. Sundarraj Kaushik writes, “It is hard not to sympathize with the protagonist and her family.” 6(Kaushik: Retrieved on 20/2/2013)

Rukmani hates the tannery from the beginning because she believes that the intrusion of industry and modern technology will certainly bring about sinister consequences in the lives of the peasants. She recalls,

“They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played and had made the bazaar prices too high for us.”7 (p 28)

She had seen change before. She reflects,

“Change I had known before and it was gradual..... But the change that now come into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye.”8 (pg.25)

IV.1.4. Effects of Industrialization-

**Relationships/Financial/Social culture:**

As a sign of industrialization, the tannery brought about rapid changes. Finally, it grew fast. The tanning went on night and day. Not a month went by, and somebody’s land was swallowed up. New buildings were constructed.

The introduction of an industry in the form of tannery in Rukmani’s village replaced the age-old barter system by monetary one. Machines were bought and so was labor. Man’s basic value as a man now got a price-tag. One person was different from another person because of his market value. A person who was so far skilled in farming lost his skills in the world of machines. He was no more useful in the new
set up. Lifeless money changed hands. Vegetables and grain were sold in grams in the public places. Rukmani’s family suffered heavily due to the establishment of the tannery.

The tannery also happens to be root cause of disintegration of Rukmani’s family. It attracted Arjun and Thambi, Rukmani’s two eldest sons, in spite of her stiff opposition. The young generation no longer belonged to the earth. This particularly shattered Nathan’s hopes as he looked forward to help from his sons. The tannery created craze for money. People became highly selfish and self-centered, forgetting their earlier characteristics of generosity, selflessness and concern for others. The neighbours who shared joys and sorrow had to quit the village or become rivals, giving rise to jealousy and hatred for one another. Sons who left parents had no feelings for their parents or siblings. Nathan and Rukmani love each other but Murugan leaves his wife and child without any sense of responsibility. Filial piety is lost and people are estranged. Old Granny, who had helped to find a match for Ira, was a good friend. Rukmani always sold her vegetables to Granny who sold them in the market. But as times became difficult, she sold them to Biswas, who gave her more money. Ira became a prostitute and got the customers from the tannery.

The tannery lured Raja, who later became a victim and was attacked and killed. Kunti also became a prostitute and threatened that she would tell Nathan about her secret meetings with Kenny. She blackmailed Rukmani for rice. Thus, all ties of love, sympathy and filial piety were broken. Normal relationships were seriously affected. Parents could not trust or rely on their children and husbands and wives lost faith in each other.
Human relations were commercialized with the advent of easy money coming through tannery. Biswas, the money-lender snubbed poor customers at his doorstep. In the drought, rice was preserved for the industrial workers. Those who produced rice were deprived of the daily handful. The old rickety shops breathed their last. New shops with modern looks were the attraction of tannery workers.

The tannery is the representative of social and economic change from agrarian to industrial. The tannery changed the independent small scale economy of the village. The villagers working in the tannery started getting good money. Rukmani’s sons Arjun and Thambi worked at tannery, brought their wages home and with their money the family began once again to live well. The granary unused for so long, stored now half a bag of rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chilies. Rukmani was satisfied by it,

“Hitherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay the rent of the land; now we were enabled to keep some of our own produce.”

Rural development means the all round transformation of villages. Development of industries is the capitalistic approach. Industrial development can increase the economic sums in purse. The agricultural rural society may be fascinated and impressed by the easy money. The rich landowners and wealthy zamindars decided to trade the unproductive land. It became a main source of getting money instantly. The tannery represents money-oriented, materialistic view developed in the society.

“Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty
men staining the clean soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaning its cool silences with clamour.....It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. Some – a few – had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches.

IV.1.4.1 Economic Changes:

Kamala Markandaya also depicts that peasants in rural India fall a prey to cruel vagaries of nature. Nature, when unrestrained, can bring havoc and destruction in the lives of the peasants. The people in the village face severe loss of crops not only because of incessant rains but also because of frequent droughts. For lease-holders like Nathan, they have to pay dues to the landlords for using the land, irrespective of weather. When the harvest was bad, Nathan sells everything in his possession until ‘….there is nothing left to sell’

The landlords are only concerned with money. They are heartless, and don’t care for the peasants.

As industries are established, agriculture land is utilized. Man destroys Nature. When more people are needed to work in industries, houses are also constructed on land thus further destroying Nature. As a result, there is shortage of food leading to rising prices of food grains. People who work in industries also need food to eat. Less food grains are grown so food is not enough. Destruction of Nature and growing industries also leads to pollution, and consequently to sickness and diseases. These are far reaching consequences which the writer has subtly pointed out, without
dwelling upon them in detail. Kamala Markandaya wants to show all evils of industrialization.

The novel highlights the rural peasant’s problem. It deals with the agrarian village life and irregular agricultural production which depend mostly upon monsoon rain. The village economy based on agriculture can be saved or destroyed by the rain. Rain is the life-giving nectar for the farmer. The farmer tries to accumulate rain water in his widespread palms. Rain acquires the status of immortal nectar in the mortal life of farmers. Indian farmers cultivate different crops. Rice is produced by consistent labour but they are unable to retain it. Rice slips down through the palms of peasants and gradually disappears in the hands of landlords and money-lenders. Monsoon rain plays an important role in Indian agrarian economy. It could be a friend or foe, villain or a hero depending upon its whims. The peasants in rural India fall a prey to the cruel vagaries of Nature. It can bring havoc and destruction to the lives of peasants. The people in the village face severe losses of crops not only because of incessant rains but also because of frequent droughts.

As there is no work left on farms, the youth in villages move over to urban areas in search of jobs. Without specialized skills or education, they find it difficult to get jobs. Murugan had got his job because of Dr. Kennington. He had to accept the work of a servant in the house of a rich family. Most laborers are underpaid for their work and they get frustrated. City life also makes them forget their values and more often than not, they fall a prey to bad habits like drinking, gambling etc. The attractions in the city make them acutely aware of their poor conditions and in an attempt to earn
quick and easy money, they commit crimes. They lose their sense of responsibility
towards their family. Murugan abandoned his wife and child.

At the same time, the rich and well-settled traders and merchants earn huge profits at
the expense of the hard work of the laborers. The gap between the rich and the poor
is further widened. In novel after novel, whether it is Kamala Markandaya or Mulk
Raj Anand or Bhabani Bhattacharya, we find the same picture that rising to an upper
social class is next to impossible. Even education is futile, as in the case of Kalo’s
daughter in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Without enough money for food they cannot
afford education. Without education and strong support or a patron, there are no
bright prospects. This becomes a vicious circle in the life of the poor.

**IV.1.4.2 Social Culture:**

On the one hand, industrialization is a sign of progress of mankind. On the other
hand, it creates social classes. India is an agricultural country. It was a custom among
landowners who owned huge farms to let some part of their land to tenant farmers
who tended it and paid the owners in the form of a share of the farm produce. The
landowners themselves hardly tended crops. It was mostly let out to peasants. The
land remained with the farmers for years sometimes for generations.

However, agriculture in India depends upon rain and in case of failure of rain, there
is poor harvest. The greedy landowners never considered this factor and they claimed
their share regularly, irrespective of the harvests. They thus became richer and richer.
Rather than lose the land, the peasants often borrowed money or sold valuable things
to pay the landowners. Nathan also sold off everything until there was nothing left to
sell. This is how peasants got reduced to poverty. With the advent of industries, the situation became worst. The industry owners were ready to pay high prices for the land. Sometimes it was more than what the landowners could ever dream of getting from the tenant farmers. Naturally, they preferred to sell off the land, without giving a single thought to the plight of the tenants. This happened to Nathan and Rukmani’s land.

The two classes of Zamindars and poor landless labourers is the common picture all over Indian sub-continent. The captive tenant is never allowed to flourish by the feudal masters. If there are good rains and abundant produce, landowner snatches it all under the name of previous dues. Under paucity of rains, tenants are left to their unending sufferings. Whatever the case, farmers are destined to poverty, starvation, ill-health and beast like existence. Human relations were commercialized with the advent of easy money coming through tannery.

The industrial change affected the poor peasants and money-lender’s relations. Biswas, the money-lender snubbed poor customers at his doorstep. In the drought, rice was preserved for the industrial workers. Those who produced rice were deprived of the daily handful. The old rickety shops breathed their last. New shops with modern looks were the attraction of tannery workers. The setting up of the tannery leads to the complete dispossession of Rukmani’s family. The land which they had been cultivating for nearly thirty years has been bought by the tannery at a high price from the landlord. It was shocking to them when they are asked by the landlord to vacate the land. Rukmani’s words indicate to the effects of industrialization on the simple lives of peasants:
“Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men staining the clean soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaning its cool silences with clamour.....It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. Some – a few – had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches.”\textsuperscript{12} (pg.133-134)

On the whole it is misery all the way for the poor, whether they go to the city or remain in villages. Almost every young woman is left with no other option but to sell her body. This bleak picture is painted by Kamala Markandaya in \textit{Nectar in a Sieve}.

The youth who go out to the cities do not have good prospects either. What happens to them? Kamala Markandaya has tried to trace their life in the next novel selected for this study, namely, \textit{A Handful of Rice}.

\section*{IV.II. \textbf{A Handful of Rice}}

\section*{IV. II. 1 Introduction:}

Margaret P. Joseph has rightly pointed out that the thematic patterns in Kamala Markandaya’s novels explore the sufferings arising out of “the struggle between the traditional and the modern, the individual and the society, or one race and another.”\textsuperscript{13} (Joseph: 1980, 211) This is literally exemplified in the novel \textit{A Handful of Rice} which was published in 1966.
The social concern of the author is the same as is observed in the previous novel *Nectar in Sieve*. *Nectar in a Sieve* is set for the most part in a village, which gradually expands into a town with the establishment of the tannery. As the members of Rukmani’s family leave the village one after another, the miseries of those who remain in the village are highlighted. Rukmani also makes a tour of the town where she gets a taste of the town life. Ultimately, she returns to the village with Puli and is glad to be back to the warmth and familiarity of village life.

*A Handful of Rice* seems to be a continuation of *Nectar in Sieve*. Novel is set entirely in a town with passing references to the village life that Ravi, Damodar and other young men have left behind. The way the novel proceeds reminds us of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* and *Untouchable*. Just as Anand leads us through the life journey of Munoo and Bakha respectively in the novels, Kamala Markandaya leads us through the journey of Ravi’s life in *A Handful of Rice*. It is through the life of Ravi that Kamala Markandaya shows the struggle between the traditional and the modern.

Ravi’s father and Apu are traditional in their outlook while Verma and Damodar as well as the rich clients are symbols of modernity. The novel is about the struggle between the individual Ravi and an uncompromising society, which prevents Ravi from possessing many attractions in life. Ravi, his father and Apu’s family members belong to the poorer class. The merchants, clients and later Damodar belong to the rich class. Ravi makes every attempt to fulfill his dream of crossing the bridge to the higher class, but he is unable to do so. The writer also touches upon the East-West clash of codes which is a part of modern India. Like Bhabani Bhattacharya’s ‘So
Many Hungers’, this novel also peeps into the chaotic and neurotic conditions of the people, on account of hunger and suffering.

The modern man has to suffer on all fronts, - especially in the city, where the basic problems are housing, food and sanitation. Caught in these problems, he has lost all traditional values. Ravi makes an effort to survive and procure a secure position in the society by hard work, but in vain. Born in a peasant family in the village, he is an outsider and misfit in a thickly populated town. Ravi is unsuccessful because he realizes that the urban set up is completely based upon exploitations. Damodar adjusts his ways and means to suit city life but Ravi’s conscience does not allow him to do so.

IV.II.2 A Brief Outline:

Novel does not have tight-knit and compact plot. The writer just takes us from one event to another, through the experience of the protagonist Ravi, with occasional shift of focus to Apu and Nalini. The narration begins with the description of Ravi, Damodar and a few others, who share a home on the foot path. They do petty jobs, labour work. Sometimes they steal and pinch and just manage to live from day to day. With their meager earnings, they never care to save money or think about the future. They squander the money on drinks and fun. One night, at a late hour, Ravi runs into the alleys to avoid a policeman on the main street, and breaks the iron grills of a window within his reach. He threatens the owner and makes him give food and a night’s shelter. During this forced entry into the house, he does not miss the sight of the young and attractive daughter of the master of the house. He then revisits the
house during the day time, when he is not drunk, and offers to mend the broken bars of the window. This pretext gives him frequent opportunities to exchange glances with the daughter Nalini. Ravi now wishes to make a good impression about him in the house. He honestly returns the five rupees that Jayamma, Nalini’s mother, had given him for the repairs. The bars were given to him by Kanan, the blacksmith, free of cost. Ravi continues his visits to the house and succeeds in getting into the good books of Apu, who is tailor by profession. With Jayamma’s permission, he takes Nalini out to watch a movie, to eat ice cream and is happy in her company. They spend a nice time together, mostly of course, accompanied by Jayamma. Sometimes Ravi is sad that he does not have much money. Without any strong family background, he is at a loss. He is compelled to call his father to town to plead on his behalf. His father arrives, shares warmth with Apu and finally, friendship between Ravi and Nalini culminates into marriage. Jayamma once insists on visiting his house when she suspects his intention of marrying her daughter, but he escapes by telling her a bit of lies.

Ravi sits in the motor-car as a bridegroom. His bride Nalini wears a pink sari with a four-inch gold border. Actually the gold is not real. It is only the shiny silk stuff the merchants have produced after much research to satisfy the hunger that poor people have for rich family marriages. Ravi thinks about those people who live in large and big houses and wear four-inch gold borders. From his father’s house not even sham gold would have been possible. The financial status plays an important role.

Ravi’s father is a poor peasant. Ravi himself forgets his father in the marriage ceremony who stands away, remotely observing the celebration. Ravi does not mind
when the old man is neglected because he has no money, he has not given financial support to his son. Apu and Jayamma bear the entire expenditure of the marriage ceremony. Therefore they are in the center. Ravi’s father has no financial power to spend money at the marriage. He looks lean and surrendered. His weak financial position is responsible to break the solidarity of the filial bonds. Ravi’s elder brothers left the home, his sister shifted to city after marriage and Ravi also followed their path.

After marriage, Ravi becomes a member of Apu’s family, which is already very large. Apu, Jayamma, their two daughters, Apu’s brother-in-law Verma and a cripple Kumaran live in a very small house. The elder daughter Thangam’s husband Puttanna and her child also live in the same house.

A few days after marriage, Ravi has the entire room, Apu’s bed and special favours from Jayamma. However, it was all over soon. The bed had to be returned to Apu. He has to share the room with Thangam’s family with a partition in between. Ravi helps Apu in his work and becomes his worthy assistant. Ravi realizes that Puttanna is a worthless man and totally dependent on Apu. Varma and Kumaran do help Apu in small ways. Apu is eager to pass on his responsibilities to Ravi and makes every effort to teach him the nuances of his trade. In due course of time, he also takes Ravi with him to his clients for taking orders and making deliveries. While the warmth of Nalini’s love possessed Ravi, he dreamed of a bed, a bi-cycle, and new sari for Nalini. But they remained unrealized dreams, with Thangam’s coming child and growing expenses. Romantic and defiant as he is, he clears some space on the roof and constructs a tiny, cozy, private shelter for himself and Nalini.
While they pull on with difficulty, Apu gets a stroke of paralysis and is bedridden. Ravi manages the difficult time by carrying out his duty as a good son-in-law and managing the work by himself. His sole happiness is his good wife and a son, born after Thangam’s twin babies. But there are times when he feels he should follow the path of Damodar who had become a rich man, built a big house through illegal means. K.R.S. Iyengar notes down the pathetic condition of Ravi in the following words “Caught between the pull of the old tradition that all but strangles him and the pull of the new immorality that attracts as well as frightens him, Ravi lurches now this side now the other side and has worst of both.” 14 (Iyengar: 1985, 446)

The family invades the private shelter on the house top once, to watch the candle procession. Once they all file out a long way down the place to watch the fire walkers. A few days later, Apu discovers that he has been robbed of all his savings which he had stitched up in his pillow. Obviously the blame falls upon Puttanna and Apu drives him away from the house. He leaves with his wife and all his children. Ravi is pleased as he does not have to share the room and there are lesser mouths to feed.

Unfortunately Apu dies and the business dwindles after his death. Ravi tries his best to repair the damage but he lacks the skill and vision of Apu. He refuses to bribe the watchman to get an entry into the houses of rich. He drives away the crippled Kumaran in a fit of anger. To add to all this, Ravi’s son is attacked by meningitis. He is unable to bear the medical expenses and provide timely treatment. Nalini asks him to call a doctor, but in an agony of helplessness he cries out,
“A doctor, what! Are we memsahibs or something to send for a doctor for every ache and pain? Will you pay his bills?”

Ravi’s son dies which shatters Ravi. In a fire of desperation smouldering in his heart, he joins a procession shouting,

“Rice, rice today.”

The crowd loots the rice godown. He struggles and gets close to the rice bags, but fails to get even a handful of rice. He indulges in looting the rich people. He picks up a brick to hurl at the rich man’s shop but then refrains from it. Finally, good sense prevails upon him and he keeps away from evil doing. He is a refined man later who hopes for a better life. He says,

“But tomorrow, yes, tomorrow.”

IV.II. 3 Class Conflict in A Handful of Rice:

The novelist has chiefly dealt with conflicting issues like the old and the new, traditional and modern, the east and the west and chiefly the class conflict between the rich and the poor. Economic status creates social classes. While the rich keep on getting opportunities, they become richer while the poor are exploited and become poorer. It is difficult to understand the dimensions of Ravi’s desires and aspirations. From the beginning, he is very sensitive to the class structure and wants to reach the status of the rich by fair or foul means. While he lived alone on the footpath with Damodar, he did not care much about money and status. When he fell in love with Nalini, he realized the importance of money, status, family background and strong
support. With growing responsibilities, he constantly and acutely became aware of money.

He secretly admired Apu and felt awe about him. Apu worked until it was dark, was so skilful and talented, who supported such a large family, who yet managed to save money and lived a respectable life. Ravi agreed with Varma in the beginning and was all against Apu and his old ideas of running a business. While he wooed Nalini, he had smuggled some rich cloth material from the godown so that he could win Apu’s favours. But from the beginning, we observe that Ravi avoids foul means and does not indulge in them willingly.

The first instance is he returns the five rupees to Jayamma because Kanan had not charged him for the iron bars. He tries to involve himself in Apu’s trade and works hard and lovingly. He sews on the button or stitches the hems of the rich and beautiful dresses. He carries them awkwardly in his hands so as not to spoil or crease them. He is against paying bribe to the watchmen to get an entry into the Memsahib’s houses, but later realizes that Apu was right.

Apu pays him very little money for his hard work. Once, he happens to see a price tag on the coat stitched by him, in the window of a shop called ‘EVE.’ He realizes that it is sold at twelve times the price that they get for it. He cannot control his anger. He thought that they work hard and hardly get anything while the shop owners, who live in big houses, eat rich food and are carefree, earn more out their labour. This realization leads him to utter frustration. He frets and fumes and tells Apu to increase the price but Apu pacifies him. They would lose the order because
other tailors were ready to supply at cheaper rates. Ravi gets drunk that day and beats Nalini and is rude to her. All that he gets as result of this angry fit is a little rise in his earnings.

Even while Ravi accompanies Apu to the houses of the memsahibs, Ravi’s eyes roam around observing the riches and the glory, the delicate and attractive crockery, the way the memsahib could afford to give them a basketful of fruits which they could never afford. When he goes into luxurious houses, he is distracted by the silk hangings, tall windows, gleaming doors and shining furniture. He would touch the satin-wood surfaces, sinking an inquiry toe into the inch-thick carpets. Apu was keen to introduce him to his clients as his assistant who would take over from him in the future, but Ravi’s mind was obsessed by the difference in their life styles. He hardly heard what Apu said. Ravi wished to do many things. Nalini is worried when he gets into one of his desperation fits. Ravi has a strong will to buy a new bed, a new sari for Nalini, good material for a shirt, a safety razor, a mouth organ, sundry other essentials and luxuries. But his inability to purchase these things makes him an angry man. Whatever he wishes for is good and worthy. For example a bicycle which will enable him to go around customers and save time. This would be beneficial to the business.

The few days that he had enjoyed, the comfort of a bed when he had got married makes him crave for a bed. He would have liked to rent a separate house. He wanted to buy things for Nalini, to take her out to movies and to make her happy. He does not wish to earn money so that he can drink and squander. His criminal act of breaking the window was the combined result of extreme hunger and fear of the
policeman. He never indulged in any criminal act after that. He even put back the cup which he had flinched at the cinema theatre for drinking water. Thus, with the vision of a rich and luxurious life hovering at the back of his mind, Ravi lives a practical life of hard work. He has to sew and stitch, ‘unmanly’ work as Damodar calls it. He has to feed worthless dependents and tolerate a crowd in a small house. He even helps Varma to nurse and tend the bedridden Apu without complaining.

Poverty compels Ravi to quit his village and come to the city to make his fortune. He represents young boys in poor families in villages. He follows the footsteps of his elder brothers who have also left for the city before him. He sometimes thinks about the past life that he has left behind. He remembers his father’s small thatched hut that always needed mending, the half empty cooking pot and the leaking roof of the hut. Ravi’s father is reduced to poverty. With no chances of earning money in the village, the youth sever their relationship with parents and siblings and turn to the city. The village life that Ravi remembers is full of misery and squalor. He remembers the ailing babies who cried all night. These desires are simple enough like,

‘……enough food, a cup of coffee in the morning, a shirt without holes, and a shawl made of pure wool to keep out the cold of monsoon’.¹⁸ (pg. 49)

Ravi’s memories are related to hunger, shortage of food and poor harvests. Ravi comes to the city with great hopes but he finds that it is already full and it offers no scope for job. It is full of black marketers, bootleggers and cheaters. He meets Damodar and joins hands with him in evil deeds for money. Ravi expresses his opinion about the city in these words:
In the city, Ravi has to stay on the pavement or at the corner of some shops. Yet, he does not return to the village. Ravi has an attraction for a better lifestyle. He constantly thinks and dreams of money. He is obsessed with the thought of acquiring wealth. Ravi wanders on the road, observing the shining shops.

Ravi lacks skill in tailoring. His meager financial support for household ultimately changed his position in the house of Jayamma. She gives him crispest pancakes, watery coffee, thin gruel that is left after most of dhal has gone. Ravi is used to starvation. He had fed his life on water in which things had been boiled, while the things themselves went to his father who was the bread-winner along with his elder brothers. The identity of the man is always related to the economic position.

Ravi’s status in Apu’s home is related to his earning and his behavior. When Ravi comes home drunk Jayamma calls him a vagabond. Ravi is accepted as a son-in-law but at a crucial moment Jayamma indicates that he has come from off the streets. The Tailor’s family is not affluent but they have enough to eat a good meal twice a day. After Apu’s death Jayamma regrets that she is unable to eat tasty food and coffee.

On the other hand, Apu is successful in making his family financially sound. His little money-bag is a financial support for the family. He has power and authority over his family-members. Apu runs his business nicely and his decisions are honoured by everyone. His small house is filled with many dependants. Usha Pathania comments, “The material aspect is a vital in the preservation or reverence of filial relationship is unmistakably proved by the affairs of the Apu household…..
Apu is the sole bread-winner in the family. Even then, Puttanna, Thangam and Varma do not think of leaving him. They have neither the will to work nor the self-respect to avoid dependence on crumbs offered grudgingly by an old man.²⁰

(Pathania: 1992, 160)

After Apu’s death Ravi has to own the responsibility of the whole family. He does not like to earn money in an illegal way after his marriage. Ravi’s desire to live luxuriously like the rich people remains a dream. His confidence evaporates after Apu’s death. His frustration grows, he finds everywhere lean people, tired by hardships of life. A stranger on the road tells him that he is a laborer but no one wants his labour. He is at a loss and does not know what to do. Ravi faced the same problem. In his first demoralizing months in the city, while working with Damodar and Apu as an assistant tailor he had never been sure of his work. He needs money but the way accepted by Damodar is not his way.

In his economic hardships Ravi goes to Damodar, a criminal turned rich man. But he is reluctant. Ravi tells Damodar that they live quietly without any excitement – work, eat and sleep. It’s all petty humdrum and ordinary way of life. Sometimes Ravi thinks of working with Damodar for money but his love for Nalini and his moral consciousness do not allow him to join his hands with Damodar. But it is true that the earning of money always intrigued and obsessed Ravi.

The economic differences are not so conspicuous and apparent in the city. One cannot easily recognize a poor or a lower middle class in the city. Ravi likes to visit the coffee bar because no one can recognize him in the city. He can enjoy his position with other classes. It is impossible in the village to hide the lower class. The
city gives him the sensation of living in high society. He likes the idea that with a little luck he too might be like one of those carefree young men gathered in the coffee bar. His ‘decent’ appearance helps him to hide his poverty. Imitation of the upper class life-style, attraction of the materialistic world, attraction of different things in the market, various shops, clothes in the showcases, vehicles on the road make the man desperate. He thinks he must possess all those things. Ravi cries,

“I want more. I want more. I want a bed for one thing! I am fed up sleeping on the floor. They all have beds, the people we slave for! Day beds, night-beds, double-beds, divans....”

Ravi does not envy the rich class. He knows that he is a servant; he works for them (rich), a slave of those (rich) people who live in comfort, who possess beds, double beds and divans. His consciousness about his own class, difference between them and him makes him despondent. His angry reaction is quite natural when he sees the wealth of the rich and their luxurious way of life. He argues,

“They’re not made of different clay, are they? There’s nothing lays down they should always have the best and trample us and do us down, and we should always come off worst.”

Ravi sees the luxurious cars of the wealthy people on the beach. He knows it is beyond his financial capacity to possess a car. He likes to see the beautiful bungalows, bedrooms, dressing rooms, tall windows, thick carpets, gleaming floors and fine furniture of those people. He likes their life-style – without worry, without
wanting. Harrex comments, “He struggles for a place in the society, but socio-economic pressures push him back to his ill-assorted destiny. The educated son of a peasant, Ravi tries to find himself a ‘decent way of life in the city where he is outsider’ without caste, in no-man’s land between coolie and clerk.”23 (Harrex: 1971, 74)

Ravi’s wife, Nalini’s knows that they are ordinary people, cannot compete with those high-class people. She does not appreciate Ravi’s wrath and comparison.

“How can people like us ever be like them?”24 (pg.75)

This question shows her acceptance of reality. When the beggars surround them on the beach Nalini has satisfaction that they are poor but not beggars. Her argument is simple and shows her helplessness.

“They’re a different class. Ordinary folk like us can never be like them.”25 (pg.75)

Nalini has accepted the class difference. She accepts the fact that they are ordinary lower-class people. She has no complaint against their present. She cannot understand Ravi’s desire and obsession to get money in a foul way. She blames him,

“You’re 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?”26 (pg.75)

Nalini makes him realize that they are poor and hence should not think of high class. She makes him socially conscious of their class and suggests that he should be satisfied with what they have. She knows Ravi’s desire to own luxuries of rich people despite their financial capacity.
There is apparent difference between rich and poor in the urban society but the poor people think of themselves superior to beggars. The lowest class is the class of beggars. The beggars cling to the rich for money and the rich with cold mind neglect the beggars from their sight. The rich people treat the beggars like dogs. The beggar boys request Ravi for money. They would try it on anybody; even on those who could least afford it. Ravi learns from his own experience that the rich are more tight-fisted than the poor. Ravi observes the big problem of the rich that they avoid sharing their wealth with beggars around them. They shout to get rid of them. Some brought imperious chokras and peons to act as defenders.

A be-ringed merchant and his plump jeweled lady sit placidly on the beach enjoying the sea-breeze, guarded by a peon. Several beggars have already been warded off. But a young beggar-woman with a blind child in her arms, evades the servant’s arm and manages to get to within a foot of the placid couple. She stands there begging, rattling her tin, exhibiting the baby’s sad little face to the couple. Later she falls at their feet, grasping the hem of their clothes. The couple mercilessly neglected the beggar. Their peon pushes her aside with his master’s walking stick. At last the beggar woman picks herself up, pouring out a stream of abuse. Ravi hates rich couple because they can’t even do their own dirty work of driving away the beggars. He does his own dirty work. He shouts at beggars, when they pestered him when there were no rich people around. His wife Nalini takes the whole matter easily. She justifies the rude behavior of the rich.

“No, but beggars are different people. Now don’t say in what way, they just are that’s all, in the same way that we aren’t the same as they, now are we?”
The upper class and caste people always think themselves superior. The lower class people get similar satisfaction when they come across people of still lower class or caste. Every human being aspires to get success in public and personal life. Ravi thinks bitterly that they could afford it, only because they have money and money is power.

‘Money… if only, if only money he had…”

His conclusion is simple. It is Ravi’s philosophy that without money one cannot do anything; money is the god of all. ‘Money is the key to open the doors of life’ this is realized by all. Ravi is much conscious about it. He is humiliated; he suffered, got inferior treatment only because he had no money.

Ravi continues his profession of visiting the houses of Apu’s customers. A smoldering anger rises in him against the rich uncaring inmates of homes. They have no humanity. The expensive dress material Ravi has ruined by his wrong measurements makes the memsahib furious. She had bought the costly material for her little girl. He cannot understand the need of such costly material for a little girl.

“Fifty rupees for one little jacket for one little girl, while of late they had not even been able to afford a few vegetables for the evening stew.”

The rich can afford to spend a great amount for a little jacket for a little girl while others are unable to afford even daily vegetables for their houses.

Ravi likes to walk on the big shopping roads. He stands looking in through the large
well-lit plate-glass windows, the array of luxurious accessories there. All of the finest workmanship, all of the finest material, the costliest silks, brocades and velvets were made for rich. All luxurious items are for other women, always for their women. The tailor could handle the rich cloths, work on them and fashion them into beauty, and then hand them over dumbly. It was as if one has no desires, no yearning to lavish in something of this opulence upon one’s own women – as if one is some kind of eunuch. Ravi’s rich customers never questioned the expectation. They think it is the natural order. The wealthy people have the power to rule the material world.

Majority of poor Indian common folk is unable to afford even medical treatment. Like many other urban poor middle class people, Ravi brought Nalini and the new born babies back home within thirty six hours of birth to avoid medical bills. Their children never get enough and nutritious food. They have little immunity to fight against diseases. Ravi’s son is attacked by meningitis. Ravi is unable to give his son medical treatment at the right time. Ultimately he dies of illness.

The death of little Raju is a bitter dose of poverty. It is difficult for them to call a doctor. When Raju’s condition deteriorates a doctor is called, but it is too late. Ravi works day and night for money but he cannot give emergency treatment to his child. It happens only because of his poor class. His wrath and helplessness are expressed in these words,

“I don’t blame myself for not getting the doctor. I blame them. Them. Society. Guilty of casual murder.”

He could raise money through loan from the money-lender. The increasing interest make the loan amount a pile of debts. The evil cycle of debts make the poor man
poorer. The loan Ravi has taken on the sewing machine increased due to its interest. The shortage of money created many problems of health and food. Ravi is unable to buy vegetables and grain for the family. To join Damodar to solve the money problem is the alternation. Ravi’s conscience doesn’t allow him to walk on the wrong path after the marriage with Nalini and in the company of generous Apu. He realizes the uselessness of Damodar’s evil deeds,

“…they were dirty hands, hands that grew rich by squeezing people’s throat…”

(pg. 217)

It is quite appropriate to quote Prof. K. Venkata Reddy: “His active conscience has to choose between penurious respectability and affluent disrespectability. He wants to be honest but at the same time he realized that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills.” (Prasad: 1984, 158)

The fire of hunger provokes Ravi to join a mob to loot the rice godown shouting:

‘Rice, Rice, today.’

(pg. 233)

The crowd loots the rice godown. Ravi struggles and gets very close to the rice bags, but fails to get even a handful of rice. Yet he is hopeful that he will get rice. At another time Ravi indulges in looting the rich man’s locality but he restrains from it. Good sense prevails upon him and he keeps away from evil doing. He is a refined man who hopes for a better life. The fire of hunger is responsible to make the man snatch his bread. The social discrimination, unequal distribution of property can disturb the society and create criminals. ‘A handful of rice’ is a need of everyone. All cannot get it easily. The poor have to struggle for it. Ravi joins the crowd to loot the
grain because,

‘...it was his right, his children’s right.’

Kannan, the ironsmith warns Ravi not to do the madman’s business.

Ravi by birth is Hindu who believes in re-birth. He does not wish to be re-born in the village or in the poor family. He would not like to be re-born into what he was in the present situation.

‘Something better, he thought, his mind beginning to wander. Perhaps as a priest, well fed, housed and cared for by his flock whether Hindu or Christian. Or a sahib. Or a police inspector.’

Ravi struggles for a place in the society but socio-economic pressures push him back. He is unable to change his lower class in this system. Ravi is very sensitive to the class structure and wants to reach the status of the rich. The ‘fact’ that if you are rich, all doors open to you, if you are poor, all doors are closed is realized by Ravi very late.

For one time meal, for a handful of rice one needs money, not religion. One can get enough meal and shelter if one becomes a priest in any religion. The class conflict – rich and poor – is presented only on individual level. Ravi constantly thinks about the social discrimination. He cannot actively do anything to fight against it. Ravi is a representative of lower middle class. His economic position is delicate but he follows the ethics and morals of society. Though he had done evil deeds in his early life for money, for food, he presents the dreams of the lower class people. He wanted to live luxuriously. In his middle age he wanted to live with pride. Ravi realizes it is his
right to get a handful of rice in a proper way – with dignity, with pride and with power. Ravi learns a lesson from his experiences from youth to adulthood that,

“……life wasn’t all that bad; the important thing was to let it go on top of you.”

Ravi gets the message,

“Hard labour, sweet life.”

Ravi’s life presents the vision of day-to-day problems of lower middle class in the specific milieu of Indian society. It explores various socio-economic problems of poor masses of India. He is the representative of those who are unable to get sufficient to support the family but they are optimistic, hopeful that ‘perhaps tomorrow will be easier.’ The ‘patience’ is a virtue of such people. The needs and wants are different – needs are few and wants are unlimited. After a long journey in the flux of life Ravi finds the Indian philosophy of life as a solution.

‘Live in life as it is. Do not blame others for your fate, for your sufferings, for your poverty and poor life. After all one must live in the life. No way to escape from the reality.’

IV.II. 4 Conclusion:

Poverty, misery and sufferings are common in Indian villages and cities. The gap between the rich and poor is so vast that it is impossible for the poor to rise above economically. In spite of poverty, the village folk cling to some moral values which are not easily shaken off. The atmosphere in a city provokes people to cheat, lie and
become violent. This leads to corruption and demoralization of a society. The writer has shown that different people react in different ways to social conditions. There are some people like Nalini, who has mostly fashioned her ideas after her father, who accept life and its calamities as they are, with meek submission.

Others like Damodar have no scruples and choose a path of crime and corruption in order to make easy money and change their fortunes quickly, without hard work. Damodar and his lot do not seem to have a conscience.

There are some persons like Apu who perceive the situation, study it minutely and are ready to work hard so that they can at least eat a decent meal twice a day, support a family and live an honest and respectable life.

Some, like Varma, have no desires. They do not like to work hard, nor do they mind living like dependents. Varma knows the weak points of Jayamma and does not hesitate to take disadvantage. Kumaran is a cripple. Yet he does not like to live like a dependent. Nature has been unjust to him but he helps Apu by pinning paper patterns on the cloth as much as his maimed limbs can manage.

Puttanna is the most shameless member of the household. He would accept nothing less than owning a shop. He refuses to accept the difficult times. This destroys his practical sense and he lives shamelessly at the expense of his father-in-law. He takes no responsibility and lives with his wife and entire brood of children in Apu’s house. When he gets desperate, he steals Apu’s savings but refuses to work.

Extreme hunger gives rise to anger, violence and aggression, or sometimes, even crime as in the case of Puttanna, Ravi and Damodar. Damodar has lost his values and
his principles; Puttanna is lazy and impractical; but Ravi’s case is different. Ravi does not like to resort to crime easily.

Ravi would be a happy man. Puttana was well fed and comfortable in Apu’s house, yet he stole Apu’s money. Ravi broke into Apu’s house because he was driven by sheer hunger. He was under the influence of alcohol. He even regrets his action during the daytime and admits that it was wrong on his part. He never repeats that kind of mistake and even keeps himself away from drinking. Ravi’s violence and anger towards Nalini was due to his realization of how they were being exploited and underpaid for their hard work.

A Handful of Rice deals with the theme of urban economics that divides the society into classes – upper, middle and lower. The class consciousness is strong among the people. They have strong desire to change the class, particularly the lower class people desire to uplift. The protagonist Ravi is a common man. He does not have any extraordinary qualities. He represents an average, ordinary, mediocre youths who are ready to do anything to earn money. Ravi’s hunger for food, his criminal deeds, drinking, connection with underworld, desire to live comfortably like upper class people – all these are the indications of life of a simple man. Ravi has not established himself as a thug or a criminal. But it is possible that he can turn into a violent man to earn money. Ravi is the representative of those unemployed youths who never understand the reason behind the socio-economic discrimination, an unequal distribution of money in the society. A handful of rice is the basic need of a common man. Ravi tries to get it in the right and wrong way.
The ultimate triumph of conscience makes Ravi leave the evil deeds in an assertion of Kamala Markandaya’s belief in the essential goodness of man. In spite of the social evils present in the world, the author has a positive and assertive vision of life. Nathan, Rukmani and Ravi believe that there is a silver lining to the black cloud. The characters of Kamala Markandaya show great powers of heart and soul even in moments of crisis and calamities.

Like *Nectar in a Sieve* this novel also ends on a positive note. In spite of colossal sufferings, the characters rise above their desperation triumphantly. Both the novels deal with starvation and poverty but they end on a progressive note. Selvam’s words to his mother ‘Don’t worry, we shall manage’, and Ravi expression ‘tomorrow, perhaps, tomorrow’ are words that ring with hope, confidence, positivism, determination and undaunted spirit.

John Masters comments: “An overwhelmingly real book. It is about those parts of us, as human beings, which are permanent and universal - love, hunger, lust, passion, ambition, sacrifice, death. She is the best writer now writing who generally uses an Indian background.”38 (Masters: Retrieved on 22/9/2013)
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