

CHAPTER - III

A HANDFUL OF RICE.

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A HANDFUL OF RICE (1966), is Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel. It is a realistic novel like NECTAR IN A SIEVE. Some of the problems, like the nightmares of urban poverty, the exodus from the village to the town and the uprooting of the village artisan by the impact of technology, which are painted in a microscopic view in NECTAR IN A SIEVE also figure out in this novel. "It reveals an Indian caught in the vortex of change from the rural society deeply rooted in tradition to the machine-based materialistic urban society."¹ Whereas the major emphasis is on rural poverty and the related problems in NECTAR IN A SIEVE, A HANDFUL OF RICE portrays the urban problems and the continual struggle going on in the urban poor for survival. Kai Nicholson remarks that in a HANDFUL OF RICE, Mrs. Markandaya "uses the village as a pretext for her hero, Ravi, to flee the countryside and plunge into the turmoil of urban life."²

Thus having depicted the rural India and its problems in NECTAR IN A SIEVE and the urban India and its problems in A HANDFUL OF RICE, Kamala Markandaya provides a complete picture of the society. These two novels, studied together, give a very good opportunity to the sociologists to understand better, the India of the Fifties and the Sixties.

Ravi, the protagonist of the novel, is the son

of a poor peasant. Tired of rural hunger and poverty he joins the general exodus to the city. But after reaching Madras and experiencing the struggle that one has to make in this city of miracles, he gets disillusioned. His disillusionment forces him to join a group of local petty criminals. Damodar, a leader of these petty criminals, initiates him into the underworld of smugglers and bootleggers. Ravi starts forgetting all his worries and anxieties by getting drunk. One day he is caught drunk by a policeman but goes scot free. In his drunkenness he breaks the bars of a window of the house of Apu, an old tailor. He steps in the house by threatening Apu and his wife Jayamma, eats and sleeps there. He finds himself tied hand and foot in the morning. Jayamma, who is keeping a watch on him, beats him black and blue. But she and Apu take pity on him when they see blood trickling from his head. Ravi confesses that he was drunk as he was hungry. Jayamma feeds him and lets him go. Ravi, who gets a glimpse of Nalini, the daughter of Apu, gets attracted to her and falls in love. At the advice of Damodar, he goes to Apu's house in the daylight and offers to replace the bars that he had broken. Though Jayamma at first hesitates, allows him later to do the job then and also to visit the house thereafter and to run errands for her and Apu. Having won their confidence, Ravi tries to win Nalini also. Apu is an aging man. He alone has to work for the family. There is a whole lot of the parasites in that house depending solely on Apu's

earnings. Thangam, Apu's daughter; her husband Puttanna; her children; Kumaran, the crippled man; Verma, a distant relative are all to be supported by Apu. Ravi decides to work as an apprentice with Apu. Apu, who liked Ravi, marries him to Nalini. Apu becomes very tottered day by day and falls seriously ill. Puttanna steals away all the savings of Apu and runs away. The turn comes when Apu dies and Ravi becomes the head of the family. He shoulders the new responsibilities. But as he is not a skilled worker like Apu, his business declines. Irritated by this, Ravi becomes a man of fretful nature and often beats Nalini. One by one everybody start deserting him. Thangam joins her husband Puttanna. Kumaran and Verma also leave the house. As a result of a serious quarrel, Nalini also leaves the house. Ravi, caught in the web of all these problems, indulges in a sort of forced sexual intercourse with Jayamma. Ravi succeeds in bringing back Nalini. The problems of poverty and hunger mount up day by day. His son, Raju, dies of poverty. Ravi approaches Damodar to get out of his problems. But Damodar, a king-pin of the underworld and a well to do man now, refuses to help him. Disillusioned, Ravi joins a crowd that attacks godowns for a handful of rice. But when his chance comes, he does not dare and returns.

The novel depicts the struggle to earn a handful of rice, the disillusionment that one faces when one fails to earn it and then the subsequent twist from honesty to

dishonesty and the resulting dilemma of the human conscience to choose between the right and the wrong. How a tragedy relating to these struggles and the search of identity form the foundation for social problems and how they lead to disruption of the society and its institutions, are depicted in this novel by Mrs. Markandaya.

Haydn Moore Williams, who thinks that the most memorable heroes and heroins of Markandaya's novels are victims, victims of fate, victims of their own character or of the follies and malice of others, considers Ravi a victim hero and remarks, "It is a mistake to see this novel as about Indian society; it is essentially a study of a special kind of Indian character; ..." ³ But to the insider, who has studied the Indian society closely, this character appears not to be of a special kind but a representative of the thousands and thousands of the frustrated and the disillusioned urban youths.

NECTAR IN A SILVER ends with a fresh beginning of struggle for existence by Rukmani. A HANDFUL OF RICE begins with such a desperate struggle by Ravi. Margaret P. Joseph remarks :

"In her first novel, Rukmani's son Murugan leaves the village hoping to make a better living in the town, he

could well be Ravi, who does the same in *A HANDFUL OF RICE*. The idea merely mentioned in the first novel is enlarged and given a full-scale elaboration in the latter." ⁴

In *NECTAR IN A SILVE* the village of Rukmani and Nathan, before the starting of the tannery, was a quiet and peaceful one, where the songs of the birds could be heard. The village where Ravi's family lives appears to have already become a victim of such transformation. Because Ravi never thinks of his village as something quiet and peaceful. The village for him is nothing but the place better to be forgotten. He describes:

"... that arid dump in the village which his mother, and indeed their neighbours, lyingly labelled 'a decent home' what was decent about it was its honesty. They did not lie they did not cheat. they did not steal. But 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, the old ones and the babies dying of

of tuberculosis, dysentery, the 'falling fever', 'recurrent fever' and any other names for what was basically, simple nothing but starvation." 5

Like Nathan, in *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*, the villagers here also seem to lack the voice of protest. Because Ravi observes further that :

"The pattern must have gone on a long time, for generations. Because nobody objected, they just kept on going, on and on, and were thankful that they were able to." (12)

But the young men in the village do not meekly accept such a life. The urban impact on the village is definitely visible here.

.... a restlessness, a discontent in the towns whose spores had spread even as far as the villages so that suddenly it was not good enough and first one home and then the another began to lose its sons, young men like him (Ravi) who felt, obscurely that it was not right for them - and this

with conviction - that it would be
utterly wrong for their children."

"(12)

Ravi's father, a small rack-rent tenant, half-believed in the shining legend of riches of the city. Ravi's mother is afraid of the train, which took away all her children—three sons, her daughter and her son-in-law. The chord between the parents and the children is broken completely once they board the train to go to the city, for the city offers them no opportunity to go back.

The youngmen "joining the exodus to the cities because their villages had nothing to offer them. The cities had nothing either, although they did not discover this until they arrived: but it held out before them like an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, some day, there would be something."(26)

The city has no job particularly for the uneducated or for the people who are able only to read and write. Ravi's education, which was a matter of pride for his father, could not earn him a job. But amidst the frustration Ravi, and the youngmen like him, pull on in the city clutching to the delicate thread of hope.

According to K. Venkata Reddy "A distinguishing artistic feature of A HANDFUL OF RICE is the successful operation of the system of parallelism and contrasts. The juxtaposition of the rural life and the urban life is well brought. " 6 As we go through the novel, we can notice that Ravi often compares the city life with his past life in the village. So it would be appropriate for our study, if we analyse the social structure, institutions and the problems of the city and the village side by side.

The village portrayed in this novel, is just like any other village in India. It presents the same problems that are depicted in NECTAR IN A SIEVE. All the problems centre around poverty and hunger. The plight of the have nots is the same everywhere. They eat - and a lot it when they have and they starve when they don't have anything. The villagers cannot protest: the main cause being their illiteracy. Ravi's father is a tenant. Like Nathan in NECTAR IN A SIEVE. The children of both of them have no hope to be found in the occupation of agricultural tenancy - where either you get no returns, or if you get a good crop, the major portion is snatched away by the landlords, leaving the tiller starved in both the cases. Whatever little education the children can get in spite of all the problems, makes them realise their plight. But these youth, who have the protesting nature, finally leave the place of action and go away in search of personal security. None of the characters stand, fight and achieve

some results for the common welfare of the rural mass. Arjun and Thambi (in NECTAR IN A SIEVE) try to raise such a voice, but finally give up, due to lack of support and go to Ceylon to work in an estate. In the novel under study, Ravi and the village youth like him feel disgusted with the poverty and also the exploitation of the poor. But they just leave the village and go to join the general exodus to the city.

Markandya once again tries to emphasise through this novel that the plight of the villagers is due to their ill fate - i.e. the rain failures or excess rains -, their illiteracy, ill-planned economic activities, excess children, and the constant economic plight by the merciless zamindars.

The joint family system, existing in the villages, also figured as a general family type in the cities in the sixties. Ravi's family in the village is a joint family. Even Apu's family in the city is no exception to this. Such a type of family evidently acts as a curse to the bread winner of the family and as a boon to the idle dependents. Apu's family stands as a good example to show the demerits of the joint family system. In this family at first Apu is the only bread winner. Ravi joins him later to shoulder his responsibilities to some extent. A very descriptive picture of the hangers on is given by Markandaya, in this novel.

"... people, too many people for one house... Cousin, nephew, in-law- a whole host had attached itself to the household and...lived off the old man. Day in, day out - except for occasions of free food and merriment like a marriage or a naming ceremony when they departed in a body leaving the house empty... otherwise they ate here, they slept here."(34)

This is not the case only with Apu's family, for"... there was hardly a household that did not have its hangers-on who, once in, it was virtually impossible to dislodge. "(35) The innumerable relations, that the Indian family have and the family ties are difficult to be understood by the English Memsahibs. When Ravi explains his delay in delivering the memsahib's clothes, on account of Apu's death, she fails to understand him. "These people", she thought. "With their innumerable uncles and aunts and cousins who seem to be forever dying really they are impossible people inhabiting in an impossible country."(153)

Compared to the mud huts, owned by the poor tenants of the villages, the middle-class people of the city figures out better. Apu's house is small. He had one room-perhaps twelve feet square-for himself, another

bigger room, which he used as workshop and a kitchen which served the purpose of bedroom for the newly weds. The workshop also became the sleeping cabin for all the hangers-on at night. Not only a separate room to sleep in, but also a second hand bed used by Apu, become a pride possession for Ravi, who gets hurt when they were snatched away from him after some time. A little shelter arranged on the roof of the house becomes for Ravi, a place to dream about the happy future, without anybody's interference. Ravi can only view with awe and jealousy the big hungalows of the memsahibs, rich people and even that of Damodar, his one time accomplice.

Like NECTAR IN A SIEVE, this novel also portrays patriarchial type of family, where father is the head of the family. But the families that are portrayed in this novel do lack the attachment, love and affection, which form the essence of the novel NECTAR IN A SIEVE. There we can find love and affection to such an extent that the members of the family are ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of others. Ira, who sells her body for the sake of her ailing brother, stands, as an ideal example. In the novel under study, such kind of attachment is lacking. Ravi's mother, no doubt as a representative of Indian mothers, stands as an exception and always worries about her children, who desert her one by one. Even Ravi remembers his father only when he falls in need of a middle-man to fix his marriage with Nalini. And this is

the only occasion, when his father journeys from his village to meet his son. His problem can be understood as we learn that he had to raise the money for the train fare by mortgaging the remaining portion of his land. In these two novels by Markandaya, the train fare acts the role of a villain; making his parents difficult to visit Ravi, in the novel under study, and keeping Rukmani and Nathan away from their village for months together in *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*. Owing to varied reasons, lack of intimacy is also found in Apu's family. The love and affection which we see in between Rukmani and Nathan of *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* are totally absent in between Apu and Jayamma. In fact Jayamma does not recognise the existence of her husband until he falls seriously ill. Even at that time "...she nursed him ... devotedly as wife should, out of strong sense of duty, but without love." (149) This lack of love is conducive to lack of sexual satisfaction. She failed to understand what love meant, when Apu could give to her love and satisfaction. And when she was in the prime of her life, Apu, due to his old age, failed to give her what she was in need of. Though they did not complain against each other, "communication between them had all but ceased" (149). Jayamma's failure to get what she wanted from her husband forces her to get attracted unconsciously towards Ravi, her own son-in-law. And that is why her unresisting calmness, when Ravi forcibly indulges into sexual intercourse with her, can be explained as the result of her desire to get fulfilled the suppressed

material needs. But what surprises is that she does not even feel guilty over what has happened in a moment of passion. She is not worried about it a bit as she thinks nobody cares about what goes on in between four walls. Ravi loves his wife Nalini. But the financial problems make him a fretful man and in his moods of anger, he beats her and even his son Raju, thus straining the relations between husband and wife day by day. But whenever Ravi felt uncertain, he would seek relief in Nalini, who was "constant, a rock to which he could cling and keep his head level when his views and values began their mad dance. "(118) The relations between Thangam and her husband do lack love and affection. In NECTAR IN A SIEVE Rukamani and Nathan come closer when their problems increase. But the same economical problems send Ravi and Nalini distance apart. Money plays an important role in establishing and keeping up the relations in this novel. Such emphasis on money, and the prestige attached to it, can no doubt be found in the urban society. But the rural India, atleast before any industrial impact, did not show such an importance to money, even on the verge of starvation.

Marriage is an important social institution in Indian society. It brings a kind of respectability to man. Marriage changes even Ravi, from a petty criminal to a respectable bread earner. "Marriage had painted a few strokes of respectability on his back, it had insidiously revived the old values in him, so that he once again

lauded the superiority of work over loafing..."(177)

Marriage in villages is easy to be arranged, as there are match-makers, who keep a record of all the eligible brides and bridegrooms. But in a city it goes difficult. Ravi has to summon his father to finalise his marriage talks. Markandaya describes the marriage in a middle class family, where one has to put up a show, even though one is not able to spend much. Apu arranges a good shamiana, a motor car and even a band. The bride's saree has a four-inch gold border, though Ravi could make out that the gold was not real. Markandaya points out to the "shiny silk stuff the merchants had produced after much research to satisfy the hunger that the poor people had for rich clothes."(61) As already observed, marriages can succeed only if there is mutual love and affection between the husband and the wife. But one speciality of the arranged, traditional marriages in India, is that they provide security even in the absence of love and affection. Apu and Jayamma do not love each other. But they have no complaints either. The marriage tie is not broken even in the absence of mutual love. Ravi and Nalini love each other. But at times when angry, Ravi behaves very rudely with her. She even leaves him once and goes to her sister's house. But when Ravi goes there and asks her to return, she follows him humbly like a traditional Indian wife. The relations between Thangam and Puttanna do not go beyond procuring children. But even in this case, there is never any talk of breaking the

marriage tie. Markandaya thus highlights on the image of the traditional Indian woman who submits to the will of her parents before marriage and later to the will of her husband after marriage.

As in *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*, in this novel also, Markandaya highlights on the superiority of men and the subordination of women to them. In a family, a male child gains all the prominence and attention. Apu who has no sons, is worried a lot. He thinks; "what I need is a man, someone to carry on when I am gone ... A man needs sons ... I have none, only daughters." (39) Be it Nathan of *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* or Apu and Ram, Ravi's father, of this novel under study, everybody desires to get a son to continue their progeny. Ravi's father thinks a man needs sons. But he is sorry as "he had them and much good they had done to him for in the end they had all quit, leaving behind him to scratch around alone on his barren acre bewailing the sorrows they had brought him." (39) These are exactly the feelings of Nathan also, when his sons one by one leave him and his land.

Arrival of a female child in the home disappoints everybody. In the Indian social setup, a female child is considered to be a financial burden. When Thangam gets two daughters in succession, she is very much disappointed. Puttanna thinks that "two daughters in a row was sheer bad luck." (117) Thangam is more worried

because her father, who had no sons, would not hand over his property to her, as she too has no sons. When Ravi gets a son, he gets more respect from Apu, as Ravi had given a son to that family, which earlier had seen only daughters after daughters. The girls though unwanted, are kept under a close watch. "Ravi had sisters, and so he knew the strict watch that was kept on young unmarried girls in their community.." (40) Such a watch is common in traditional Indian families.

Except some odd and exceptional characters like Kunthi of *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* and Jayamma of this novel understudy. Markandaya paints a woman character with all the colours of ideal and traditional Indian womanhood. Her women characters tolerate all the sufferings without any protest. They are ever ready to forgive their erring husbands. Though they know the weaknesses of their husbands they are not ready to admit them openly but in turn they safeguard the interests of their husbands. Not only Nalini, but also Thangam, is not ready to give up her husband. Meena Shirwadkar, who accepts such a traditional image of Nalini, opines that, "her decision to go to stay with her sister is her mild protest against Ravi's savage treatment." ⁷ But Nalini forgets her complaint the moment Ravi approaches her and asks her to return. Nalini is a good house-wife who understands her world. She being a realist, does not like Ravi's romantic ideas. She is happy with whatever she has. She does not like any bad comments on her husband. "I just don't want

to hear them calling you vagabond again, that's all. "(77) she says. She calls the memsahibs, with scant dresses, shameless. She is a good sister, who tries to help Thangam. She is also a good daughter and affectionate mother. In general Markandaya portrays her as a paragon of virtue. Sheo Bhushan Shukla, who is though satisfied with the pictures of rural and urban poverty in South India, given in the novels of Markandaya, as convincing, asks, "Who can believe Ravi's having sex with his mother-in-law in 'A HANDFUL OF RICE' ?" ⁸ Though such an instance may raise the eye-brows of the traditional minded people, for those who have studied social pathology, psychology or atleast who go through such and many other kinds of unbelievable instances reported in the newspapers, there appear nothing fake or highly imaginative. Ravi's suppressed desire to take revenge on Jayamma, who had beaten him black and blue, on his first illegal entrance into the house and also Jayamma's suppressed unfulfilled sexual desire correlate and result in this forced but unopposed sexual intercourse between the two. Jayamma who does not feel guilty about this affair, honours her husband on his death. She says "perhaps I wronged him ... He was a good man ... perhaps I did him wrong - but he was an old man he seemed old even when married, it is over". (77) Apart from her weaknesses she is a practical woman and manages the household affairs efficiently. Thangam is a woman with a faint sense of morality.

We have already observed in the course of our study of *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* that Mrs. Markandaya avoids referring to caste factor, which is an important factor of Indian social stratification. But she highlights on the other factor i.e. class system. In the urban society, the social statuses - the upper class, the middle class and the lower class. The middle class can further be divided into upper middle class and lower middle class. As in the *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*, Markandaya depicts the living conditions and the problems of the lower or the poor class people, in this novel under study also. But here she highlights on the problems of the lower middle class people. No doubt there is class consciousness present among the people of all the classes. The poor people like Ravi's father, look to the lower middle class man like Apu, with fear and respect. Apu in turn thinks his rich customers to be Gods. He behaves with the memsahibs as if they are Goddesses. The petty criminals like Damodar are full of hatred towards the rich people. But once they too become rich then they turn their hatred towards the poor people, like Ravi, who can not take their chance when it comes their way. When Ravi comes from the village, though poor, he is a part of the polite society. But when he joins the gang of criminals, he becomes an anti-social element. When he decides to marry Nalini, what troubles him more is his inner conflict to give up the anti-social circle, which provided him freedom and food, and to join the society once again and thus to get

entangled in the social ties and responsibilities. But once the decision is made, he regains the respectful place in the society. Though Puttanna has lost everything and is leading a life of parasite in Apu's house, he constantly reminds everybody of his past glory and his status. While most of the people accept their status in the society as it is, and thus tolerate all the suffering caused thereby, very few people stand out and protest. Ravi as a representative of such people, decries the economic disparity. He becomes angry when he sees the big merchants taking away the profit margin, leaving them - the real workers - a paltry sum. He tries to register his protest by not supplying the products to them and by raising charges etc. But Apu, an old man, who has known the ways of the business world and the competitions etc., calms him down. Ravi also gets angry when he is kept in waiting by the memsahibs or when he has to pay tips to the attendants to meet the memsahibs. When the upper class Indian women join hands with these foreign ladies and advise them to bargain, Ravi wonders why these Indian women should act against their own people. To this Apu replies; '... perhaps it's because they are all the same - same class, same money, even coming from different countries makes no difference compared to that. It's the sameness make them stick together.' (153) Thus Markandaya points out not the regionalistic caste system, but the class system, which is universal - there being two distinct classes, that of oppressors and the oppressed.

Ravi thinks that the rich people, who have power can be ruled by even a petty criminal like him, in the darkness of night. When he breaks in into the house of Apu, 'He felt like commanding, conscious of dominion; this was what they felt like, the people who said 'Hey, you ! who gave orders and expected you to jump to it, who had money, who had power, who did the pushing around. Well tonight he would do the pushing.' (7)

Social change, we have already observed, is an inevitable process. About the social change in India, the social scientists have pointed out that there is an interaction of tradition and modernity. Whereas certain trends of social changes are working towards the revival and preservation of the traditional values, other trends are working towards modernisation on the pattern of the advanced western countries. Kamala Markandaya has been successful in depicting both these trends, as are prevalent in the post-independence India, in *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* and in *A HANDFUL OF RICE*. The environmental factors, like excess of rain, failures of rain, drought etc., which play the major role in her novel, *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*, form the foundation of the novel under study. This is the factor because of which many youths of the villages join the general exodus to the city in search of employment. The train, which carries hundreds of youths, like Ravi, to the city, stands as a symbol of rapid change assuring a journey from hell to heaven to these young

aspirants who are in need of employment and regular bread. Industrialisation has given rise to towns, where a distinct urban civilisation has sprung. As a result, rural India is quite different from the urban India. The rural mass feel a kind of inferiority before their urban counterpart. Ravi during the first few days at the city and his father during his short stay at the city, feel quite uneasy. Markandaya has depicted the impact of industrialization on the individual families in particular and on the society in general, in both the novels viz., NECTAR IN A SIEVE and A HANDFUL OF RICE. There is organisation of labour, specialisation and fast life. In the business world of cut-throat competition, Apu survives because of his specialised skills and his indepth knowledge about the business world. Ravi on the other hand fails utterly because he lacks these qualities. Industrialisation has given rise to new classes. Ravi decries such economic disparity of the society. He tries to revolt against the social injustice. He fails to understand why they get only Rs. 80/- per dozen garments made ready by them, whereas the same are sold by the shoppers at Rs. 125/- per piece in the market. He is surprised to note that the Indian men join hands with the European ladies in harrassing the tailors. He is also distressed to note that the tailors are not ready to get united and fight to safeguard their own common interests. Ravi notices the failure of fights of the young educated men in search of employment, against the big ones, because of lack of unity.

"No wonder they fought, he and they.
 But the battle had never yet been
 wages as a joint one, and until it was
 the day of reckoning would not dawn.
 "(209)

Poverty in rural India has been portrayed in its stark nakedness by Markandaya, in her first novel NECTAR IN A SIEVE. The result of such a poverty is seen in the general exodus of the village youth to the cities, hoping to improve their living conditions. But A HANDFUL OF RICE proves that the situation is no better for the poor class even in the cities. Poverty and hunger force them to lose their morals and turn anti-social. Markandaya gives a picture of the rural poverty in this novel also, so as to give a background to the escapade of Ravi and his like from the village to the city.

Ravi, who had left the 'arid dump in the village' (12), "knew better the economics of village life, knew the superhuman efforts, the begging and the borrowing that went into raising the train fare, the money for the extras demanded by the pride and standards of a city. His father had managed it once, where many like him never managed it at all. He would never do it a second time. "(98) For these villagers, managing any extra expenditure means only mortgaging or selling the petty piece of land that they own. This extreme step is taken

with a flickering ray of hope of the future. When this hope is shattered, frustration develops. And frustrated young people like Ravi, it is no wonder, succumb to the devilish hands of boozing. The following piece of conversation, between Ravi and Apu, explains why a majority of poor people in India, spend their meagre daily earnings on a glass of liquor than on a loaf of bread.

(Apu) : "What did you expect, breaking in like a ruffian ? "

(Ravi):"I was hungry ... I hadn't eaten-"

(Apu) : "But you were drunk."

(Ravi):"So you would be ... if all you had was one rupee between you and kingdom come."

(Apu) : "You could have bought a meal... instead of boozing. A rupee buys a very reasonable meal."

(Ravi):"Yes and what then ? ... I didn't want to buy reason, what I wanted to buy was something quite different, something that would stop me thinking about tomorrow, because the more I think of it the sicker I get-sick, sick of it!"(9)

The factors leading to poverty in rural India found in this novel, in brief, are the same as those explained in detail in *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*. In urban India the major problems are unemployment and underemployment. Particularly in a joint family, where many parasites are found depending on the sole or the very few bread earners, the economic conditions deteriorate very quickly. In Apu's house, half a dozen people depend on only two earning members, viz., Apu and Ravi. When Nalini is saved from a possible abortion, Ravi is forced by the poverty to think, "... if the disaster so narrowly averted would not in fact have been a blessing." (189) But in the end, Ravi's son dies, not because of fever or illness, but because of poverty, which doesn't allow the family to arrange for a proper medical treatment. Arrival of more children in a family forces a poor man even to think to such an extreme: " I want to put my hands round their necks and squeeze until I know I'll never again have to think about feeding them" (126) Though it has become quite like a custom to wear new dresses on festivals, Apu had to decree, "There were... to be no new clothes for any one this deepavali." (164) Ravi's anger, when he sees memsahib spend fifty rupees for one little jacket for one of her little girl, is well justified because his family "... of late . . . had not been able to afford a few vegetables for the evening stew." (186)

Markandaya sketches the major link between the

urban and rural economics, the harvest, which though appears to be oscillating between good and bad, in reality always remains tilting between bad and worst, as it is explained in this piece of conversation between Ravi and Nalini.

Nalini remarks-"... the price goes up and up. You see, it goes up all the time. they say it's because of the bad harvest- "Bad harvest. It was the echo of the knell, sounding away down the years. part of a pervading consciousness-his own his father's and his grandfather's, Ravi felt very tired. He thought he had cut clear of all that, very simply by walking out; now here was the slimy tentacle reaching out from the sodden paddy fields of endless abject villages to clutch at him in the middle of the town."(205)

Markandaya deals with the problem of unemployment in the villages, caused due to natural calamities, economic oppression etc. in NECTAR IN A SIEVE. In this novel under study, she deals with the unemployment problem in the cities, of which she had given a microscopic view in the first novel. The village youth,

who find their future dark in the villages, join the general exodus to the city. But their dreams are shattered the moment they land up in the city. Ravi finds the situation in the city very frustrating :

"... there was no job. The city was full of graduates- the college turned them out in their thousands each year-looking for employment, so what chance he with his meagre elementary school learning ? ... his education did not allow Ravi to compete against the gaunt, shabby genteel graduates who hung around the streets, while it had taken from him the ability to work with his hands except in an amateur capacity. "(26-27)

Ravi "... had seen the queues that every vacancy produced, the long waiting lines, the fine-drawn patience that suddenly snapped, turning these mild, well-bred men into screaming agitators. "(206-209) Such unemployed youth, forced to hunger and then to frustration, finally get a "passport to a world shot with glitter and excitement"(27) i.e. the underground world. Damodar, "a city slicker, born and bred in the streets of the city," "knew the town like the back of his hand " and knew " that life was a battle in which the weak always went under; he accepted the fact that the man who did not do all he could to keep

on top was a fool." Ravi is initiated into this underground world trade by Damodar. Markandaya gives a descriptive picture of one such location, where the underground trade is going on:

George Town ... skirted the docks, was its unproclaimed clearing house, and into the maze of streets that penetrated inland poured the products of a thriving industry the world's underground trade. Here he (Ravi) had seen the wine butts coming in, from Porto Novo and Pondicherry and round the Cape from as afar off as Mlhe' and Goa; and hemp, opium, bhang, hashish - all the deadly disguises of the beautiful poppy off - loaded under the noses of the customs men from junks that has wallowed in from Rangoon and Singapore and even, it was rumoured from the China ports. "(16)

Markandaya even describes the modus operandi of Damodar and his gang." . . . sometimes he (more often Damodar) was approached by a remittance-man, guarded in speech to the point of incomprehensibility, or offered the overspill from a liquor or drug peddling job. Somethings were troublesome, but flogging duty free spirits was easy.

There were handsome profits to be made here . . ." (17) Markandaya even analyses the reason due to which such an industry thrives. There is a craze among the people for the cloths with a foreign label. Regarding the demand and supply of such foreign cloth, Markandaya comments :

Commercial interests would have catered for their needs; but in these post-British days there were bans, quotas, import restrictions imposed by a government more interested in fostering national industry than in pandering to the rich. So the black marketeers took over." (30)

Such a profitable industry is controlled by the large operators. The small operators live off the back of the larger operators. Then there are ring leaders like Damodar, who with the help of their henchmen, carry out the schemes. These people in the lower ring can graduate upwards. When Damodar puts up a proposal to lift the goods from the godown, Ravi is frightened. Because "tweaking the nose of the law was one thing, operating against one's kind entirely another : unsavoury, and frightening." (31) When Ravi expresses his fear and says that it is dangerous, Damodar simple asks, "Isn't life ?" "For people like Damodar taking risk has become a part of the game. And by his risk taking tasks only, Damodar,

who was an orphan, found on garbage heap in his childhood, has now built a house which is several storeys higher than any of his neighbours'. His trade now not only included the blackmarketing of the restricted foreign goods, but also the grain market, and selling when the prices go up and up. Ravi who has cut off all his past relations with Damodar, visits him at the moments of uncertainty. But he fails to take up the offer of Damodar, to work for him and earn profits.

Apart from poverty, unemployment, crime and juvenile delinquency, Markandaya also refers to other social problems like prostitution, alcoholism and corruption. But these problems have not been dealt with in detail in this novel under study. People like Ravi, drink liquor because they are hungry and want to forget about the dark future. Markandaya refers to 'greasing the palms', i.e. to corrupt the concerned to get the work done. It is found at all levels. Even the attenders at the bungalows of the memsahibs are not an exception. Apu could get entry into these bungalows only when he paid some amount to these people. He thought it essential to survive in the cut-throat competition. All these social problems have become a part of the urban life and Markandaya very realistically depicts them in her novel.

Thus we can see that Markandaya has painted the picture of both the rural and urban Indian society with

consummate skill in A HANDFUL OF RICE. She tries to highlight the social problems of the city. The struggle for existence in a city gains more focus in her canvass. If one had to live in the city i.e. the jungle - as Ravi calls it, "... one had to fight, fiercely, with whatever weapons one had, or go under."(198) And this fight for survival, in the deteriorating financial conditions and moral values, and the resultant social outcomes are vividly and very able described by the novelist.

The theme of A HANDFUL OF RICE is not altogether different from that of NECTAR IN A SIEVE. Both deal with hunger and poverty. But the location differs. Where as one deals with the rural economics the other one deals with the urban economics in relation to poor and middle class families. Studied together, they both present an insight into the poverty stricken India, which is quite different from the five-star or high class society India, comprised of industrialists, businessmen, politicians etc.

As observed at the outset of this chapter both these novels definitely help the social scientists to study the life of a common Indian, who is facing all the social problems and yet trying to come out of their clutches.

NOTES AND REFERENCES.

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- 5) A Handful of Rice, Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1985, P-12. (All subsequent references to the novel are indicated in the parentheses within the text.)
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