

A Distinguishing Artistic Feature of the Novel a Handful of Rice

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A distinguishing artistic feature of *A Handful of Rice* is the successful operation of the system of parallels and contrasts. In this novel there is juxtaposition of the rural life and urban life. Ravi leaves the penury and apathy of his village in utter despair hoping to make a better living in the city. But he is equally disappointed here. The 'arid dump' of the village is now replaced by the 'Jungle' of the city. Ravi thinks that the modern city is "a man-made Jungle...full of snares and traps." Ravi's struggle to make an honest living in the city is like the creatures that have to struggle for existence in the Jungle. Ravi represents the new generation. He has ideas, aspiration dreams and capacity to do hard work but he lacks patience, endurance, humility and humanness. Markandaya believes that these things new generation will have to learn from their elders. When Ravi wanted to be apprentice to Apu he advices Ravi that he should learn three things mainly i.e. patience, care and craftsmanship. Soon Ravi is fed up burdened with a family and his troubles pile up. He starts drinking out of frustration and despair. Ravi calls his elders as "fools! Meek stupid fools with nothing worthwhile to leave to the young ones." Ravi is frustrated and wondered how people earned so much. Ravi in fact is firm believer in the force of wishing and when his aspirations don't fulfill he becomes miserable. Ravi's dream of living a good life doesn't materialize and this wide gap between his dreams and reality leads to frustration tension and disappointment and, however, Nalini becomes a prey to Ravi's frustrations. Ravi wanted many "essentials and luxuries the list of which grew daily longer." He wants to be honest but at the same time, he realized that honesty buys no rice and pays no bills. In this dichotomy between idea and fact, in the impossibility of bridging the gap between desire and honest fulfillment lays the essence of the tragic in Ravi's life. He could not balance the two and could not bring harmony between what he wished and what he got.

Frustration and constant denial affect the young couple like a deficiency disease. He wants to be honest yet temptations pull him in another direction. Damodar, steadily calls him out, "any time you want to work for me, my way, just come along." There is Damodar

beckoning Ravi into anti-social acts like hoarding, smuggling, illegal liquor and there is his own sense of integrity, of doing right as a husband, and a responsible householder. Ravi talking to Damodar says, "But now, my wife—she—she doesn't want me to do anything dishonest." His intention to stick to the righteous path is called his weakness by Damodar but the righteous way is not an easy way. Ravi became a member of the household, "there were Cinemas and cool drinks... but now he had his family responsibilities there was nothing no small pleasures." Nevertheless, his business troubles multiply with Apu's death. Ravi now finds himself as the reluctant and indispensable head of the household.

After parting company with Damodar Ravi faces many a storm in the hot house atmosphere of Apu's house. His business had declined because he was not a good craftsman. Ravi now turned into a "violent stranger." Nalini is capable of withstanding poverty without complaining but was half afraid of her husband's fury; she is unable to assert her views in the improvement of tense relationship between them. "She wanted to break the silence, pull down the bleak wall that had come between them, but she was too nervous, too unsure of herself and afraid of his reactions." Kamala Markandaya tries to analyse Indian woman's embarrassed state under the pressure of misery and tension. Ravi and Nalini become too weak to fight against the outer circumstances due to great financial and emotional crisis in the family. Nalini is extremely upset with the unexpected misfortune in the shape of her son Raju's death. This compels Ravi to change his mind about joining Damodar, who, however, rejects him with utter contempt thus: "you're empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts." Ravi is told that people with 'no guts' cannot work with a person like him. Damodar advises him to go back to his village, because he is not fit for anything else.

Towards the end of the novel 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!”

Ravi finds himself incompetent to meet the heavy expenses of a large family, which compels him to involve himself in a scheme to attack the rice godowns in the market because he felt that the innocents have always suffered and violence was the only way. Ravi joins strugglers and goes very close to the rice bags, but fails to get even A Handful of Rice: “He struggled to reach the grain, this time at least, and he clenched his empty hands and watched with frantic eyes as the rich heap dwindled, and the empty sacks flopped and sagged and were snatched up and filled or humped away full of shoulders that could bear them.”

Again he joins the regrouped mob, indulging in looting and destruction. When his turn comes he takes a brick to hurl at the Nabob’s Row. But suddenly 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.” At the last moment, he withdraws back postpones the issue by saying, “But tomorrow, yes tomorrow...” Like other novels of Markandaya, A Handful of Rice also deals with the fundamental problems of human existence, poverty, in the main. Markandaya is conscious of the fact that by the change of place one cannot overcome the basic problems of life because all places are the same. But one has to do is to create a balance between people and places. Ravi for example, came to the city hoping that he would start his life afresh. This is a very natural thought but very simple at that one night, when he was at peace with himself, it occurred to him that he had left his village thinking that there is no hope left there but she too had to return to the village. The village life, Ravi felt, sickened him that life, of misery and squalor, the ailing babies who cried all night long, the way one was always poor and everyone knew was always poor too, the desire to get what one needs. This is not to say that Ravi did not know that change though ceaseless never changes human fortune altogether for what we gain, lose in another way. Ravi also knew that things would never be any better. So, did the villagers. Therefore, they thought as T. S. Eliot’s persona in Four Quartets did that it is better to stand still, “For the only other way was downward.”

The way upward therefore is the same as the way downward. Ravi hated his village people precisely they had this wisdom innately given to them. But on coming to the village he realizes the truth of that wisdom. That’s why he does not throw a stone as others did in order to loot the food go down.

But this lesson has to be learnt through suffering. Initially he was in a hurry to leave his village life behind,

not to look back but to look forward. But Markandaya would ask: Is the beginning different from the end on the circumference of life? The city was so crowded, rents so high, that even men with decent incomes search for home in a relatively small house. Ravi’s real battle of course begins as an apprentice to Apu. Apu too belonged to a village. So Apu’s origins, like his, had been in a village to which his parents, defeated by the city, had returned curiously. There is an eternal return in Markandaya. Apu once told him (Ravi) of this and of his regret that he had not been able to provide grandparents for his two younger daughters. Ravi at this stage would not understand he knew better the economics of village life. However, he was prepared to live in a Joint family as he lived in the village. He has to fend for himself with his brother-in-law and sister-in-law and suffers daily bickering. Neither Puttana nor Verma nor the crippled boy Kumaran contributed a pie to the household. Puttana was considered to be as worthless son-in-law, who had no job and who had the responsibility of looking after his wife Thangam.

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