



BETWEEN FEAST AND FAMINE: THE QUIET WEIGHT OF A HANDFUL OF RICE

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Abstract

This paper explores Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* as a powerful literary meditation on poverty, survival, and social marginalization in post-independence India. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly urbanizing yet unequal society, the novel chronicles the life of Ravi, a rural migrant who leaves his village in search of opportunity, only to encounter the brutal realities of city life. The narrative revolves around the metaphor of “a handful of rice,” which symbolizes not only the bare minimum needed for physical survival but also the immense socio-economic burden borne by India’s urban poor. Kamala Markandaya portrays the tension between fleeting moments of sustenance—the “feast”—and the overwhelming, persistent specter of deprivation—the “famine.” Ravi’s journey is defined by cycles of temporary relief and chronic instability, capturing the precariousness that shapes the lives of millions. The novel also interrogates notions of masculinity, as Ravi’s struggle to fulfill his role as a provider exposes the emotional and psychological toll of economic failure. His descent into petty crime and moral compromise reflects the structural constraints faced by the disenfranchised. The paper further examines how Kamala Markandaya’s quiet, restrained narrative style intensifies the emotional weight of the story, rendering Ravi’s suffering all the more poignant. Through sparse yet evocative prose, Kamala Markandaya amplifies the silent desperation of those pushed to the margins. Ultimately, *A Handful of Rice* stands as both a social document and a humanistic plea, drawing attention to the invisible labor, unmet dreams, and quiet endurance that define the lives of the urban underclass.

Keywords: Kamala Markandaya, A Handful of Rice, Urban Poverty, Postcolonial India, Hunger, Masculinity, Migration, Economic Survival, Feast and Famine, Quiet Despair, Alienation, Urban Marginalization, Family Dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is a powerful exploration of poverty, migration, and survival in the urban underbelly of post-independence India. At the center of this narrative is Ravi, a young man from a rural background who arrives in the city filled with hope, only to be confronted by the harsh and often dehumanizing realities of urban life. Disillusioned by the limitations of rural poverty, Ravi's migration represents a larger socio-economic shift occurring during this period, as many villagers abandoned agrarian livelihoods in pursuit of prosperity promised by the city. However, instead of opportunity, Ravi finds himself trapped in a cycle of underemployment, economic instability, and moral compromise. Kamala Markandaya's depiction of Ravi's journey serves as a microcosm of the broader issues facing India in the wake of colonialism. The novel situates his struggles within a framework of systemic inequality, where class divisions and the legacy of colonial economic structures continue to marginalize the poor. Ravi's search for meaning and survival in a rapidly modernizing society reflects the inner conflict between material hunger and existential void. He is not only hungry for food but also for identity, respect, and a place in a society that seems to have no room for him. The city, in Kamala Markandaya's portrayal, is both a site of promise and betrayal. It seduces with its dazzling consumerism and opportunities, but ultimately delivers alienation, exploitation, and degradation. Ravi's downward spiral—from unemployed youth to reluctant criminal—highlights how urban poverty strips individuals of agency and forces them into morally ambiguous roles. His story illustrates how poverty is not merely an economic condition but a deeply personal and psychological burden that affects one's sense of self and purpose. Through *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya offers not just a story of individual suffering, but a broader critique of the socio-political failures that perpetuate inequality. Her sparse, understated prose lends weight to the quiet despair that defines Ravi's existence. The novel thus serves as both a social document and a humanist narrative, exposing the contradictions of a society caught between traditional values and modern economic imperatives. In doing so, Kamala Markandaya captures the fragile line between survival and surrender—between feast and famine—in the life of the urban poor.

Post-colonial theory examines the impact of colonialism on cultures and societies, often focusing on identity, power structures, resistance, and economic exploitation. When applied to Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice*, post-colonial themes emerge vividly through the portrayal of poverty, class conflict, and urban displacement in post-independence India. The protagonist, Ravi, embodies the struggle of the lower class in a society still shaped by colonial legacies. Though India has gained political freedom, economic and social inequalities remain entrenched. The urban elite, represented by characters like Apu and his family, live in relative comfort, while migrants like Ravi are trapped in cycles of poverty and violence. This reflects the post-colonial condition where structural inequalities persist despite the end of direct colonial rule. Moreover, the novel critiques the failure of the post-colonial state to deliver on its promises of equality and progress. Ravi's descent into crime underscores a lack of opportunity and systemic marginalization—common themes in post-colonial literature. The symbolic "handful of rice" becomes a metaphor for survival and dignity in a society fractured by colonial aftershocks. In essence, *A Handful of Rice* reveals how post-colonial identities are shaped not only by colonial history but also by the failures of the independent nation-state.

2. Between Feast and Famine: Poverty as a Persistent Theme

In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya masterfully deploys the motif of “feast and famine” to represent the precarious balance between sustenance and starvation that defines the life of her protagonist, Ravi. This motif is not merely a metaphor for economic fluctuation but rather a deeply embedded theme that underscores the cyclical and unforgiving nature of poverty. Ravi's experience in the city is a constant oscillation between hope and despair, between brief moments of relief and prolonged periods of deprivation. The metaphor encapsulates not only the physical hunger that afflicts him but also his psychological and emotional craving for stability, recognition, and self-worth. Upon migrating to the city in search of opportunity, Ravi initially believes in the promise of urban prosperity. However, Kamala Markandaya strips away the illusion of the city as a place of redemption. Even the rare “feasts” that Ravi experiences—occasional meals, temporary jobs, or the illusion of familial comfort—are invariably accompanied by costs: moral compromise, dependency on others, and the erosion of dignity. These moments of satiation do not signify progress, but rather temporary pauses in an otherwise downward spiral of economic hardship and social marginalization. Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of hunger transcends mere physical need. Ravi is also hungry for a sense of belonging, for purpose, and for a life not constantly overshadowed by failure. This dual hunger—of the body and the soul—reveals poverty as more than a material condition. It becomes a lived, emotional experience that shapes identity and choices. Ravi's desperation leads him to the fringes of legality and morality, reflecting how survival in an unequal society often demands acts of quiet surrender or defiance. Ultimately, the motif of “feast and famine” serves as a thematic lens through which Kamala Markandaya examines the cruel ironies of poverty. The novel illustrates how systems of inequality offer the illusion of opportunity while entrenching deprivation. Ravi's struggle is emblematic of countless lives caught in the relentless cycle of need, making *A Handful of Rice* a searing commentary on poverty as both a persistent reality and psychological weight.

3. Masculinity and Economic Survival

In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya offers a compelling examination of how poverty deconstructs traditional conceptions of masculinity. Through the character of Ravi, she reveals how the role of the male provider, central to patriarchal definitions of manhood, collapses under the weight of chronic economic hardship. Ravi's repeated failure to secure stable employment and his inability to shield his family from hunger directly challenge his sense of masculinity and social worth. In Kamala Markandaya's narrative, masculinity is not inherent; it is constructed, performed, and—most significantly—fragile in the face of structural poverty. Ravi's emasculation is not only economic but psychological. His self-worth is eroded by his dependence on his in-laws, his inability to provide even basic necessities, and his diminishing control over his circumstances. The gap between the ideal of male strength and the reality of his powerlessness leads him into morally compromising decisions. When traditional routes to success and stability prove inaccessible, Ravi turns to illegitimate means, including theft and smuggling. These choices are not born out of inherent criminality but are instead desperate strategies for reclaiming agency in a world that systematically strips him of it. Kamala Markandaya uses the metaphor of “a handful of rice” to illustrate the dual burden Ravi carries. The rice symbolizes both sustenance and responsibility.

Providing food is not only a practical necessity but also a measure of his success as a man. Yet, the very act of trying to fulfill this role leads to his deeper entrapment in cycles of debt, shame, and violence. In this way, the novel critiques the rigid gender expectations that tie a man's value to his economic utility. It also questions a society that equates masculinity with dominance, when so many men like Ravi live lives marked by submission to poverty, to systems of inequality, and to the despair of unmet expectations. Kamala Markandaya's portrayal is both empathetic and unflinching, showing how economic survival for men in marginalized communities comes not only at the cost of their integrity but also their identity.

4. Urban Alienation and Moral Compromise

In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya offers a stark portrayal of urban life as a space not of liberation but of alienation, moral erosion, and existential dislocation. The city, far from being the land of opportunity Ravi had hoped for, becomes a symbol of indifference and fragmentation. It is disorienting, cacophonous, and morally ambiguous—traits that mirror Ravi's internal collapse. His transition from village life to the city brings with it a profound sense of uprootedness. Unlike the village, which at least provided community ties and a sense of belonging, the city presents him with nothing but anonymity, competition, and a brutal economic hierarchy. Ravi's struggle in the urban landscape is not merely with poverty but with a growing sense of isolation and moral compromise. He is forced into choices that gradually erode his integrity. The narrative traces his descent from a hopeful migrant into a man involved in smuggling and petty crime, acts driven not by greed, but by the pressure to survive and the desperation to provide. Kamala Markandaya's depiction of the city's underbelly serves as a broader critique of the myth of urban opportunity. For the rural poor like Ravi, the city is not a place of possibility but a mechanism of exploitation. It offers just enough to maintain a dream of escape while ensuring systemic dependence. Furthermore, the city in Kamala Markandaya's novel symbolizes a new India where traditional social values are replaced by materialism, competition, and moral ambiguity. The physical chaos of urban life—crowded lanes, crumbling tenements, noise, and filth—mirrors the spiritual erosion of its inhabitants. In this space, Ravi is both invisible and expendable. His transformation is not one of development but of degradation. His moral descent is not a personal failure but a response to a system that offers no ethical alternatives. Kamala Markandaya's treatment of urban alienation is subtle yet powerful. She does not romanticize the village, but she does expose how the city, under the guise of progress, can consume individuals entirely. Through Ravi's experience, Kamala Markandaya delivers a compelling indictment of modernity's false promises and highlights the invisible cost paid by those who come to the city seeking life but find only its shadow.

5. Women, Family, and Domestic Hunger

Although *A Handful of Rice* primarily follows Ravi's journey, Kamala Markandaya subtly but powerfully highlights the role of women within the oppressive structure of poverty. Nalini, Ravi's wife, stands as a quiet pillar of strength, bearing the emotional and physical burdens that his failures bring into the household. While Ravi navigates the external world of employment and moral compromise, Nalini navigates the internal world of hunger, domestic responsibility, and emotional suppression. Her suffering, though less vocal and less visible, is equally—if not more—

profound. Nalini's experience illustrates that hunger in the novel is not only physical but also emotional and existential. She faces a persistent "domestic famine"—a lack of stability, recognition, and respect. Her labor, both in maintaining the home and in enduring emotional strain, goes unnoticed and unrewarded. Yet she remains steadfast, attempting to hold her family together despite mounting pressures. Kamala Markandaya presents her not as a passive victim but as a symbol of enduring strength and resilience. Women in the novel, though often confined to domestic spaces, play essential roles in the family's survival. They are caregivers, peacemakers, and silent sufferers who absorb the impact of economic hardship. Nalini does not question Ravi's authority, but her silence conveys the depth of her internal struggle. Her strength lies not in rebellion but in endurance—a quality Kamala Markandaya emphasizes as a uniquely female form of resistance. By drawing attention to the "invisible" labor of women like Nalini, Kamala Markandaya critiques the gendered dynamics of poverty. While Ravi's failure is public and humiliating, Nalini's suffering is private and continuous. Both are trapped, but the novel subtly suggests that the burden on women is heavier because it is both emotional and economic, both social and unspoken. In this way, *A Handful of Rice* broadens its critique of poverty by illuminating the silent toll it takes on women, whose sacrifices are foundational yet largely unacknowledged.

6. Socio-Political Context of Postcolonial India

Set in the early decades following India's independence, *A Handful of Rice* offers a poignant critique of the socio-political realities of postcolonial India. While the nation was striving to rebuild itself with grand visions of modernization, industrialization, and democratic progress under the leadership of figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, the ground-level experiences of the poor told a different story. Kamala Markandaya's novel captures the grim underbelly of this national transition—a world where poverty persists, and urban migration becomes more a survival strategy than a pathway to empowerment. The protagonist Ravi's journey reflects the real historical phenomenon of mass rural-to-urban migration during the post-independence period. Driven by agrarian instability, unemployment, and landlessness, countless villagers moved to cities in search of work. However, as Kamala Markandaya shows, the urban centers were ill-equipped to absorb this influx. Cities, rather than becoming spaces of opportunity, became congested, stratified, and exploitative. Ravi's failure to secure a meaningful existence in the city symbolizes the disillusionment of an entire demographic that remained excluded from the promises of development. Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of the urban poor stands in contrast to the optimistic rhetoric of Nehruvian socialism. The novel's city is not a utopia of industry and reform, but a chaotic sprawl where the working class is ignored or commodified. Through Ravi's marginalization and ultimate moral compromise, Kamala Markandaya critiques the failure of the postcolonial state to create inclusive growth. She exposes the illusion of upward mobility and highlights the enduring class divisions that colonialism had cemented and postcolonial governance failed to dismantle. In this way, *A Handful of Rice* does more than narrate personal tragedy—it also offers a layered political commentary on independent India's uneven development. It brings to light the voices of the "other India"—those left behind in the pursuit of national progress—revealing how systemic inequality and policy neglect shaped the everyday lives of the urban poor.

7. Literary Significance and Narrative Technique

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* holds a significant place in Indian English literature for its unflinching portrayal of urban poverty through a distinct literary style marked by restraint and psychological depth. Kamala Markandaya deliberately avoids melodrama, instead choosing a quiet, introspective tone that highlights the internalization of suffering. This narrative approach allows the reader to inhabit Ravi's emotional world, feeling the slow erosion of his dignity without the need for overt sentimentality or theatrical expression. The third-person narration closely follows Ravi's consciousness, capturing his frustrations, fears, and fragmented hopes, while maintaining enough narrative distance to critique his actions. This balance enables Kamala Markandaya to portray Ravi as both a product and a victim of his circumstances, without reducing him to a mere symbol of poverty. Kamala Markandaya's dialogue and rich descriptive language create a vivid atmosphere of both physical squalor and emotional emptiness. Her depiction of the slums—dense with grime, noise, and decay—mirrors the despair of its inhabitants. This aesthetic of "quiet despair" becomes a defining feature of the novel's emotional texture, setting it apart from more overtly political or romanticized narratives of postcolonial India. In doing so, Kamala Markandaya crafts a literary experience that is both empathetic and critically nuanced.

8. Conclusion

In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya presents a searing portrayal of life on the economic margins, where each day is a negotiation between hunger and survival, hope and humiliation. The novel dismantles the romantic myth of the Indian city as a space of opportunity and self-realization. Instead, the city emerges as a site of exclusion, disillusionment, and quiet suffering. Kamala Markandaya, a protagonist, Ravi, encapsulates the experience of countless individuals who migrate in search of dignity, only to find themselves further entangled in poverty and moral compromise. Kamala Markandaya does not merely tell a story of an individual downfall; she constructs a broader commentary on the structural forces—economic, social, and political—that shape such outcomes. Hunger in the novel is not a fleeting crisis, but a persistent condition tied to class inequality, urban neglect, and systemic failure. The metaphor of a "handful of rice" captures this contradiction powerfully: it is both the symbol of sustenance and a reminder of insufficiency, a burden that must be earned daily and is never enough. Ultimately, the novel urges readers to reflect on the invisible labor and psychological toll borne by the poor. Through her restrained style and focus on interiority, Kamala Markandaya allows us to witness not just physical hardship but the erosion of self-worth, relationships, and morality. *A Handful of Rice* becomes not just a novel about poverty but a critique of the socio-economic systems that perpetuate it. In this quiet but piercing narrative, Kamala Markandaya gives voice to the silent endurance of India's urban underclass, reminding us that even in a handful of rice lies an entire politics of survival, identity, and inequality.

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