

# Theme of Alienation in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice.*

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## ABSTRACT:

Kamala Markandaya occupies a prominent place as a novelist in Indian English Literature. She is blessed with an extraordinary vision of life and possesses a practical feel of life in rural areas as well as in urban centres. In almost all novels she is deeply occupied with the changing Indian social and political conditions. S.I. Hemenway observes:

Markandaya is definitely one of the most productive, popular...Indo-Anglian novelists, and a superb representative of the growing number of Indian women writing serious literature in English. (The novels of India 52)

Markandaya excels in recording the inner workings of the minds of her characters, their personal perplexities and social confrontations which become the cause of their alienation. Kamala Markandaya, in fact, is more concerned with unfolding the sense of alienation of her protagonists. Her primary purpose is to highlight the isolation and alienation of the individual soul on account of-

- Poverty and Unemployment,
- The problem of conscience,
- The tug-of-war between traditional values and modern life, i.e. rootlessness
- Inconsistency between religion and science,
- Clash of values etc.

According to Md. Irshad:

Alienation constitutes the most striking theme in...*A Handful of Rice*. The novel fictionalises the sociology of India by awakening the polite society to the plight of the rural people. The protagonist of the novel, Ravi, feels a strong sense of alienation throughout the novel. He is a vagabond and as a proletarian product of the fifties, he is enmeshed in the maelstrom of change, in the transition from traditional and rural society to the machine-ridden, materialistic urban milieu. (Cross-Cultural Interaction in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 74)

However, Kamala Markandaya does not believe in depicting the sense of frustration at the disintegration of old order and at the loss of traditional values rather she shows her firm confidence in the unflinching spirit of the Indian social order to sustain itself through the worst of trials and tribulations. Uma Parameswaran rightly observes:

It is easy to writing tears of pity for the plight of peasant, underfed, uneducated, exploited and easier still to rouse anger and contempt for the superstitions and slow moving masses. They should stand there vulnerable and open to every attack, be it indifference, contempt, or emasculating charity. But to evoke admiration, even envy, for the simple faith and unswerving tenacity they hold needs, sympathy and skill. Kamala Markandaya has both. (Native Allies and Expatriates 92)

In her novel *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya shows that a man lives as long as his roots are undefiled and rootlessness or alienation becomes the cause of his suffering. The novelist portrays the modern man in Ravi who suffers from melancholy, maladjustment, emotional imbalance and psychological instability caused by poverty and unemployment, and cruel treatment by society, resulting in his alienation. *A Handful of Rice* contains symbolic portraits of the starving people, the exploited working class who struggle desperately for bare subsistence both in the rural and the urban areas.

*A Handful of Rice* deals with the isolation and alienation of Ravi in urban life in which he struggles for survival. Kai Nicholson rightly points out that in *A Handful of Rice* Mrs. Markandaya-

...uses the village as a pretext for her hero, Ravi, to flee countryside and plunge into the turmoil of urban life. (A Presentation of Social Problems in the Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian Novel 116)

Ravi, the central character in the novel is a proletarian product of the fifties. Belonging to the generation of 'angry young men' who rebel against fatalistic attitude of subservience, Ravi had the initiative to fight for proper place in society. But, he is ultimately forced by socio-economic oppression to recede back into his inherited destiny. What is, however remarkable about Ravi is-

He preserves his integrity at the cost of his family's suffering: alienation from them and the suffocation of his passionate rebellious democratic spirit. (Harrex 256)

Ravi is the son of a poor peasant in a village. Having been a perpetual victim of poverty, he becomes tired of hunger. And so, to escape from the rural poverty and hunger, he leaves his village and joins the general exodus to the city. He sees that the villagers:

Had all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty- the kind in which the weakest went to the wall, the old ones and the babies, dying of tuberculosis, dysentery, the 'falling fever' 'recurrent fever' and any other names for what was basically, simply, nothing but starvation. (*A Handful of Rice* 12)

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. Of course much of this world, this dazzling world, lay in the future: but every kind of fear and privation became bearable in the light of its bright promise. (HR 27)

Though the cities, like the villages, have nothing to offer for poor people like Ravi "it held out before them lie an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, some day, there would be something" (HR 25)

In his endeavour to save himself from starvation, Ravi plunges into tremulous turmoil of urban life. He runs a hurdles race, which leaves him disillusioned and despondent. After facing a series of trial and tribulations and floating through different streets in the city, he joins a gang of loafers and criminals. Initiated into the mystery of urban existence by Damodar, Ravi becomes a

part of the underworld of smugglers and bootleggers. He is exposed to the evil that rages in the city in many forms-

[T]he insensitiveness of the affluent, their mania for conspicuous consumption, their hardness of heart; the exploitation of small fish by big, the worker by the capitalist, the Apus of the world by the Big Shops in Mount Road; and the internal success of the bootlegger, the black marketeer, the drug-peddler at the cost of the poor, the down and out the desperate. (Iyenger 445-46)

As a member of Damodar's coterie, Ravi witnesses life in all its raw hunger, want and exploitation. He finds life in the city a fierce battle for survival. With its 'lawlessness' and 'darkness', the city is a jungle. Ravi realizes how "in this jungle one had to fight, fiercely, with whatever weapons one had. Or go under." (HR 198)

However, in his earnest effort to strike roots in the city environment, Ravi finds Apu's tailoring convenient, though monotonous, falls in love with the tailor's daughter, Nalini, and decides to put an end to his criminal career. He agrees to work as an apprentice with Apu, and becomes a member of his family by marrying his daughter. One may wonder how men like Ravi with a spirit of rebellion against injustice of the world, besides being used for the exciting life of pick-pickets and bootleggers, could possibly become a tailor's apprentice, a craft which is neither exciting nor lucrative. A close reading of the novel, however, reveals that with his spirit of protest Ravi has been influenced to a considerable degree by the traditional values upheld by people like his father and Apu. That is why black marketing, at the expense of the starving poor, is morally repugnant to him. The rebel in him is not so much against the traditional values as against the hypocrisy of those who champion the cause of the traditional values.

Crisis of conscience leads to a gradual decline in faith which obviously means a total collapse of culture and civilization. A civilization based on perversion and distortion of values, on corruption, nepotism, exploitation, sycophancy, murder, robbery, incest and all forms of social evils is absurd and meaningless. It is menagerie that incarcerates the human psyche and suffocates man's passionate, rebellious democratic spirit. Ravi cannot become part of such civilization. Hence, he prefers a happy conjugal life with Nalini to achieve mental peace and emotional richness. But the question arises-does he get it?. The answer is No. From all sides, the urban milieu with its concomitant evil presses down on him, and for him there is no escape route. For him there is no diving underground; he has to encounter its darkness, poverty, mere triciousness. The city lacks conscience.

The novel takes the turning point when Apu dies and Ravi becoming the head of the family, shoulders the responsibility of the entire family only to get bogged in an atmosphere of gloom and despondency. He loses his job in the hospital. On top of all, the price of rice goes up day-by-day. With the upward spiralling prices, Ravi's family fortune "slips down with increasing momentum". (HR 196) His dog-eat-dog condition compels him to sell Apu's bed for eight rupees

– the bed on which he has slept with Nalini for only ten days after their marriage. They had to devour rice full of black stones. Bad Harvest! Then the drought!

Ravi proves himself a misfit for the role Apu wanted him to play in that big family. His unwillingness to toe Apu's code of the conduct leads to a decrease of income. And with soaring prices he has to raise loans to make both ends meet. He says:

I have borrowed on the sewing-machine, I have to keep up the interest payments and the rent is mounting up...and the light bill...and there's no water. (HR 213)

This affects his temper also. He becomes a man of fretful nature and beats his wife. Nalini leaves the house. Damodar, no doubt, is ready to help him provided he joins him in black marketing and hoarding. But Ravi is totally opposed to the idea. Debts pile up. Life becomes miserable. His son dies of meningitis.

Unemployed and desperate, Ravi approaches Damodar again. But he is told that people with 'no guts' cannot work with a person like him. Damodar advises him to-

Go back to your village. It's more your size. You are not fit for anything else. (HR 214)

With his moral indignation Ravi "rose unsteadily. He felt like retching but he controlled the spasms and went down to the street." (HR 216) Thus, Ravi's integrity finally alienates him.

The novel comes to a close with the crowd episode. Ravi joins the hungry crowd which plunders the rice godowns in the market place rending the sky with the slogan:

Rice today, rice. Rice today, rice! (HR 233)

Ravi struggles and goes very close to the rice bags, but fails to get even a handful of rice:

He struggles to reach the grain, this time at least, and he wrenched his empty hands and watched with frantic eyes as the rich help dwindled, and the empty sacks flopped and sagged and were snatched up and filled or humped away full of shoulders that could bear them. (HR 235)

Again he rejoins the regrouped mob, indulging in looting and destruction. When his turn comes he takes a brick to hurl at the Nabobs' 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." (HR 23). The novel ends with Ravi thwarted, despairing and weary. Ravi's tragedy is that of the 'economically weak' who search for answers to problems, not only of day to day life, but of existence itself. The foundation of his tragedy is hunger.

Kamala Markandaya presents Ravi's moral dilemma convincingly. Caught between two values, 'the almost dead and the other powerless to be born,' Ravi is faced with an impossible choice. While it is true that Ravi has a choice, it is also true that free will in this situation operates morally only in a life-denying way. As KR Srinivas Iyengar puts it, "[C]aught between the pull of the old tradition that all but strangles him and the pull of the new immorality that attracts as frightens him, Ravi lurches now this side now the other side, and has the worst of both." (Indian Writing in English 446)



Alienation of Ravi is born not only of the conflict between tradition and modernity but also of the frightening dilemma of the human conscience itself, in the choice between right and wrong. It is this struggle in Ravi's conscience that constitutes the kernel of the novel. His active conscience has to choose between penurious respectability and affluent disrespectability. He wants to be honest but, at the same time, he realizes that honesty buys no rice and pays no bill. As Margaret P. Joseph puts it, "in this dichotomy between idea and fact, in the impossibility of bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfilment, lies the essence of the tragic." (Kamala Markandaya 62)

Ravi's soft conscience which is a proletarian product of fifties is enmeshed in the maelstrom of change, in the transition from the tradition bound rural society to the machine-ridden, materialistic urban milieu degenerated in human values. The modern man is given to money and machines, scepticism, hypocrisy and corruption and so suffers from melancholy and maladjustment, emotional and psychological instability. Consequently man ceases to have faith even in his own self. And this happens with Ravi who gropes for a world where he can breathe freely, a society where he can eke out a living independently. He struggles for a place in the society but is pushed back to his ill assorted destiny. In spite of the fact that he is an educated person, he tries to find for himself a 'decent way of life in the city where he is an outsider without caste, in a no man's land between collie and clerk'. (Harrex 74) In the stifling and suffocating urban milieu of Madras, he comes across "the terror of losing his identity in an indifferent city which was akin to death". (HR 27)

Ravi feels worried about his true identity in the city where people hardly have any sense of social conscience and human values. In such circumstances he becomes self-alienated and feels insecure:

To get rid of impoverished conditions, Ravi takes refuge in the city but the city disowns him. He is dispelled and discarded. He is in the quest of identity. His neck is gripped by poor financial condition...He is always worried about his identity whether in village or in city. In the sprawling city people are insecure and there is violence, despair and disillusionment. (Md. Irshad 75-76)

The life of Ravi in Madras passes as if he is living in jungle. Kamala Markandaya uses the symbol of jungle, in the novel, several times. This the author does to indicate that the quality of life in urban milieu is not also healthy for the poor. Staggering under the hard blows of poverty, Ravi finds himself alienated in this jungle:

He was alone in the jungle, and in the jungle one fought or died. The knowledge was an incandescent light at the core of his being like the single eye set in the forehead of a demon. Lying, sleeping, waking, even in his frenzied acts of love its beam scorched and excoriated him. (HR 217)

The horror of this jungle life dazes Ravi when he finds himself at the receiving end with a business slipping through his fingers and being choked with the dry husks of despair. He finds himself, in this jungle, in an existential situation that is suffocating in the extreme:

As an inalienable associate of Damodar's coterie, Ravi witnesses life in all its raw hunger, penury and exploitation. Life in the city is a grim struggle for existences for survival. This lawless, subterranean city is a jungle, and people here cherish 'jungle' values and an animal conscience, each unscrupulously preying upon the other. He realises how "in this jungle one had to fight fiercely, with whatever weapons one had. Or go under". Go under, shedding all values and norms. (Pattanaik 115)

Thus Markandaya deals with the struggle of man for survival in her novel *A Handful of Rice*. The novelist also presents a realistic picture of the crowd of unemployed and alienated graduates through the portrayal of Ravi's life that is led in isolation. It is the sad story of a dreamy person who utterly fails in establishing his identity and survival due to his hesitant choices, weak resolution and nettling rootlessness. His desperate quest for identity miserably fails. He is terrified of losing his identity in the indifferent, cold and inhuman society. He is ultimately crushed by socio-economic oppression and thereby becomes a victim of rootlessness and alienation. To conclude we may quote Md Irshad who writes:

Ravi is not in favour of submission to ignominious way of life. This integrity and fidelity if his self ultimately bring about his alienation. In depicting alienation the character of Ravi, Markandaya displays her universal sympathy for those who suffer. Undoubtedly, she does have an experience of the slimy poverty and the dry husks of despair of the society. (Cross-Cultural Interaction in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya 83)

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