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Scrutinizing Social and Psychological Conflict of Class Suppression in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice*

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Abstract

A Handful of Rice by Kamala Markandaya's is an exemplary novel that depicts class prejudices, rural urban migration, hunger and struggle for survival in the power conscious society. The present paper discusses the plight of poverty in urban locale through the protagonist Ravi who submits to the ways of society, suppressing his desire to raise his social status. The search for power and failure to attain it, results in social and psychological conflict. The paper mirrors social tension through the differences between the capitalists and the proletariats and psychological stress as a repercussion of dissatisfaction, frustration and suppression. The paper also analyses the East West encounter and the biased ideologies of the Westerners which generates inferiority complex among the Natives and prevents them to achieve their rightful status in the society. The novel imparts a sincere message for eradication of poverty just by giving a chance to the lower class to grab the opportunities available in the society and to treat them as human being.

Keywords: class consciousness, conflict, power, colonization, subjugation, marginalization

Introduction

Subjugation is the act to dominate/control the weaker individual by the use of force/power. Subjugation in terms of caste, class, gender and species is not something unusual in political history. The women/the weaker class/ the lower caste people have always been subjugated by the superior in their authoritative axis of origin, status and role. History abounds of division on the basis of power and privilege. Women and the lower class were always suppressed by the ideologies of the upper class which ultimately turn them into victims of the approved social discrimination. Colonialism and marginalization are common instances of suppression. This vicious practice continues till date and violates the totality of equal existence which gives rise to "economic inequality, social alienation.... race, sex, ethnicity or power differentials based on economic divisions." (David 4) The class hierarchy, caste differences, gender differences and the difference between rural and urban space all of these identifications run through power and get controlled by the ideologies and culture of socially powerful people. "Foucault asserted that the type of discourse associated with a particular historical period is the determining factor in the power relations of the period, including the prevalent norms." (Oliver 74) In fact, subjugation and surrender is a play of power which is a vital element in every human relationship. Supremacy of any kind is a power exercise over the less empowered cluster of people which makes them realize their retrogradation in the social hierarchy. Foucault believes in the productive aspect of power where domination gives space for the new dimensions of living. Balan truly believes that "oppressive measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviours to emerge." (2) Subjugation and Surrender can be regarded as the first stage of resistance to acquire power.

Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is the continuation of hunger and poverty discussed in her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) but shifts in space from rural to urban. Dealing with the issue of dislocation, it is a narrative of the protagonist's struggle to establish himself in the urban world to avoid the pangs of rural poverty. It delineates the economic migration from rural world to the urban world with hope for better opportunities and employment but ironically the situation proves just reverse.

The novel portrays the psychological dilemma of poverty through Ravi, a rural man who is in search of employment in the city and aspires high to become rich, to be equal to the city bred well educated upper class people but finally gets disillusioned when the harsh reality of the city life shatters his dream as he realizes that in urban social set up the poor is suppressed at every step and gets trampled by the rich so remain powerless. The protagonist Ravi, works as an apprentice with the tailor Apu, his master and father-in-law stitches dresses for the European women who pay better than the Indian ladies. Though he is an expert in his work yet the money he earns is inadequate in comparison to his creativity and skill. He is conscious to his exploitation by the wealthy European women but his colonized self deters him to raise his voice against his suppression and finally lack of status and power compels him to kneel down before them. He finds no one to support him amidst the capitalist dominance and becomes the victim of thoroughly modern attitude of the Europeans with their disbelief in humanitarianism treating the people only on the basis of their class and nativity. This "social injustice generates poverty, hunger and exploitation" (Dern: 8) for the lower class people. Ravi's struggle starts with the focus on financial security in future life. He wants to do "something that would stop him thinking about tomorrow". (Markandaya: 6) Marxists theory of awareness towards class conflict and longing for wealth in the socio-economic system comes in to operation here.

The decision to move to the city in search of wealth ironically proves him wrong. He is one of those villager who are occupied with the thought that the city life is far better than the village life so joins "the exodus to the cities" because of the unavailability of any kind of opportunity in the village to fulfill the dream of success but the reality comes in to knowledge after reaching there that "the cities had nothing either". (Markandaya: 26) His strength and enthusiasm find no way in the urban exodus of unemployment which causes stress and anxiety. The glorious glittering city is there with all its charm and attraction but he is merely a trivial creature with no partake in all these. Being a tenant farmer, he surrenders under persisting poverty of the village and succumbs to his mother's ambition for riches for which he shifts to city, powerless and innocent before urbanized and modernized locale. Ravi also targets the problem of unemployment in the city as one of the factors that is the cause of his failure. He says "if there had been a job, he thought, it might have been different: but there was no job." (Markandaya: 27) The other factor which prevents him from achieving success is his poor education. He was stuck between the peasant and an educated young man, neither a labour nor capable enough for a white collar job. The education "had taken from him the ability to work with hands". (Markandaya: 28)

The problems in the life of Ravi are not only social, economic and psychological but it affects him personally too. He feels defeated to settle with the girl of his own choice due to lack of income and lower status so surrenders himself to Apu. First of all, a helper later on as an apprentice he subjugates himself to the power of his master accepting everything from him as an order. Though he accepts Apu's proposal to work with him as an apprentice but feels disillusioned to know that his job is under his supremacy as a master not as a partner. Under the pressure to earn anyhow he suppresses his wish to be a master and accepts apprenticeship with Apu "I'm willing.... more than willing.

Any time you say. Anything you want me to do, I'll do." (Markandaya: 41) The choice of profession is a matter of surrender to the superior class as he never wanted to become a tailor but it was the only option he could find. He doesn't respect this trade because it doesn't suit to his masculinity as well as there are less chances to explore the other things in addition to it one has to pursue it for a longer time for reasonable augment in the wages. Ravi accepts "this womanish trade that made no call whatsoever upon a man's strength, or valour or spirit" but determined enough to earn and establish himself at any cost for which he doesn't care about better or worse rather "he would put up with worse for the sake of a regular pay packet." (Markandaya: 76) Though he is crushed down but accepts his fate as decided by Apu, the man with power who has the right to govern the poor men like Ravi.

Ravi invites his father Ram in the city to fix his marriage with Nalini, Apu's younger daughter. Ram finds the environment of city more tempting than the environment of village. Materialistic approach of the city people makes them inconsiderate towards evils like robbery or gambling. In the outward glory of the city, Ravi doesn't find a place to sustain himself by fair means so turns to robbery and theft forgetting his purpose to migrate to the city to be a gentleman. Due to lack of money, he becomes indifferent to right and wrong, moral and immoral and creates his identity of a wanderer in the beginning of the novel. The protagonist measures the changing paradigms of class with the change in space and scenario. Even after the change in space the "the misery and the squalor" follows him and makes him sick with the thought that "the way one was always poor and everyone knew was always poor too." (Markandaya: 54) Poverty drives him to the extent of changing his lot but finds it the harsh reality which is difficult to change immediately. He says that "there was nothing irrevocable about" (Markandaya: 54) indigence.

In the mid of the novel there reflects the practice of colonialism and imperialism. Imperialism is different side of the theory of colonialism where Apu and Ravi are not physically colonized but mentally dominated by European women. They work only for them at the prices they decide or bargain. Their earning depends on the work for the white settlers (European) in their own land. Apu feels obliged to the White women because "they buy" the clothes prepared by him at good price and believes that no one "else could pay such good money?" (Markandaya: 77) Thus, he shows humble respect to them. After his visit to the shops, Ravi gets to know about their exploitation by the capitalists. He feels shattered to know that they are not getting even the half of the total income of the businessmen. The injustice between the capitalist and the proletariat clearly reflects in the vast difference between their income but Apu accepts it blindly by admitting the fact that major portion of the income belongs to the owner and they are getting the exact amount of their labour. Ravi gets completely disillusioned to know the unequal structure of society where "the honest suffer and crooked prosper." (Dern: 8) The wages he receives is not more than the amount they give pitying a poor. Ravi fails to accept his subjection to the exploitation of the wealthy people but Apu's silence on this injustice makes him surprise. Apu says "of course they get twenty times what people get. That's because they're not people like us." (Markandaya: 78) According to Ravi

submissiveness of Apu to the Europeans is the greatest cause of their lower status.

The class consciousness of Ravi hurts him a lot on finding that there is no one who can stand with him and revolt against class distinction. He feels as if he has lost the battle with the upper class due to his criticism by Apu and marginalization by rich so capitulates to the existing norms of the society. At the time, he fears of being spatially alienated as a new comer in the city Damodar, his city friend encourages him by telling the backdrop of his fight to get the proportional payment. He advises “you’ll have to get rid of your beggar mentality first, otherwise you will never want decent money”. (Markandaya: 82) Alienation in the migrated place prevents him to think more than his mere survival. The struggle for basic needs increases his longing for village because in city he has “no roots, no family to give him a background”. (Markandaya: 83) Ravi suffers from inferiority complex due to his rural background which obsesses his mind and compels him to surrender because no person residing in city values a villager with his obsession with city manners. They don’t assimilate their culture and ideology of the poor with their own or give them space and opportunities to equate the status and become the subject of all economically and socially unfair attitude of the privileged people in the respected fields.

A Handful of Rice documents all sides of class difference from the superiority complex to imperialism, from capitalism to de-humanism and the oppression of all strata of society from the rich to the beggar. The author criticizes short temperament and superiority complex of the rich settlers in their community who behaves as if everyone else is dependent on them. Ravi becomes anxious on the words of his white customer who shouts at him for the improper fitting of the dress and threatens him by saying “minus ten rupees and one good customer” (Markandaya: 171) from her own community. His anxiety increases with the responsibility of the entire family. He needs to control the financial crisis of family to get the things in order but “money was short.” (Markandaya: 176) He becomes so impatient to earn that his anxiousness reflects in his absent mindedness and short temperament.

The colonial practice is clearly visible through the exploitation and over burden of work on the poor class. Apu for his whole life has worked for Europeans and trains Ravi for them to take their orders. In a way, he is colonized by the whites who guarantees future safety and employment to Ravi. Apu worship them as their customer but they do not have any concern for him due to his class. Ravi also faces their indifference even after treating them as his lord and master. Ravi says “they look at me as if I were made of wood... They don’t seem to see me as a *man*.” (Markandaya: 180) The inhuman attitude of capitalist colonizers doesn’t stop here. Ravi goes to deliver the dress to a memsahib with a week’s delay to complete his commitment even after the unbearable pain of Apu’s death. But instead of expressing regret on his death she outbursts on Ravi for the late delivery as if Apu does not matter at all for her. Her irritation on the truth verbalizes that “these people...with their innumerable uncles and aunts and cousins who seemed to be forever dying-really they were quite impossible, impossible people inhabiting an impossible country.” (Markandaya: 215) His vision of success shatters with their prejudiced and inhuman behaviour. She fires him on the delay by saying “that will be

all.” (Markandaya: 216) Further, he subjugates to himself as a deskilled labour who can’t run the business like Apu. He is insulted by a wealthy customer on the imperfect stitches on her dress and punishes him by cutting his payment. Increasing stress makes him alienate and mysterious to the other family members. “He was eaten up by his misery. Work held no enticement” (Markandaya: 220) to him. He becomes the subject of urban poverty and stress with his passive acceptance of the dominant behavior of privileged people. His failure to get success due to poverty tortures his inner self more than the outer self that he beats Nalini brutally, later on assaults Jayamma in her absence. Markandaya portrays a very pathetic picture of class struggle in respect to subordination and social hierarchy.

Kamala Markandaya “excels in recording the inner working, of the minds of her characters, their personal perplexities and social confrontations.” (Dern: 4) She outlines the psychological tension caused by poverty through Ravi’s anguish, distress, frustration and mental disbalance. On the one side, he becomes corrupt day by day, gets indulged in drinking and behaves violently with the family, on the other side, he becomes very cruel towards Nalini who stops him from doing the unethical and dishonest practices with others. Despite of Nalini’s effort to make him satisfy with the present belongings, he becomes very impatient to acquire higher social status in frenzy of which he behaves very irrationally and violently with the family members. Every time he decides to behave pragmatically, he is pressurized to deep down by the social forces which debilitate his will power.

The impression of opulence in the houses of European ladies is clearly seen in his dominance over his family particularly Nalini. It is his economic power that makes him to dominate over her as an earning member of the family. He says to his wife “get out, ‘I’m done with the feeding and keeping you for nothing.” (Markandaya: 242) The tendency to rule and dominate comes from the “Power-conscious memsahibs” (Markandaya: 242) which he practices later in his family. Ravi dominates on the basis of male superiority and patriarchy to show others that he is the “master of the household. Master of his own house, if nowhere else.” (Markandaya: 242) His longing for power and status roots in his suppression by the society. He tries to fulfill his dream of riches by his own efforts but the failure of them makes him futuristic about his life and delves deep into the myth of death and rebirth to find the possibility to become rich in the next birth. His mind reveals that “he did not want to be reborn into what he was now. Something better, he thought, his mind begins to wander. Perhaps as a priest, well fed, housed and cared for by his flock whether Hindu or Christian. Or a sahib. Or a police inspector” (Markandaya: 244) His delving in the after life is the outcome of his dissatisfied incomplete self which he seeks to complete in his imagination. This is all the result of his suppression by the society, by the capitalist, by the rich and so on. The wealth of Damodar provokes him as well to acquire wealth but now he expresses distaste for wealth and status being confronted with the reality and his defeat in the class-conscious society. He expresses the futility of his efforts “I had a pretty good imagination once... now it just seems a waste of time.” (Markandaya: 251)

Poverty closes all the possibilities of a happy life for him. He has been living under the debts. Taking loan is a different kind of surrender to poverty which impedes him to

think about future possibilities of advancement and makes him stick to the present crisis. He borrowed on the petty things of his household and tells his friend "I've borrowed on the sewing machine, I have to keep up the interest payments.... and the rent is mounting up." (Markandaya: 252) The worst picture of poverty is shown through the death of Raju, Ravi and Nalini's son who suffers from meningitis. Ravi is so busy in the calculations of his petty earning that he could not arrange proper medication to Raju and saves few rupees from his treatment. On medical treatment he says to Nalini "we shall have to cut down on something. I don't know what." (Markandaya: 269) Under the pressure of other requirements, he skips the doctor and faces the harsh reality of his son's death which he fails to accept in the end. The obsession for minimal expenditure makes him cut the doctor's expenses. His frustration for increasing expenses verbalizes to his wife "a doctor, what are we, memsahibs or something to send for a doctor for every ache or pain? Will you pay his bill?" (Markandaya: 270) The engrossment to improve his financial condition creates a threat in his life with his son's death. Above all his last ray of hope to fight with poverty also fades away with the loss of his job in the hospital. The hospital administration simply declared that "we have no work for you" (Markandaya: 273) without even taking concern of his need and situation. Finding no way to improve his conditions, he goes to Damodar with a single motive to earn money for his family, to provide the children everything which is their right. Tyagi approaches his psychological failure and mentions that Ravi is "ultimately crushed by socio-economic oppression and thereby becomes a victim of rootlessness and alienation." (19) He completely surrenders to the demand and necessities of the time and says "no more blocks and restraints. No more loyalties and responsibilities for he had none. Neither to the land nor to people nor to their society nor to society's betraying ramshackle codes." (Markandaya: 274) Ravi got fed up with his life and was bound to do anything which can secure the future of his children so he kneels down in front of Damodar for providing him shelter by giving him a job but shatters to know that he is "too late." (274) Shankar rightly observes that "he is destroyed by a false society." (326) Damodar laughs on his fate for his early decisions guided by honesty and morality and humiliates him for his disciplined life and current condition. He wonders over his fate "I see nothing, you're empty. No heart, no spleen". (Markandaya: 274) Thus, Ravi fails to do anything specific beyond his class due to the diverse social norms for the rich and the poor made by the socially empowered people.

Thus, *A Handful of Rice* is a masterpiece by Markandaya dwelling on the sensitive issue of class conflict. It condemns the outlook to judge a person's caliber by his class and status negating his true skills and talents and forming false opinion based on their class. Markandaya deconstructs the class biasness and shows a mirror to the society projecting the injustice meted out to the downtrodden on the one hand and the need to raise the voice against the exploitation on the other hand. It is a plea to the rich and powerful that to establish permanent happiness, well being and harmony in any human society, the disadvantaged people must be treated as fellow human being -with dignity, sympathy and respect, only then the proper equilibrium in the society can be maintained.

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