

Hunger, Unemployment and Struggle for Survival in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*

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Abstract:

Hunger, Unemployment and Struggle for Survival are the major problems faced by people living in Indian cities. It is hunger that often compels people to commit crimes, and hunger is a direct result of. In the novel *A Handful of Rice*, hunger and unemployment and Struggle for Survival are central themes explored through the lives of the characters, with particular focus on the dynamics within families and society in both rural and urban area of India. *A Handful of Rice* powerfully depicts the struggles of the poor, centred on the themes of hunger, unemployment, and the struggle for survival that run through the narrative. These challenges shape the lives of the protagonist and other characters, reflecting the broader difficulties faced by disadvantaged communities in Indian society. In the novel, hunger is more than a physical need: it motivates the characters' choices, actions, and moral compromises. The protagonist, leaving his village for the city in search of relief from poverty and starvation, quickly discovers that urban life offers no escape from hardship. Unemployment emerges as a root cause of hunger and social inequality; without stable employment, the characters remain trapped in poverty, unable to meet basic needs or provide for their families. The novel captures the harsh realities of Indian urban life, where a lack of opportunity can lead to despair, crime, and disillusionment. The very title, "*A Handful of Rice*," symbolizes not only subsistence, but also hope and the bare minimum. It reflects how even a small portion of food becomes a precious commodity in the characters' lives, signifying the broader theme of scarcity in the face of poverty.

Keyword: Poverty, Hunger, Unemployment, Inequality and Conflict.

Kamala Markandaya was a British Indian novelist. Her novels are concerned with the plight of poor and marginalised. Her novels explore a variety of theme including post-colonial identity, urbanization, poverty and social-inequality. Kamala Markandaya continued her studies at the University of Madras and worked as a journalist during World War II. In 1948, she moved to England, where she married an Englishman and eventually settled. She died in 2004. Her novel, *A Handful of Rice*, primarily addresses the themes of poverty, hunger, and the struggle for survival. The story vividly depicts the harsh socio-economic realities of Indian village life, where livelihoods are scarce. Trapped in a perpetual cycle of deprivation, the villagers focus only on ensuring their daily subsistence, while education, health, and recreation remain distant dreams. Markandaya describes how poverty makes the elderly and children vulnerable to diseases like tuberculosis, dysentery, and recurrent fever, forcing them to live below the poverty line. When the protagonist, Ravi, leaves his village for the city, he discovers that urban life offers no escape from hardship. For the poor, the difference between village and city is purely geographical; exploitation persists in both contexts. An uneducated villager, Ravi finds himself destined

solely for manual labour and is constantly exploited. His relentless struggle for a "handful of rice" symbolizes the universal quest for sustenance and dignity. At the novel's beginning, hunger drives Ravi to Apu's home, where he acknowledges that he must eat or perish. After Apu's death, Ravi sells the household goods to feed his family, revealing how hunger dictates his every action. Despite his hard work as Apu's assistant and later as his successor, he still cannot achieve a better life; his aspirations remain unfulfilled.

The title *A Handful of Rice* is both suggestive and deeply symbolic, expressing the central theme of poverty and hunger. "Rice" is a metaphor for survival and basic needs, inaccessible to the poorest. Markandaya's portrayal of rural Indian life highlights the systemic inequalities that perpetuate poverty and hinder social mobility. Through Ravi's experiences, the novel exposes the grim reality of economic oppression, where even resilience and hard work fail to guarantee dignity or fulfilment.

In *A Handful of Rice*, the author examines urban conditions in India, highlighting the difficulties individuals face adapting to a society shaped by economic pressures. The upheavals caused by social and economic restructuring threaten the independence and security of traditional artisans. Through this lens, Markandaya examines the undercurrents of a seemingly stable urban social order, revealing how economic forces can destabilize personal identities and relationships. The novel depicts the impact of these changes on everyday life, particularly through the experiences of Ravi, whose narrative reflects the broader challenges and transformations of urban life. In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya depicts a society where individuals are forced to compromise between their personal morality and the harsh demands of survival. The outward conflict between the individual and the social order mirrors an inner struggle between free will and moral conscience. For characters like Ravi, this tension becomes the defining feature of their existence. On the one hand, there is the lure of material success an illusion of prosperity that can only be achieved by renouncing ethical principles, as illustrated by Damodar in the novel. On the other, there is the quiet but persistent call of the "inner voice," a symbol of integrity, humanity, and the desire to remain morally upright despite adversity. Through this conflict, Markandaya exposes the profound moral and existential dilemmas faced by the poorest, revealing how poverty not only erodes physical well-being but also challenges the spiritual and ethical foundations of individual life. In the novel People like Ravi lives a miserable existence in the cities. The city takes the form of a concrete jungle where the law of the jungle prevails. It is only in the jungle which is the city at night that duped people like Ravi can stand on with this privileged. In the cosmopolitan, powerful jungle, the wicked prosper while the meek and the gentle suffer. Ravi is at first a mismatch in the city; then he joins a group of vagabonds whose values he tries to adopt but in vain. His early life is portrayed in the manner of flashbacks. He compares himself to Damodar:

"He knew that life is a battle in which the weak always lose; he accepted the fact that a person who does not make every effort to remain on top is a fool. He never blamed Damodar for this" (*A Handful of Rice* 15).

With marriage comes responsibility; and Ravi is indeed following the path of many slackers before him. He exchanges the arrogant freedom of living for security and respect in society and this includes commitment to his new-found family. Ravi is confronted with his commitment to his family, his financial provider, and the corrupt socio-economic system; and this in turn is a rebuke to his conscience and moral integrity, which he has unconsciously but reluctantly cultivated in himself during "all those years" of "respect." As a young rebel, Ravi finds it difficult to reconcile his disillusionment and resulting bitterness with Apu's spirit of renunciation. The appalling disparity between the lives of some of his wealthy clients and his own seems unfair to him. Unlike the client who could spend fifty rupees for a dress, his family could not even buy some vegetables for dinner. If he rebelled against the economic tyranny of his clients, he would lose them simply because the profession of tailoring was fast

becoming a monopoly of big shops and factory warehouses. He hesitates to accept Damodar's offer. Markandaya raises questions of social injustice and economic inequality. Ravi's conflict is a result of the conflicting forces of his situation moral versus commercial, personal fulfilment versus the morality of success. Ravi has to choose between 'prudence and violence, compassion and cruelty, honesty and cunning' (*A Handful of Rice* 218).

The power of years of conformity and the underlying spiritual code that had now unconsciously become a part of him prevent Ravi from participating in the irresponsible act of robbery. Markandaya explains that there are undefined regions of the soul where peace alone resides, and rebellion cannot bring about "peace beyond understanding". In Markandaya's imaginary world, there is no place for the irresponsible freedom that is in the Indian tradition. Even Ravi's questioning attitude in the middle part of the book is not really rebellion. While the main source of rebellion is excessive activity and energy, resentment is passive and always tinged with jealousy. Ravi is more resentful than rebellious; but when he rebels in the last scene, he cannot muster enough energy to carry himself through it. If the true aim of realism is to conquer the totality of the real world, Markandaya recreates the rebellious tendencies in his novels with a notion of credibility. Unlike the world of naturalist novels, here the environment does not dominate but exists in a fine balance with the self of the individual character.

Thus, Ravi's progress is from irresponsibility to responsibility, again to irresponsibility for a while and then to the realization of his duties. His situation aptly compares with Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder* (1960), where Prem marries Indu and, frustrated with the increasing responsibilities, vents his anger on Indu. The responsibilities of marriage prove too much for Prem. Jhabvala has presented a realistic picture of the young couple reaching the status of responsible adults. This novel is an Indian author renowned for her poignant exploration of the socio-economic conditions in India. The novel, first published in 1966, provides a vivid portrayal of the struggles faced by the poor in urban India, capturing the harsh realities of life in the slums of modern India. The overarching theme of *A Handful of Rice* is poverty and the relentless struggle for survival that shapes the lives of the marginalized. Ravi, the protagonist, embodies the aspirations and disillusionments of countless rural migrants who migrate to cities in search of a better life. However, instead of experiencing prosperity, he finds himself caught in an inexorable cycle of deprivation and hardship. Through Ravi's experiences, Markandaya exposes the grim reality of urban poverty, where the quest for livelihood often leads to exploitation and despair. By contrasting the simplicity of rural existence with the alienation of urban life, she reveals that migration, driven by economic necessity, often leads to deeper social and emotional displacement. The novel thus serves as a poignant commentary on the illusory nature of progress and the structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty in both rural and urban India.

Hopelessness and Crime: The novel explores how poverty can push individuals to despair and moral compromise. Ravi's involvement in petty theft and his struggles highlight the difficult choices that extreme poverty forces on individuals. **Family Dynamics and Relationships:** The story also examines family relationships under financial pressure. Ravi's interactions with his wife and father-in-law reveal the emotional strain that poverty places on personal connections.

Social Injustice and Inequality: Markandaya critiques the systemic social inequalities in Indian society, such as limited access to education, scarce employment opportunities, and the wide gap between rich and poor. Yet, in the face of these challenges, the novel emphasizes human resilience. Ravi's determination to improve his situation and his hope for a better future reflects the unwavering strength of those living in poverty.

Realism and Cultural Context: Markandaya's writing is distinguished by its authenticity and attention to detail. His vivid descriptions of slums, daily hardships, and the socioeconomic landscape offer an

immersive portrait of urban poverty in mid-20th-century India. The novel also captures the effects of industrialization and rural-urban migration, grounding the narrative in its historical and cultural context. *A Handful of Rice* is a powerful and thought-provoking tale that highlights the challenges of urban poverty, the moral dilemmas it creates, and the resilience of the human spirit. Through Ravi's experiences, Markandaya offers a poignant exploration of survival, hope, and social realities that remain relevant today. The novel effectively contrasts the rural and urban settings, highlighting the migration trends and the disillusionment that often follows.

In the beginning of the novel we find, that the Ravi is trying to escape from police and enter into a house. Next morning he finds himself tied in chains. Apu's wife Jayamma beats him badly due to which he gets a head injury and is bleeding. When Ravi is caught burglarizing a house, the owners confront him and demand the reason for his desperate act. Ravi explains that he was driven by hunger and only wanted to eat. Touched by his honesty and pitiful condition, they take pity on him, clean his wounds, and carefully bandage them. Jayamma, a kind woman in the house, insists that he not leave without eating and offers him idlis and coffee. After regaining his strength, Ravi visits his friend Damodar, a petty criminal, and recounts the previous night's events. After that Ravi married to Apu's daughter Nalini and start to living in Apu's house. Apu falls seriously ill and soon he dies, leaving his family in dire straits. The family is orphaned after Apu's death. Now Ravi has to bear the entire burden of the family. Ravi's inability to sustain his small business in the face of increasing competition plunges him into poverty and despair.

Desperate, he seeks help from his old friend Damodar, now a wealthy and influential man. However, Damodar shows no compassion for Ravi's predicament; instead, he disdainfully advises him to return to his village, a place without prospects or hope. Ravi begs for his help and offers to work on any terms, but Damodar, hardened by his own past as an orphan, remains indifferent, revealing his loss of empathy and emotional detachment. Ravi returns home dejected, overwhelmed by economic failure and emotional isolation, Nalini, his wife, tries to console him and urges him to eat, but his frustration and anger drive him to a violent lash out. In a fit of uncontrollable rage and confusion, he drives Nalini away and, in a tragic departure from his beliefs, assaults his mother-in-law, Jayamma. The next morning, Ravi is consumed by guilt and shame over his unforgivable act. Jayamma's health deteriorates rapidly, and their son, Raju, contracts meningitis. Despite Nalini's pleas to see a doctor, Ravi initially refuses, citing his inability to pay for treatment. When he finally relents, it is too late; Raju's condition worsens, and he dies soon after. Devastated by the loss of his son, Ravi becomes painfully aware of the consequences of his anger and helplessness. Later, when a mob attacks a rice warehouse, Ravi joins them, driven by desperation to provide for his family. However, when confronted by Kannan, he comes to his senses and withdraws, recognizing the futility of violence and theft as solutions to his suffering. His concluding words, "I am not in a good mood today." But tomorrow, yes, tomorrow..." translates his permanent conflict between despair and hope, illustrating the cyclical struggle for dignity and survival that defines his existence.

Markandaya's vivid portrayal of familial relationships, social injustices, and systemic inequality offers a searing critique of the socioeconomic conditions of mid-20th-century India. Through her authentic and realistic narrative, she highlights the pervasive issues of poverty, scarce opportunities, and the deep divide between social classes. Yet, amidst these hardships, *A Handful of Rice* celebrates the resilience and determination of individuals striving to overcome adversity. The novel's long-term significance lies in its profound reflection on the human form, the on-going struggle against poverty, and the quest for a better life. Ultimately, it is more than a story of hardship; it is a testament to hope, perseverance, and the unwavering strength of the human spirit, a poignant reminder of the social inequalities that continue to demand empathy and action.

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