CHAPTER V
Chapter : V

A HANDFUL OF RICE

Kamala Markandaya is a very prominent signature belonging to this phase of Indian English Fiction and her literary prominence has not lessened a bit even now. *A Handful of Rice*, Markandaya wrestles with issues of social hierarchy, in the novel *Shalimar* she accurately portrays two parallel societies in India. The main character, Rikki, is introduced to both of these societies during his adolescence. Rikki was born into the life of fishing. His father, brother, and cousins were all fishermen. However, at a young age his entire family falls victim to the might of the sea. Rikki is taken in by a family of missionaries. These new guardians show Rikki a completely new life. Markandaya shows that the presence of both cultures has painted the beautiful picture of what has become India. This novel depicts the evolution and development of Indian society and culture by describing the changes of Shalimar. This novel is a nice addition to her already extensive list of work. *A Handful of Rice* fictionalizes the sociology of India by awakening the polite society to the plight of the rural people. Like Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers*, the novel deals with hunger and poverty and the consequent degeneration of human values. The modern man given to money and
machines, scepticism, hypocrisy and corruption suffers from melancholy and maladjustments, emotional and psychological instability. Scepticism, surreptitiously increased due to extreme paucity of faith for man causes to have faith even in his own self. In her life as well as in her novels she has made a powerful and very appealing attempt at viewing the eastern situation in the light of western thought. The haunting memory of colonization which led to a different scale of values for the black’s and white’s resulting in social injustice and corrosion of spiritual values. These make her novels a forum for sensitive critique against suffering caused by such racial tension. She excels in recording the inner workings of the minds of her characters, their personal perplexities and social confrontations. She endeavoured to portray them as individuals growing into themselves, unfolding the delicate processes of their being and becoming.

*A Handful of Rice* is one of the first novels to exemplify the plight of rural peasants to the new urban lifestyle. She traces the path of the antagonist in the novel, Ravi, a rural peasant who moved to the city to escape the vicious cycle of starvation in his village. When he moves to the city he befriends an orphan who grew up in the city. Ravi’s life becomes full of robberies, alcohol, and prostitutes. He sleeps on the sidewalk and eats perhaps one meal a day. Things change when Ravi falls in love with Nalini, the daughter of a man he robs. Ravi begins to change his ways and begins working for Apu, Nalini’s father. Ravi
marries Nalini and realizes that even while working, it is very difficult to make a decent living. Ravi becomes obsessed with greed and constantly battles between going back to his old way of life with easy money and freedom and living a middle class life. Markandaya conveys the stress of society’s standards through Jayamma, Nalini’s mother. Jayamma never seems to care about the hardships their family encounters but is more concerned that the neighbors do not find out about their struggles. As Ravi and Nalini have children, financial stresses increase and Ravi becomes more stingy and greedy. He then associates with his old gang friends and starts to abuse Nalini. Finally, Ravi is forced to choose between his money and his son, a choice that in the end claims his fate.

Kamala Markandaya’s fifth novel *A Handful of Rice* concerns itself like the first novel with the theme of conflict between oriental stoicism and western revolt. Like the first novel, this novel also gives vent to Markandaya’s anguish over social injustice. In the first novel she as treated it in a village, now she shows its effect in a town. In the first novel Rukmani’s son Murugan leaves the village hoping to make a better living in town in the same way Ravi, the protagonist in *A Handful of Rice*, follows the same pattern. The first novel has female protagonist Rukmani, the narrator heroine. The fifth novel has a male protagonist Ravi. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ravi in *A Handful of Rice*, in village and a town respectively, represent starvation, social injustice and
exploitation of poor people. The first novel shows the hard struggle for existence in a rural society, the fifth one displays the same in a modern city. The former novel shows it in the life of Ravi. Here Markandaya Probes deeper into the misery of human predicament and shows the seeds of revolt in the heart of its hero. Poverty pollutes the characters of Markandaya’s fiction. She shows that extreme poverty is a gateway to all kinds of crime.

*A Handful of Rice* is a poignant tale of grim poverty and perpetually gnawing hunger, the whole narrative is woven around Ravi’s character. The author using the third person method maintains just sufficient distance from him to analyse his motives and conduct, keeping at the same time close enough to identify herself with him in the flow of thought and event. The novel begins and ends with Ravi’s struggle with hunger. Living in abject poverty, famished Ravi cannot hear the voice of his conscience. He drowns his morality and his misery in drink. “I am starving,” he says, “I’m hungry, I want a meal.”

In the village, Ravi led a life of genteel and acute poverty. He had seen “nothing but starvation.” that had led the villagers astray. Ravi comes to the city for a foothold in the life. But what has the city to offer to poor people like him? Nothing: “It held out before them like an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, some day, there would be something.”

Both Ravi and the Convict have a similar background. They lived in the village in poverty and misery. Like Ravi, the Convict had no food,
no work and had to steal something for survival. When his wife fell ill, the Convict was caught and jailed while Ravi dodges the police and escapes from being arrested. The Convict in prison and Ravi at Apu’s house are chained up, lashed and then fed like animals. Convict after being rescued from the policy by the Bishop, and Ravi after being given food and shelter at Apu’s house, are considerably humanized to lead a normal civilized life. Ravi says to himself, “…. The girl who could make a man feel like a man even outside the jungle of his choosing” ….⁴. But for Ravi, there is no escape. The other tailors will snatch away his livelihood. Here Ravi becomes the citizen of the unreal city, neither dying nor living. It is not merely economic insecurity that is portrayed but the moral problems of conscience it arouses, and the apprehension that honesty and prosperity are not always synonymous. Ravi leaves the penury and apathy of his village in disgust to make a better living in Madras. After coming to the city and getting involved in Damodar’s shady business activities, Ravi fears, evades and is eventually crushed by the corrupt administrative powers. Ravi gets to know the city, learns the ropes and hopes for something better to turn up. The theme of poverty and hunger in an apathetic and ruthless society is the thematic concern of this novel too but “the latter goes a step further in attempting a search for identity for persons like Ravi who run away from the countryside and its impoverished conditions to take shelter in the city where financial constraints grip them by the neck”.⁵
In the stifling and suffocating urban milieu of Madras, Ravi has the lassitude of hunger, and “the terror of losing his identity in an indifferent city which was akin to death.”6 One night, drunk in Prohibition time, he escapes from a pursuing policeman by forcing his way into the house of a tailor, Apu. The next morning the beats him, and the husband scolds and advises him, righteously indignant that a decent boy like him should behave as he did. Both Ravi and the Convict have a similar background. They lived in the village in poverty and misery. Like Ravi, the Convict had no food, no work and had to steal something for survival. When his wife fell ill, the Convict was caught and jailed while Ravi dodges the police and escapes from being arrested.

The Convict in prison and Ravi at Apu’s house are chained up, lashed and then fed like animals. The Convict after being rescued from the police by the Bishop and Ravi, after being given food and shelter at Apu’s house is considerably humanized to lead a normal civilized life. In Indian Literature, Prema Nand Kumar compares this novel with Bernard Malamud’s The Assistant:

“In Malamud’s novel, a stray Christian waif, who comes to steal from Jewish shop, stays on to help the shop owner and win the love of daughter. He is nagged by his mother-in-law and tortured by poverty. But the shop- owner’s sudden breakdown makes him indispensable in the house and the shop.”7
A Handful of Rice is a common expression for requirement of food for the hungry mouths. It intimates the theme of hunger which is further reinforced in the novel the frequent recurrence of the word ‘rice’. Ravi and Nalini talk about the need of rice and express their concern over its rising prices and adulteration. Ravi finding no other way of satisfying his hunger finally joins the agitated mass of people to plunder a godown for a small quantity of rice. A Handful of Rice thus is a pathetic chronicle of man’s vain struggle for food and the brutal demolition of his quixotic dreams. A strong motivational component of an individual’s behaviour is the requirement of satisfying the biological needs of the body such as hunger, thirst and sex. The entire pattern of Ravi’s behaviour can be seen operating according to his biological drives, particularly hunger. He uses violence in the beginning as well as the end of the novel for satisfying his hunger.

Hunger, poverty and desire for comforts of life had lured him to the illusive verdure pastures of the city only to make him realize with envy that those were meant for well-to-do families. Far from providing simple support to his family, K. R. Srinivas Iyengar finds the significance of the title in the “spiraling of grain prices in India because of the failure of monsoons and the inability of governments to hold the price line.” As the theme of the novel is a tragic portrayal of an impractical youth, wriggling out of his rural shell but dreaming of dizzy heights and then afflicted grievously by the denial. Being the son of a poor peasant, Ravi
along with other villagers, was leading a miserable life of poverty and hunger in his village as he recalls here: “they did not lie, they did not cheat, they did not steal. But then in that small struggling farming community what was there to steal? 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.”

Primarily, his demand at Apu’s house was only for food and shelter. Even his attraction for Nalini was only for food. Subsequently, however, his wants to explode like crackers darting across in all directions for a new shirt, a safety razor, a mouth organ, a bed, a nice new sari, a new shirt for himself and other essentials and luxuries the list of which grew daily longer. Then he must have higher wages and a separate room: “a refugee, a place they could call their own, where he and his wife could talk, plan, dream, and make love, undisturbed.”

Ravi’s desire for a room as a substitute for a house can be understood on the ground that it is one of the three basic necessities of life – food, clothing and shelter, but not his acts of equipping the room with a khus khus blind to keep the glare out and a punkah to generate gentle breeze such as “they have in burra sahib’s houses.” Nor is there any justification, as he maintains, for some of the luxury items for increasing the efficiency.

One such item is a bicycle “that beautiful machine with the flashing silver spokes he had ridden so often in his dreams.” which
neither Apu had nor do Ravi’s finances allow him to have. The knowledge of his wife’s pregnancy shifts the priorities of his dreams from non-human to human. A bed and a bicycle become subsidiary externals to his son, something real and precious. However, when the charm of his family wanes, his hunger for other items of luxury like refrigerator and a nice gold watch to show it off to others increases. He even itches to get into “one of those motor-cars that purred along how the Marina,”12 though wondering all along how people have so much of money. Occasionally, his growing longings and the inevitable non-materialization of his ever-spiraling dreams make him in his unhappiness wish to be like a child again “who could sleep through any disturbance.”13 but the insurmountable burden of feeding the hungry mouths of his entire family forces him to seek solace in easily-available items of luxury like Apu’s bed with springs instead of the string-bed. The problem of hunger or more concretely the non-availability of *A Handful of Rice* affects not only Ravi and Nalini but their children as well.

While winnowing rice liberally adulterated with stones and chaff, Nalini feels concerned as her twin babies “cried after every feed for the milk she could no longer give them, turning speechlessly away from the boiled rice mush she offered instead.”14 The vexation situation befuddles Ravi’s mind and defies an easy solution. He remembers
nostalgically how his mother used to give him a good meal but which he now cannot give to his own children:

“One good meal, his mother would have said, clasping pious hands together, thankfully, indicating the rice, the dhal, the vegetables, the thin chilli-water brew. One good meal and he had to watch his children sucking their fingers, grown silent ad anxious, long before the next one was due. This one good meal was not enough for him. He wanted more. It was his right, his children’s right.”

Ravi’s frustration mounts with the growing realization of his incompetence to feed the family, making him frantically think of several possible alternatives of resolving this problem. Here, Ravi’s struggle to extricate himself from the coils of debt, hunger and insecurity seem Sisyphean in dimension.” The rationing of food within the house appears non-feasible whereas his insistence on book-keeping and better management of his earnings only worsens his relationship with his wife. Ravi’s act of breaking the rusty bars for food can be taken as the demolition by a hungry man of the walls of decency. All principles, norms and morals are normally good for a man only as long as his belly is full; in empty rumbling belly they are relegated to the background. Having been in existence for a long time, some of these norms become outdated, meaningless, even diseased and as such stifle the healthy development of an individual who, being alone and unaided, cannot
demolish or change them. What helped Ravi in fighting against them, rightly or wrongly but certainly ironically is liquor. Ravi is an individual who realizes that society is harsh, cruel, callous and unimaginative.

The individual, no matter how brave, means very little to it. Far from rewarding him for good deeds, society punishes him. Goodness of an individual in society is quite irrelevant. Hemingway once wrote: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.” Hence, being hungry and in a rebellious mood, Ravi violently attacks Apu and his house and ends up tied down with a bicycle chain and a cotton sari. Here the bicycle chain against which Ravi unsuccessfully fights to free himself could be the uncontrollable power society has upon an individual. This becomes clear at a later stage when he fights against the society represented by the European memsahib’s the policemen, and the guards at the rice godowns. After the death of his son, Ravi castigates society, calling it “Them. Society. Guilty of casual murder.”

In each of these places, Ravi finds that he did not have many chances of success. Margaret Joseph voices this idea when she concludes that “Ravi is destroyed by a false society, represented by the ‘people’ who think he has no feelings, who give him no privacy, who pin him down, actually and metaphorically, who give orders, who have money. His harsh treatment of Nalini and his incest with his mother-in-
law are indirect results of this frustrated rage against society.” With the bicycle chain, there are other associative words which strengthen its connotative meanings. They are the iron bars of Apu’s house, the grilles of rice godown, the blows of Jayamma and the whistle of the police. All of them are directed against Ravi, the individual, place obstacles in his way and thwart his progress. The iron bars and the grilles of rice godowns from barriers between the haves and the have-nots. As by breaking the iron bars, Ravi had claimed food from Apu, he expects rice by breaking the iron grilles of rice godowns, oblivious of the fact that the law-enforcement agents would not allow this to happen. The presence of the police, both at the beginning and the end of the novel, points out to this fact.

In the beginning when Ravi had successfully evaded the police, he had to face Jayamma’s blows for she becomes a law-enforcing agent at home even as the policemen are more effective. Society, Ravi realizes, is so inconsiderate that showing honesty to it would mean nothing. Ravi showed his honesty to Jayamma by returning four-fifty out of five rupees he was given for replacing the iron bars, but finds that she had taken no notice of it, making him unhappy and disgusted. His antipathy to Jayamma is extended to the world in general: “How like her, how like them, he thought, filled with a great contempt.” He insults her by using ironical language, pointing unmistakably about her nature and then thinks:
“This time at least he got under her skin—skin, he thought, My god, it’s not skin, what it is hide, what they get after years and years of toughening up, of not looking, of not caring to look, of glazing their eyes when they do. But this time he had pierced it, hide or skin whatever it was.”

Associated with the bicycle chain is the woman’s cotton sari with which Ravi’s arms are closed and bound. The sari, thus, is another kind of chain, less powerful than the bicycle chain but still quite strong from the grip of which he cannot come out very easily. The chains of his dream-wife and subsequently of his children tie him softly but irretrievably. He does get out of the bicycle chain but remains powerfully chained and charmed by the sari, that is, Nalini. She remains a force so powerful that even humiliation at the hands of other members of the house such as Jayamma and Varma do not discourage him. Whenever discouraged and beaten by the world, Ravi finds some happiness in his love for Nalini whose temptation at Apu’s place is much more powerful than even his desire for possession of wealth. Thus, associating Jayamma with the bicycle chain representing society, one can associate Nalini with the sari representing family. It is Nalini who holds the key to Ravi’s. “What a girl, he thought. Take a girl like that, and half a man’s troubles would be over.”

A mere glimpse of her is enough to “make a man’s day as her mother’s marred it.” Thus, the symbol of sari when associated with
and extended to Nalini becomes quite powerful. For one thing she is very charming, and for another she stands for family and for whom Ravi is prepared to disregard everything which is associated with the world and might come as an obstacle. The two women Jayamma and Nalini symbolize respectively society and family as well as the old and new generations. Associating Jayamma with society, Ravi finds her harsh and callous whereas Nalini is captivating and brings about a tremendous change in him. Remove her and Ravi would be altogether a different person. He accepts the job of an apprentice against his own liking in order to be close to her. He replaces the broken bars of Apu’s house for her sake. At a time when he is drawn towards Damodar due to the latter’s growing prosperity and because of his own mounting financial problems, it is Nalini who keeps his conscience alive.

Meena Shirwadkar voices the same idea when she says that Ravi moves about in the world “where all unhealthy elements dwell… when he is vagabond but leaves it when he marries Nalini whom he loves.” Nalini is the most powerful stimulus that draws Ravi from Damodar who is deeply concerned with his unfair and unlawful quest for wealth and, as such, can be associated with the third symbol of tin trunk whereas for Ravi it is second symbol of sari which is uppermost. He ruminates about her:

“He came to her house as often as he could, slaved for her mother, worked for her father, bore with the whims
of the hangers-on in the household, neglected his own distinctly precarious finances - for what? For the few words he was able to exchange with her in between, if he was lucky. Sometimes there was not even this: sometimes after a whole day’s endurance all he had for his comfort was the sound of her, the swish of her sari, as she whisked about the place at her mother’s bidding, or a glimpse of her sitting cross-legged like an inaccessible goddess in one of the inner rooms.  

For the sake of Nalini, Ravi is prepared to do anything, suffer any humiliation and discomfort. He is completely enthralled by the beauty of her profile framed in muslin sari, by her utterly feminine sound, “the distilled essence of all that was sweet and desirable in a woman,” and envisions her as his wife. If she were to be his wife, “what would he not do for her, what could he not achieve.” While the world continues to work against Ravi, the very idea of a family encourages him and serves as a stabilizing force when he is ruffled by social problems.

“If I had a wife, he thought as he ate, she would cook for me, it would be like this everyday…. But what had he to offer to get himself a wife?....... I’ll buy her a little house, small but nice, he thought as he finished, and some nice, new shiny aluminium cooking vessels, these brass things
are too heavy, old-fashioned....... and with a job one can save say a quarter of one’s wage.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, the extension of the idea of a girl to his wife and then on to home, with pots and pans, a soft bed, new sheets, a bicycle, grains and rice brings it to the third symbol of the tin trunk. The cotton sari “was tied to a tin trunk.” which here refers to a traditional repository of household riches and precious possessions. By the extension of its meaning, it may include too the food grains, particularly the of-repeated item of rice “a potent symbol of poverty in urban life.”\textsuperscript{29} This is the third chain, in addition to the bicycle chain and the cotton sari, which continues to put a hold on Ravi. By being a sort of dream which empowers him, the tin trunk, continue to direct his movements and activities. As a matter of fact it is the same economic well-being of his family. The success of a family depends not only on mutual love between the husband and his wife but also on its economic condition. Hence throughout the novel, after Ravi has settled down with Nalini, economic considerations, symbolized by the tin trunk, continue to direct his movements and activities. As a matter of fact it is the same economic consideration which had earlier drawn him from the village to the city and further in the city reluctantly to the company of the discreditable and redoubtable. However, he does not succumb for long to the temptation of Damodar. His mounting problems due to his
strengthening integrity are in direct proportion to Damodar’s mounting prosperity based on a deteriorating moral code.

Even though towards the end Ravi agrees to do anything Damodar would suggest in order to improve his economic plight, Margaret Joseph rightly draws the conclusion that the statement “does not mean that he actually will.” One additional advantage that Ravi has here at Apu’s place is that the second and third chains ‘wife and money’ are joined together while with Damodar only the third one exists because he has no family. Take on another level, Apu and Jayamma represent the old generation in the same way as Ravi and Nalini do the new one. Apu takes pride in doing his work very painstakingly, in being tough in life and in facing the challenges of the world, taking its commendation and criticism in his stride. Ravi, like Nalini, is soft, wishes to make easy money, bleeds at a slight touch and refuses to yield to his customers. Believing in some ideals of his own; he refuses to conform to Apu’s code which includes flattery, bribery and subservience and that “leads to sliding finances, scarcity, debts and death.” When Apu and Ravi, the old and the new generations, walk everywhere carrying their merchandise in a huge bundle, the latter feels humiliated as if she were a human donkey, for the former, not realizing that in a traditional society, the young have to realize that in a traditional society, the young have to relieve the burden of the old if it were possible.
Besides, Apu does not burden Ravi by keeping himself free; he does not spare himself whether in sun or in rain “his thin spindly legs kept going like pistons, at a pace Ravi found it an effort to emulate.”  

Belonging to the old generation, Apu is a very worldly wise man and understands that the problems of Ravi are the problems of the new generation. Markandaya seems to point out the difference between the two generations in the following dialogue:

“you’re too soft, you and your generation ,’ Apu liked to cackle at him. ‘Brought up soft, can’t take anything.’

‘We don’t want to take anything and everything’ Ravi would , retort, angrily, but only sometimes. Mostly he let it pass. The old man was right He could not see himself, at Apu’s age, tramping these absurd distances.”

The novelist shows in nutshell, as has also been pointed out throughout the novel, that the new generation would have to imbibe some traits of the old generation if it has to succeed in life. The new generation has ideas, aspirations, dreams and a capacity to do hard work but it lacks patience, endurance and humility. In such a situation A Handful of Rice could make all the difference between life and death, between conscience and lack of conscience. Poverty makes him rebel, an angry young man. He joins hand with a mob which in its rice-craze pulls down and then pulls out the gunny bags of rice from the fashionable store EVE. Ravi and Apu had once worked in this store and
were paid low wages for what they stitched. Ravi thinks of throwing a
brick at the store. But his hand drops. His Gandhian hand drops,
conscience forbids him. Thus, unlike Damodar, Ravi is a man with
conscience and hence it is this conscience that makes him drift through
poverty and privation. Ironically, his beginning turns out to be his finale.
The spasm of hunger and anger at a conscienceless society locked him
in, locked him up and forced him to turn to himself, to the scruples of his
conscience and the values he cherished. Markandya presents Ravi’s
moral dilemma quite convincingly. Torn between worlds, one dead and
the other yet to see the light of the day, Ravi makes a choice which
ultimately proves to be life denying. Ravi’s insatiable hunger and
interminable struggle for rice remains unrequited with his conscience
playing a cold dice. He struggles, goes forward, comes very close to the
rice bags, but when his turn comes for looting its he stops.

A Handful of Rice remains within a hand’s reach for ever and Ravi
the modern Tantalus ends with his efforts to procure rice rendered futile.
He cannot decide. He cannot choose. He cannot even hurl a brick at
the Nababs’s Row: “….but suddenly he could not. The strength that
had inflamed him, the strength of a suppressed, laminated anger, ebbed
as quickly as it had risen. His hand dropped.”32 Thus, the scene of the
infuriated mob trying to loot the godown has a symbolic significance. It
resolves Ravi’s dilemma and brings his wavering morality and his sense
of values to the stability. But unfortunately, Ravi is a failure with a
conscience like Gerald, protagonist of Agnus Wilson’ Anglo-Saxon Attitudes. Ravi’s struggle for existence and his attempts at self-realisation, his rebellious and recalcitrant stance are all symbolic of a thousand thrusts made unsuccessfully by sensitive souls on a system that neither yields nor responds. People like Apu, Damodar and Nalini can adjust themselves to this system or rather to this anti-system. But Ravi with this saeva indignation can hardly do so. He is square peg in a round hole. He refuses to fit in. Ravi lives for human values, and hence declines the role Apu wanted him to play. He is reluctant to adopt Apu’s code of conduct. He starves but does not stoop to conquer his hunger. He does not submit to an ignoble, ignominious way of life. This integrity and fidelity to his self ultimately brings about his alienation. Ravi’s instinct to endure the buffets of existence with a spirit of self-abnegation and commiseration makes him a stoic.

In the novel, emotional maturity enriches one’s sense of values and strengthens one’s hold. It also helps one’s rapport with the society. Ravi lacks this quality. Unlike Apu and Nalini, Ravi is too much obsessed with money. When Nalini says: “...you are getting high and mighty, putting yourself on a level with high class folk.... Why can’t you be content with what we have?”33 Ravi retorts: “Because I want, I want more, I want a bed... They all have beds, the people we slave for.... Day-beds, night-beds, divans.”34 Nalini is happier than Ravi since she is emotionally mature. She understands the world. Feels it no like an
infant as Ravi does. She has none of Ravi’s childish cravings. She knows “ordinary folk like us can never be like them.” But Ravi goes into the bedrooms of the memsahibs and peeps into other rooms, catches glimpses of the silk hangings and the tall windows, gleaming doors and furniture and feels awed by so much wealth. Can a man with a conscience ever do this? Thus, it is natural for him to imagine people like himself as “cattle in the eyes of the world.” People call him a monster. Nalini scorns him. There is hardly any emotional understanding between him and Nalini. Though very much attached to her in the early days of their marriage, he falls out with her. He finds fault with her even on trivial matters. The small beautiful fan Nalini had bought rouses his ire and makes him violent. The black stones in the rice make him shout at his son Raju, Ravi angrily asks, “What are we, memsahibs… to send for a doctor for every ache or pain?” Moments later his conscience pricks him and he repents. He fetches a doctor but it is too late. The boy dies. Nalini’s deafening silence annoys Ravi. He arraigns the society, not himself: “I blame them. Them. Society. Guilty of casual murder.”

Ravi is a puppet in the hands of fate, like Rukmani or Mira. He is ready to fight for what he wants. The material things he yearns for are an indication of the manner in which his character evolves, and the steady evolution of character defines the course of the novel. From wanting a little house, new vessels and an alarm clock, next longs for a
soft bed for his wife, new shirts, a razor, mouth-organ and bicycle. Years later he laughs at these “petty fancies of his youth... what he wanted now was embracing and fundamental Pride. The power that earnings conferred on a man. The decency of a fair rewarded for his work.” Troubles are piled on to Ravi more convincingly than in Rukmani’s case, for whereas hers were a result of external fate, his partly are due to his own character. In his idealism he refuses to conform to Apu’s code which includes flattery, bribery and subservience. In the novel, the novelist’s tragic vision is seen most strongly in the contrasting roles assigned to Ravi and Damodar. Both have had their share of trouble, but whereas one has emerged diffident and defeated but still decent, the other has lifted himself by his own bootstraps to a corrupt prosperity. Ravi’s veers wildly as difficulties accumulate. Nalini’s integrity and acceptance of her lot from the foil to Damodar’s corruption add grim determination to make good. The community may have certain standards, but if they clash with his personal aims he has no hesitation in flouting them. He is often compared to a cat- his eyes, we are told, are grey and he prowls the ‘jungle’ of the city by night. As the gap between Damodar and Ravi widens, the former’s easy camaraderie turns to contempt. Ravi’s admiration of Damodar because he keeps his course un swayed by the weak babblings of myth and conscience. The novelist has bitter
denunciation of contemporary moral standards by which riches are at a premium, no matter how dubious their origin.

However, it is possible that Damodar secretly admires Ravi's decency. The recognition of the unattainable in a superior character, the realization of the core of integrity in Ravi, is no doubt the cause of Damodar’s sharp, ugly laughter and his anger that despite all the temptations to debt free luxury, Ravi retains his principles. No doubt this occasions some ineffectual prodding of his hibernating conscience. Ravi’s mounting problems due to his strengthening integrity are in direct proportion to Damodar’s mounting prosperity based on a deteriorating moral code. The novelist’s tragic vision is seen, therefore, not in the characters themselves so much, as in her melancholy realization of the system of values and conduct they represent. It is because of the strength of this realization that she has maintained the integrity of her artistic vision and ended the book with the same realism with which she has written it. The growing pre-occupation with the reproduction of reality in 20th century novels has resulted in a change in ending. In the 18th and 19th century novel, a final episode satisfactorily terminated the story. Today not all novels end in this way. They are “open-ended” i.e. no rounding-off is attempted. *A Handful of Rice* is an example of an “open” ending, artistically integrated with the rest of the book, in which the novelist has refused to compromise with her vision merely to please the reader.
A careful reading of the novel will show that she has prepared us for this ending. Any spectacular improvement of Ravi’s fortunes through his own efforts would be unrealistic. Any disintegration of moral character by conforming to Damodar’s code would seriously flaw the value of the novel. Apart from this, a study of Ravi’s character will so us the impossibility of change after ten years of moulding into respectability. His final plea to Damodar reads Ravi’s, his thin voice and chattering teeth better than Ravi reads himself. Like Scarlet O’ Hara in Gone With the Wind, Ravi has evolved a method of “starving off his worries by promising himself to think about it later,” and this procrastination of thought, as well as his increasing inability to follow Damodar, because of the process by which he has been conditioned, should prepare us for the postponement of action implied in the last words “Tomorrow, yes, tomorrow”. No hope seems to be in store for him except the vague promise of a tomorrow that could turn as easily into violence as to paralysis of action.

For the story about the basic facts of earning a living and solid precision of language is necessary to project such an experience. In fact the style is the experience. The power to capture the actual moment of life is noticeable on several occasions, comic as well as tragic. Ravi’s courting of Nalini, the cheap cinema house, the marriage preparations and the procession in the car, are all realistically described. The sensation of being poised for one deliciously perilous
moment on the steeply inclined seat as they get into a hand-pulled rickshaw, the pattani seller trying to keep his balance with the tray on his head; the family gathering to watch Ravi’s efforts to gain some privacy on the terrace; all these are true to life as we know it in our country. Drawn with unerring lines are the cramped living conditions in the tailor’s house, the common tap, the partitioned bed-room and the contrasted luxury Apu and Ravi visit, with their silk hangings and gleaming floors.

In Ravi’s rebellion at the difference between both styles of life, lies the author’s awareness of the impossibility of achieving one’s aims and of the difference between things as they are and things as they ought to be. His resentment against the monotonous job of stitching apron according to a certain pattern is not so much due to the absence of freedom in it as due to his opposition to being exploited by the Eve shopkeeper who paid him eighty rupees per dozen as stitching charges whereas the shopkeeper himself charged from customers one hundred twenty five rupees per piece which is twenty times more than he as a tailor got. Apu had patiently put up with, what to the impatient Ravi appears, an unbearable exploitation. Considering the whole economic system based on injustice and exploitation, Ravi wanted Apu to refuse such a work. But what in his lifetime Apu did not do or allow his death makes it possible for Ravi to do it by increasing the stitching charges. This action unfortunately backfires since the rich customers, instead of
paying him at the enhanced rates, turn away from him, forgetting conveniently his past services. The death of his father-in-law fails to draw even a word of sympathy from the rich female customers for whom “not death itself could match the importance of a dress being ready on time.”

His impotent fury against the rich seeks a release in violent acts of calling them “bitches”, in hitting with his shoes a flea-beaten dog or the stones in the path as if he were setting terms with the economic exploiters. Having ridden high on the crest ideals and dreams and having exhausted the remnants of his energy in his little senseless violent acts of protest, Ravi comes down to the dusty earth of reality and reconciliation. The old man’s method palm-greasing which had aroused his anger once begins to make sense now. What troubles him, however, is not having to bribe, but not being able to do so. His faith in the free economic world crumbles by the encroachment of unscrupulous competitors on what for Apu was an inviolable economic territory. Devoid of cleverness and experience of his father-in-law, and without the unscrupulous methods of the new competitors, Ravi does not know how to protect his interest. His mood appears now one of final resignation. While most of Ravi’s activities in the novel can be taken as protests, there are a few on which some doubts have arisen. K. Venkata Reddy questions the plausibility of Ravi’s acceptance of monotonous job as a tailor’s apprentice when he had been used to “the exciting life
of pick-pockets and bootleggers. Then again, Ravi burns with anger, protest and a desire of revenge against the rich but cools down once he comes in contact with Nalini. It is no longer appeared important to him to get even with them who had crushed rather carelessly the weak men like himself and his father.

And, finally, Ravi, in order to fish out an offer of job, of financial assistance or even a word of sympathy, narrates his woeful tale of unpaid bills and hungry mouths to his one-time associate Damodar but who, unmoved by tragic recital, continues to consider the poor tailor a one-eyed peasant, a credulous fool, a little runt and a part of the slime round the bottom. Then Ravi virtually goes down his knees to beg for a job for which he would be prepared to do anything. In order to understand reasons for Ravi’s acquiescent activities so much in divergence of his avowed ideals or our early impressions, one has to keep in mind his basically weak character. An immature young man who raises a giant superstructure of dreams without having corresponding capability to transform them into reality is fated to be a failure. Dream is an opiate that pushes up or drags down a person through inebriation for a time but falls flat taking the tailor’s job, Ravi would have had a bout of feast in between bouts of hunger.

Apu provided at least a regular subsistence so much in commensurate with Ravi’s rural standard. The forsaken soul must also have seen in Apu his father or guardian – a man of traditional values
associated with rural life, under whose protection he could lead a purposeful life. It is the same weak character that explains his unintentional neglect of his protests against the rich after coming in contact with Nalini. A protest implies a strong opposition in speech or action emanating, at least in Ravi’s case, from dissatisfaction. Nalini, as a living toy, the child in Ravi forgets his grievances, stops crying and ignores protesting. His final humiliating entreats before Damodar and his readiness to do anything, respectable or otherwise, is the expasperated cry of a broken youth whose rebellious acts and mounting liabilities have brought him to the brink of ruin. These incidents apart, *A Handful of Rice* is a pathetic cry of protest of a hungry and anguished half-grown child groping for a path haltingly through the labyrinthine lanes of quixotic dreams and ugly realities, rural poverty and urban plenty but reaching nowhere.

In the novel Markandaya unfolds the story step by step. In the beginning, Nalini’s parents had provided Ravi food, shelter and a hope for decent living. In a jungle-like society where commercial rather than moral values are dominant and where the rules and laws have existence only in name, Nalini’s house becomes an oasis in a desert. But soon its charm begins to vanish. The ever widening gap between his income and expenditure as also the increasing liability of the family with its lazy, good-for-nothing hangers on make him gradually lose his mental equilibrium and, after a series of disillusionment, bring about his
rapid fall. Ravi had a fitting sense of happiness in Apu after being disillusionment with Damodar, a sense of distilled pleasure in Nalini after Apu and his craft of tailoring began to be tedious and, further, a real sense of pleasure in his children when Nalini’s feminine charm was lost in the daily domestic bickrings. None of them could have given Ravi a lasting sense of happiness when his ambitions had mercurial volatility. The climax is reached when Puttanna steals money. Apu dies, and Ravi’s revolutionary economic measures only worsen his prospects. His ill-treatment at the hands of the memsahibs is the beginning of the end of his economic self-sufficiency whereas his act of beating Nalini brings about the end of his familial happiness.

Ravi sells Apu’s bed, has twins, is turned out by a sahib and turns his wife out on suspicion, and has sex with Jayamma- his mother-in-law as if ritualistically bidding farewell to his harmonious married life. In the end, as in the beginning, Ravi wanders alone and feels, as he had felt before, “a strange harsh freedom in the anonymity into which he was once again swallowed.” The consciousness of his dreams and the idea of respectability disappear and he feels as rootless as he had felt on his arrival in the city from his village. The same sense of fear and the same hunger confront him now as they had in the beginning; only it is worse because now his wife and other members of the family, instead of taking his care, as Apu and Jayamma had in the beginning, are to be taken care of. Kannan, who had shown the decency of repairing the
broken iron bars for nothing, wishes to help Ravi again by keeping him out of violence but fails to quell the hungry tailor’s rebellious spirit and the last scene appears to be the re-creation of the first one, the only difference being that in the beginning he had dodged the police and had got food; now what dodges him is *A Handful of Rice* but what gets him is the police man’s cane.

The law enforcement agencies which had failed in the beginning have finally re-established their supremacy and credibility over the law-breakers, as in the following:

> “Ravi began to run as the crowd broke up. On all sides men were running and he ran With them, wildly, crossing his arms above His head to shield his skull from the baton blows that came raining down. One blow caught his thin shoulders, spinning him round but he recovered his balance and went on, whimpering, dizzy with pain. Bastards! Police bastards!”

The story centering round *A Handful of Rice* is complete in itself. The threads are neatly drawn and tied together to make the texture of the novel complete and unified. The incidents and characters contribute to the main plot. *A Handful of Rice* suggests no such positive note. It is the tragedy of a dreamy infirm person who fails to survive due to his
wavering choices, weak resolves and nettling rootlessness. Ravi remains a dangling man unsure of his urban moorings, unwilling to go to the rural shores. Kamala Markandaya works skillfully in creating interest in the story. Decidedly there are many occasions where she uses sensational and violent episodes such as the pilferage of smuggled goods, the breaking of iron bars, the theft of money from Apu’s pillow, Ravi’s confrontation with the police, but such details are desirable to give a faithful portrayal of the urban scene where anti-social activities form as much a part of life as the social and familial ones. The creditable part is that Markandaya uses them not only to enrich the plot and to delineate characters but for symbolic purpose as well. K. Venkata Reddy says, “A distinguish artistic feature of A Handful of Rice is the successful operation of the system parallels and contrasts.”

The observation is apt because there is the contrasting use of light and darkness, village and city, Ravi and Damodar, Jayamma and Nalini, and the old and new generations. Ravi oscillates between fear of hope and between “darkness and light” which is the pattern of the universe but without his being aware of it. Whereas darkness makes him dispirited, light gives him hope, though for a short duration, in the wider domain of darkness. His poverty and hunger are alleviated, in parts, by Damodar and Jayamma. But the tailoring work that Apu and Jayamma give him and which comes as a ray of hope at one time begins to tire him later. Nalini, who had brightened him with hope and
happiness much more than anyone or anything else, begins to lose her charm and is darkened with increasing domestic difficulties, the expansion of his family, the death of Apu and the shying away of the traditional customers. These very components which at one time had brought forth is happiness ultimately bring about his tragedy. The village has been depicted as poor in harvest, deficient in essentials, infested with diseases yet ill-equipped with medicines, causing despair all around, while the city is full of apparent opportunities, a shining illusion of plenty though abounding also in adulterated rice and the long queues of people. If there are no jobs in the village, there are thousands of job-seeking graduates hanging around in the streets.

The city, unlike a village, also thrives in violence, inhumanity and fierce competition. Ravi, from the village, is basically good and has a soft conscience, Damodar, now urbanized, is devoid of conscience and is transformed into a hardened criminal. His chaste, young and respectable Nalini is contrasted with Damodar's bazaar girls who are "two a penny." The old generation of Apu and Jayamma is contrasted with the new one of Ravi and Nalini. Apu's business strategy of keeping his customers in good humour is so different from Ravi's method of increasing the tailoring charges and eventually losing his customers. The spirit of acceptance marks the one and the voice of protest the other. One is passive, the other rebellious.
Thus, the novel has an open-ending, as Margaret Joseph maintains, “artistically integrated with the rest of the book in which the novelist has refused to compromise with her vision merely to please the reader.” Markandaya could have done one of the two things: first, to make Damodar pull Ravi out of his miserable plight, or, second, to improve somewhat miraculously Ravi’s economic condition. A Miraculous improvement in Ravi’s economic condition would mean a well-rounded happy conclusion which would violate the realistic portrayal of society. Ravi, being the representative of hungry youths, will continue to face problems as long as there is hunger and poverty in India. To solve Ravi’s problems completely would be to falsify the realistic portrayal.

Hence, the novel conveys, what Ford Madox Ford calls, “a sense of inevitability: that which happens in it must seem to be the only thing that could have happened.” By reintroducing those incidents and theme with which the novel convey, whay Chekhov calls, “an impression of the entire work.” For in its totality, the novel is a sharply slashed slice of urban life with its prosperity and penury, its dreams and despairs and the exasperated pursuit of its hungry people for ever-elusive handful of rice. Kamala Markandaya shows us the futility of aspiration in relation to man’s achievement in the world, in what is undoubtedly a pessimistic novel.
ENDNOTES


2Ibid. 12.

3Ibid. 25-26.

4Ibid. 33.


9Ibid. 86.

10Ibid. 101.

11Ibid. 95.

12Ibid. 134.
Ibid. 163.


Ibid. 217.


Kamala Markandaya, A Handful of Rice (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1985) 231.

Joseph Margaret, Kamala Markandaya (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1980) 123.


Ibid. 24-25.

Ibid. 25.

Ibid. 24.


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Ibid. 42.

Ibid. 42.

Ibid. 11.

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Markandaya (Ghaziabad) 27.


31 Ibid. 83.

32 Ibid. 237.

33 Ibid. 75.

34 Ibid. 75.

35 Ibid. 75.

36 Ibid. 125.

37 Ibid. 228.

38 Ibid. 231.

39 Ibid. 207.

40 Ibid. 195.

41 Ibid. 184.


44 Ibid. 235-36.
