Ravi as a Protagonist in *A Handful of Rice*

Tarun Kumar Yadav  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga

Kamala Markandaya as a novelist is a distinctive representative of the feminine sensibility. She evinces great supremacy and insight in portraying characters. She is a grand and exceptional novelist. She has nimbly delineated smarmy developed and charismatic characters in all her novels. Her legendary characters are emblematic sons and daughters of the soil who undergo perceptible changes with the alteration of place. Kamala, who was awarded the National Association of Independent Schools Award (USA) in 1967 and the Asian Prize in 1974, is one of the crispest and most warming persons of Indian writers. In *A Handful of Rice*, she dexterously reveals her characters from the inside. She has employed stream of consciousness technique and exposed to the readers the psyche of her characters. Her characters seem to be made of flesh and blood. The novel is replete with many characters. Ravi, the protagonist, has been drawn competently. Except the protagonist, the two vital male characters in the novel are Apu and Damodar. Ravi, the hero, is a vigorous and healthy young man. His willpower is very strapping. He has a unique quickness of hand, eye and mind which endow with him a great advantage to deal with men. He is a literate boy.

He could read, he could write – not only the vernacular but English-English because that had been the language of the overlords when he was a boy. (27) He has been depicted as a vagrant. He is implicated in inconsequential criminal activities. He has left his village in search of a job in the city. When he comes to the city, he forcibly enters Apu’s house due to being chased by a policeman. He resides in Apu’s house since then. Meanwhile, Ravi falls in love with Nalini who is Apu’s daughter. Apu is an old tailor. Ravi helps Apu in his work and he has now more chances to see Nalini.

All the time he worked he had been hoping for a glimpse of her, this young beauty whose looks made a man’s day.... It was just his luck, he thought, that she should appear now, when there was no further excuse for lingering. (24) Ravi has utterly lost in Nalini’s love. He desires to marry her. He goes to market, fair and even to the movie with her. Ravi recollects:

He came to her house as often as he could, slaved for her mother, and worked for her father... neglected his own distinctly precarious finances- for what? For the few words he was able to exchange with her in between, if he was lucky.... Sometimes after a whole day’s endurance all he had for his comfort was the sound of her. (34) Ravi is ready to sacrifice for Nalini’s love. Before the marriage, he wants to be a highly regarded person. He wants to shun the bad company. He is ready:

... to repudiate all in his life that was unworthy. (33) Ravi sighed deeply, secretly with a profound sense of sacrifice. She was worth it, worth anything, even worth giving up the sweet life for. He put it all on her, forgetting the trinity of hunger, drink and misery that had been intermittent companion of his sweet life. (40)

He thinks:

For her he resolved, everything would be different, he would be different. (33) Eventually, Ravi weds Nalini. He does not receive any offering from her father, yet he loves her much.
He loved her laughing, dimpled, gay young wife; he wanted passionately to keep her so, never to oppress her with his own dark broodings. (76)

Now, marriage has transformed his life. He is going to lead a happy life with his wife Nalini. He thinks that now life would be better than before. But after marriage, he has to face accommodation problem at Apu’s house. From the beginning, Ravi faces the problem of accommodation and it continues after marriage. We see:

Ravi had no quarters.... It was a matter of choice where he slept. A bench in the park, an empty six by two space in a doorway, the veranda of an empty house, the pavement, all in turn had served to bed down on. (47)

After his marriage too, he lives in Apu’s house:

He has no private room to sleep in with his wife. He keenly desires to have a shelter of his own, a place they could call their own where he and his wife could talk, plan, and dream, make love undisturbed? (86)

Ravi likes to have a child:

... preferably a son, rather than a daughter, a little boy, who would run after him and call him father who would look up to him and to whom in time he would pass on his skills, so that he would never have to worry about whom to hand over to like poor old Apu. (92)

Ravi is also an ambitious person. He wants to earn a lot of money to slake his yearning.

Ravi would have liked his steady wage to be higher. He wanted to buy a bed, a nice sari for Nalini, material for some smart new shirts for himself, a safety-razor, a mouth-organ and sundry other essentials and luxuries, the list of which grew daily longer. (67)

Besides it, he wants to procure a cycle, a luxurious bed and a gold watch.

He wished he had a watch so that he could tell time, a nice gold watch that he could strap to his wrist, shooting his cuff smartly to show it off.... He sighed. There was no end to his wants.... (127)

Except these things, he also desires to have cars and drive them. So much ambitious was he.

The novelist has also portrayed Ravi as a livid man. He strappingly opposes social injustice. He never likes that the poor should always put up with and the rich should always rule over them. When he comes to know the fact that his one jacket is sold for Rs. 125/- , while he gets Rs. 80/- per dozen. Ravi bursts out:

Ravi felt like shrieking. The fact stuck in his gullet like an outsize stone.... He walked blindly, rapidly, wanting only to get as far away from the house as possible before his brain too, his thinking, becomes contaminated. Of all his emotions, disgust was uppermost, to be ground down like that, to lie down and take whatever they cared to give. (69)

Ravi cannot put up with social injustice and inequality. He becomes intolerant seeing the comforts and luxuries of their life. He thinks:

They are not made of different clay, are they? There’s nothing that lies down, they should always have the best and trample over us and do us down, and we should always come off worst? (75)

Since Ravi’s temperament is indignant. He is effortlessly irritated. Sometimes he scuffles with Puttana, Nalini and his father-in-law, Apu. He does not like to see Nalini’s sister Thangam. When he is tremendously snappy, he even beats Nalini.

Ravi works hard and loves his profession. He has fidelity and sincerity towards his business.

Ravi never neglected his work, however much he talked... industrious worker, good husband. (80)

He is also a very kind-hearted person because he had a lot of respect for Apu and Thangam’s children.
Ravi was a licentious man because he rapes his mother-in-law.

... and he was lost, in soft enveloping flesh that tossed away past and future, wiping out pain and unhappiness, and all his waking and sleeping terrors. (221)

Ravi always has the feeling of rootlessness, since when he has left his village and migrated to the city. He does not have any house in the city. He feels seclusion and recalls his village.

No friends, no fields, no relatives. In the city, there are no fields to lose oneself in, as the men of his village had done. There was something about the land, mortgaged though it was to the last inch, that gave one peace, a kind of inner calm, that he was acutely curious of lacking as he gazed at the narrow, hard, bustling and indifferent street. (124)

So the central character has been portrayed in a very microscopic way. Ravi starts his profession involving in insignificant unlawful activities, perhaps, therefore, in the beginning of the novel, the police are chasing him and he takes refuge in Apu’s house. Both Apu and Ravi are anonymous to each other. Later on, he manages to marry to Apu’s daughter Nalini and continues to work as a collaborator in Apu’s tailor shop. He undergoes many obstacles to accomplish his desires after coming in the city, but God has destined only hindrances and complications in his destiny. Even at the end of the novel, he is hankering for a handful of rice but he remains disgruntled.

He again decides to rivet in inconsequential scandalous deeds, but something prevents him from doing so. Now his heart has melted and he has embraced benevolence. One afternoon a crowd raids a storeroom for rice. Ravi also joins the crowd. They begin to pillage rice, but Ravi is now befuddled. He restrains himself from pillaging rice. He says that he does not feel in the mood today, but next day, yes next day he would do. It is crystal clear that Ravi has enormously transformed. He thinks that he has a family to look after and he cannot indulge himself in anti-social activities. It is unanswered how Ravi leads his life without a handful of rice. He has journeyed through a rough and tough path of his life; still he has fervour to scrap with calamities because he has been depicted as an optimist throughout the novel. Really, he plays the responsibility of an optimist because an optimist sees opportunity in every calamity and so does happen to Ravi.

Works Cited: