

## A HANDFUL OF RICE

Kamala Markandaya

(1966)

### Story

This is a story of human suffering and poverty in India of the 1960s, just after Independence. In the opening scene, a drunken man threatens to force his way into a house. 'I'm hungry,' he shouts. 'I want food.' Then he shatters the weak and rusty window bars of an unsuspecting couple's house and demand 'rice.' This, in a microcosm, is the story of Ravi, the protagonist, a son of the landless farmer who flees poverty in the countryside and escapes to the city, where he finds not only poverty but also degradation. It is a grim story, with only a tiny flicker of redemption in the final scene, where Ravi refuses to take part in another act of violence, this time a mob breaking into a fancy goods store. After the sensational opening, the story back tracks to Ravi's life in the village and his escape from grinding poverty and hunger. Once he enters the city, which is Madras, he gets caught up in a petty crime world, led by Damodar, a bootlegger. Ravi gets addicted to drink, is arrested and released. Now, the story catches up with itself and revisits the opening scene, when Ravi threatened to break into a house for food. Full of remorse, Ravi returns to the house and repairs the broken window. The husband, a tailor named Apu, accepts Ravi as an apprentice. Before long, Ravi falls in love with the daughter, Nalini, marries her and after the tailor dies, carries on the family business as best he can. His material conditions improve slightly until a relative steals the tailor's savings. Then Ravi takes to drink and beats his wife. His wife runs away and his son dies. Destitute, Ravi goes to visit Damodar, who has become a rich man, but his old friend rejects him. Finally, Ravi joins a crowd that attacks a warehouse with a store of rice, but he (along with others) are beaten back by the police. Then, in a final act of mob violence, the crowd attacks a fancy clothing store, where 'the nobs' go. Ravi is about to throw a brick through the window but hesitates and leaves.

### Themes

Poverty The novel was written at a time of failing monsoons, falling rural wages and the spiralling costs of staples, such as rice. Even the government scheme of price controls for rice, sugar and milk could not prevent black market selling, embezzlement from government warehouses and individual merchants selling government rice at higher than the allowed limit. When Ravi leaves the village, he reflects on what he knows of the people: 'They did not lie, they did not cheat, they did not steal. But then 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 tuberculosis, dysentery, the 'falling fever,' 'recurrent fever,' and any other names for what was basically, simply, nothing but starvation. His escape to the city does not free him from the grip of poverty. He struggles to find 'a handful of rice,' which is a translation of a common phrase to describe a 'handout' or a 'meagre portion.' In the opening scene, he is poor and hungry, and in the final scene he is no different. Although Markandaya's reputation has plummeted in recent decades as literary fashion has turned away from social realism, it would be difficult to find a more uncompromising portrait of society than that presented in *A Handful of Rice*.

Degradation One effect of poverty that the novel emphasises is degradation. It can turn usually gentle and kind people into monsters, who will rape, steal and kill in order to gain the basic necessities of life. Although Ravi, like millions of other Indians, migrated to the city in order to create a better life, he is ground down by indifference, mindless consumerism and rampant greed. Desperate for a 'handful of rice,' Ravi joins a gang of smugglers and commits a series of petty crimes, thinking to himself that 'in this jungle, one had to fight fiercely, with whatever weapons one has.' His existence is driven by biological needs, and if his hunger cannot be satisfied then his sexual appetite can. Although he becomes a husband and a father, and appears for a brief time, to live a normal life, when the hard times return, he sinks back to a bestial level and has sex with his mother-in-law. His poverty also forces him to lie, to cover up and to invent stories in order that he hold on to a shred of respect in the eyes of others. His contact with the affluence of Damodar (once a thief and now a wealthy but corrupt contractor), with gold watches and silk clothes, only stimulates his imagination

and ushers in the corroding power of consumer desire. Ravi, who left a poor village, searches for a decent life but ends up losing his conscience.

Village and city Throughout the novel, the characters and their actions are explained in terms of a contrast between the innocent village and the corrupt city. There is poverty in both settings, as Ravi finds out, but the village retains a moral underpinning that has been eroded in Madras. This contrast is dramatised in the friendship between Damodar and Ravi. Damodar is called a 'city slicker', while Ravi is referred to as a 'decent man.' Damodar is not more wicked than Ravi—indeed, he has admirable qualities such as loyalty and optimism—but he lacks Ravi's basic instincts of trust and compassion. Another expression of this theme is the relationship between Apu and Ravi. This time, the urban dweller (Apu) is shown to possess a stronger moral compass than Ravi. But, of course, Ravi is a transitional character in that he was born in the village and now lives in the city, where his foundation of decency is undermined.

Caste Although *A Handful of Rice* is an overtly sociological novel, using fiction to dramatise social realities, it is curious that caste does not feature as a prominent explanatory factor. This absence is conspicuous because Markandaya's novel is often compared to the similarly hard-hitting novels of Mulk Raj Anand (who published *Untouchable* and *Coolie* in the 1930s). Anand's excellent novels are focused on caste as the source of his characters' suffering, but caste barely raises its head in *A Handful of Rice*. One suspects that Markandaya deliberately downplayed caste in order to focus attention on the poverty and hunger that affects people, not matter what caste (although lower castes do suffer more). This may be a reason for making Apu a tailor, since that occupation has no clearly defined caste affiliation. Certainly not a high caste but also not very low either, tailoring lies somewhere in a lower-middle position. In fact, the caste identity of tailors has generally been vague throughout history and became more ambiguous when the introduction of sewing machines in late 19<sup>th</sup> century India meant that anyone could take up the craft. In addition to Apu, neither Ravi nor Damodar is said to be from a specific caste. The word 'caste' appears only once in the novel, when it is used to distinguish the rich from the poor. This is the theme of the novel, that poverty degrades human beings, regardless of caste.

## Characters

Ravi Ravi is the protagonist, a young man who flees poverty in a village to seek his fortune in the big city of Madras. His dream quickly turns to a nightmare as the tough economic system of the city grinds him down and turns him into a desperate animal, who can be violent in his struggle to survive.

Damodar Damodar is a petty criminal who befriends Ravi and enlists him in his gang. He is a cunning and deceptive man, but he also has likable qualities such as honesty (among thieves), humour and buoyancy. Although he may be superficial and a low-lifer, he does try to help Ravi (in the only way he knows how) and remains his loyal friend.

Apu Apu is the old tailor who gives Ravi a chance by hiring him as an apprentice, and eventually marrying him to his daughter. Apu is a kind, compassionate man, though not very perceptive or cognisant of the social forces that dictate his life. He maintains exacting standards in his tailoring business and represents the one person in the city not to be corrupted by its greed and alienation.

Jayamma Jayamma is Apu's wife, who is more assertive and talkative than he. Her nature is less trusting, too, and treats Ravi with less respect in the beginning. When her husband dies, however, she does not reject the sexual advances of Ravi, her son-in-law.

Nalini Nalini is the young and pretty daughter of Apu and Jayamma. She is innocent and sweet, and marries Ravi full of naïve hope, which is slowly destroyed by her husband's return to his bad old habits. The first blow is the death of her first child, a son aged two years. Then her father dies and a nephew runs off with the family's savings. She struggles hard in the resulting poverty and remains loyal to Ravi throughout.

**RAVI** (Decent)

**Character** Although driven to violence by his desperate situation, the author suggests that, underneath, Ravi is a 'decent' man. Unlike some other characters, especially Damodar, the petty criminal with whom Ravi commits crimes, he has a conscience. He doesn't like doing what he does, but he needs money for food. After he threatens a married couple, in the opening scene, and gets some food, he wonders if he was too hard on them. In fact, he returns to the house and offers to

repair the window bar he has broken. This nagging conscience haunts Ravi throughout the novel, never allowing him to fully settle into his role as a violent, debased man, a criminal and a useless vagrant. As the author points out, Ravi was born and bred in the countryside, where morals and manners still exist, while other characters are products of the corrupt city. Ravi also shows human kindness and empathy when he falls in love with Nalini and in his dealings with Apu, Nalini's father. In the end, however, the seductive and degrading influences of the city, the greed of the powerful and the glittering lifestyle of the wealthy, corrupt him and lead him astray.

**Activities** At first, when Ravi is homeless and unemployed, he wanders around the city, sleeping on the waterfront or in parks. By day, he works with Damodar, stealing goods, such as foreign clothes and alcohol, from warehouses and flogging it on the street at inflated prices. Later, he works for Apu, the tailor who becomes his father-in-law. Still later, after his life falls apart, he meets up with Damodar again and gets involved in more crime, which leads to the final explosive ending, when he joins mob and attacks a rice warehouse.

### **Illustrative moments**

Violent Ravi's dormant tendency to violence is illustrated on the very first page. He is stopped by a policeman because he is drunk. The policeman twists his arm hard, causing him sharp pain. 'You bastard,' Ravi says and sinks his teeth into the man's arm. 'The khaki cloth was strong but it ripped under his sharp teeth. He felt the flesh split, and it was, momentarily, as voluptuous as a sexual climax.' Ravi runs and hides near a house, where the husband threatens to call the police. But Ravi says, 'You old fool. I'll hack you to pieces before they come.' The man tells him to go away, but Ravi wrenches free two of the rusty bars on the window. 'See! I'll come in and do you in.' Ravi demands food and is given leftovers. Taking a bite, he feels relief and thinks to himself, 'This is what life should be like. That man will tomorrow become a householder, a taxpayer, the outraged citizen entitled to raise a hue and cry against vagrants like me. It is only in the jungle, only at night, that we are equal.' Ravi can be violent, but the novel asks us to consider whether that tendency is innate or social conditioned.

Decent Despite his violent tendencies, his drinking and his association with petty criminals, Ravi is a 'decent' man. This is the driving force of the narrative, the fact that a person with a good upbringing (in a village) and a moral conscience is brought low by the basic needs of food and shelter in the city. This struggle between decency and degradation in Ravi's character is a constant in the story, with one or the other tendency winning out over the other at various points. Perhaps the best illustration of Ravi's decency comes in the early chapters, after he has broken the window bars on Apu's house in a drunken and hunger-driven rage. He returns to the house and offers to repair it. The wife doesn't believe him, but he convinces her of his honest intentions. Then she says, 'Ok, it'll make me sleep better at night.' Ravi nods and thinks to himself, 'That's not the point. It'll make me feel better, too.' He takes five rupees from her to get buy the bars made, but they cost only four and he thinks for a moment of pocketing the extra rupee before giving it back to her. The conscience-stricken man needs to do the right thing.

Desperate Ravi's struggle to remain a decent man is tested throughout the novel, especially at the beginning (described above) and at the end. By then, he is desperate for food. It doesn't matter that he is responsible for his own downfall, he is destitute and will do almost anything to feed himself. In the closing pages, he joins a crowd that has targeted a rice warehouse. They are all poor, some starving, and they know that tons of rice are stored inside, guarded by armed men. One of his friends, Kannan, the blacksmith, tries to dissuade him, saying, 'The rice is for everyone, this way is wrong, this way the innocent will suffer.' But Ravi doesn't listen. His eyes are frantic with desire, desire for a 'handful of rice.' He and the others break into the warehouse and begin to make off with sacks of rice when the police come and beat them. Dozens lay motionless on the ground, but Ravi escapes by running, just as in the first scene, and survives. But his desperate situation, his existential need for food, continues, and we fear for what the future will bring for Ravi.

**APU** (Modest)

**Character** Apu is a tailor, who forms a friendship with Ravi that eventually leads to Ravi marrying his daughter. Apu is a quiet, modest and hard-working man, who leaves most of the talking and the social interactions to his wife. In fact, he spends so much time working that he never formed a relationship with his daughters, something that he regrets as he lies dying at the end of the story. Even as the book begins, he is an 'old man' with rheumy eyes, and when Ravi sees the fluid running

out of them, he wonders how he could execute his scissor-work so exactly. But Apu is precise in his work and takes great pride in producing clothes of quality and exact measurements. He is also a kind and easy-going person, who gradually warms to Ravi, takes pity on his situation and takes him under his wing, first as an apprentice and later as a son-in-law. This, however, does not mean he will excuse Ravi's slackness or deviation from his own high standards. Toward the end, when he lies for months on his death-bed, we see a proud but ultimately defeated man. His daughter's marriage has proved to be a disaster, the man he trusted (Ravi) reverts to his old habits of drink and low-life associates, and his life's savings are about to be stolen by his nephew. This is not a joyous, or even a hopeful, novel and Apu's sad end seems inevitable.

**Activities** As a tailor, Apu is busy from eight in the morning until six or seven in the evening. First thing in the morning, he puts on his 'tailor's white drill coat with its high-buttoned collar,' eats a small breakfast and goes out. He visits customers in their home, takes measurements, cuts and sews in his shop and takes the finished clothes to them. Toward the end of the story, he gets ill, takes to his bed and slowly dies.

### **Illustrative moments**

Kind Apu is, above all else, a kind man who treats others with respect. We appreciate this quality in the old tailor's character in one of the early chapters when he accepts Ravi as an apprentice in his business. Although Ravi had broken two of the bars on his window in a drunken rage, Apu is prepared to give him a chance. They are walking along to a customer's house and Apu asks him questions—'Are you going straight?' 'Do you have any money?' Ravi gives him the answers he wants, but of course he has no real basis on which to trust this young man who nearly broke into his house. And yet, he senses in Ravi a certain 'decency'—that word is used throughout the novel to refer to Ravi—and does not hesitate to take him into his work place and later his house.

High standards In another conversation with Ravi, Apu confesses that he is a little sad because he has only daughters and no sons, hinting that one of the reasons for his decision to accept the unknown Ravi is his desire to find a son-in-law (and later perhaps a grandson) who can carry on the family business. He accepts Ravi, but he will also be strict in teaching him how to be a good tailor. While walking together, he glances at the younger man and says in an unusually sharp tone, 'Be careful how you carry that cloth. You don't want to put creases in it because it's important not to lose a customer.' Apu is a kind man, but he is also a man of high standards.

Modest Apu is a modest man, without pretensions or any desire to be anyone other than who he is. In yet another scene, when he and Ravi are walking toward a customer's house, they stop in front of a display window for ready-made clothes. Ravi notices that one of the coats they have made is on a mannequin with a price tag ten times higher than what they would sell it for. He mentions this to Apu, who replies, 'Of course they get ten times more because they're not people like us.' Ravi says he wants to become like them, and Apu warns, 'Just you try, lad. Just you try and see how far you get.' Ravi gets angry and starts yelling about not selling cheap and having self-respect until Apu silences him with these words: 'Clothes, rich clothes, are not important to you and me, nor can we afford to think about them for ourselves. But goodwill is important, the goodwill of our customers. Unless you understand that and act on it, you cannot be of any use to me.' Apu does not fight the system, perhaps because he has achieved a small but stable niche within it. This deferential acceptance of inequality may not appear admirable, but Ravi's path, as we soon see, leads to utter failure.

### **DAMADOR** (Cunning)

**Character** Damodar is Ravi's companion through most of the novel. Unlike Ravi, who comes from a village, however, Damodar is a 'city slicker...with tougher and more elastic standards.' He is a cunning and deceptive man, though not entirely venal. He is said to 'move like a cat', with a thin body that leaves no trace behind. He is certainly not a hero, but neither is he a fool. He knows the city inside and out, where the warehouses are, who owns them and how to steal from them. He knows that it is a dog-eat-dog world and that only the toughest survive. He is also clever and precise with a 'timekeeping brain.' We understand Damodar's character in relation to Ravi's, for whom he represents the 'glitter and excitement' of the city with its incandescent glow.' Damodar's fortunes rise and fall through the course of the novel, but he never loses his buoyancy, his joie de vivre and camaraderie, which so impressed Ravi. At the end, Damodar is the happier of the two. He has made a little money, through black market trading, and can now stand above petty thieving, unlike Ravi who is so desperate that he joins a crowd attacking a rice warehouse.

**Activities** Most of Damodar's time is spent planning and carrying out thefts in the city. His favourite targets are the warehouses with foreign goods, especially alcohol, which he can then sell on the street for a high profit. Liquor was the real prize because Madras State (where the action is set) was a 'dry state' in the 1960s, the legacy of Gandhian abstinence. In order to serve or buy alcohol one had to obtain a special licence from the state government. At the conclusion of the story, Damodar, having made himself rich, rests on silk cushions in his newly-built mansion, stirring only to give orders to subordinates to carry out his illicit capers.

### **Illustrative moments**

Cunning Damodar is a cunning man, a petty criminal with a lively imagination and very few scruples. A good illustration of his clever thinking occurs soon after Ravi joins him in stealing from warehouses. Ravi has been telling Damodar about the family he has met—Apu the tailor, his wife and his beautiful daughter. Ravi is moody because he sees no way of getting to know the family and the daughter on equal terms, but Damodar is quick to suggest a plan. He has had his eye on a large warehouse of foreign silks and brocades for some time, but he needs an accomplice to pull off such a large job. Now, he enlists Ravi, saying that Ravi could present Apu, the father, with a few bolts of expensive cloth. 'Then,' Damodar says, 'you'll have them eating out of your hand.' They do raid the warehouse and Ravi gives them the cloth. In this way Ravi slowly insinuates himself into their good books and eventually marries their daughter. All because Damodar linked Ravi's romantic desire with the expensive goods lying in storage. As crimes go, this was victimless (even Ravi justifies it by telling himself that the goods are being stored to hide them from custom officers) and results in a good ending, of Ravi's marriage.

Seductive Damodar's lifestyle of easy money, drink, women and expensive clothes has a seductive influence on Ravi. Although married and working for Apu, Ravi cannot shut himself off from the pleasures of the city. Even though he knows that Damodar's life is not right and his own 'straight' path is better, his old friend is able to lead him astray by dangling glittering prizes in front of his eyes. The best illustration of this seductive power occurs in chapter 19, when Ravi accidentally bumps into Damodar. They talk, and Damodar makes light of his friend's new married life, but then he begins to tell him about the juicy opportunities presented by the new import duties. 'The prices are going up and up,' he explains, 'that's why people come to me. I can sell the stuff cheaper and still make a good profit.' Damodar pays for drinks, and soon Ravi is in a pleasant, relaxed state. He gazes at Damodar with 'affection' and begins to resent that he himself is trapped in a 'strait-laced, dull and killjoy' life. As they leave, Damodar says, 'If you want decent money, you know where to find me. Of course, you'll have to get rid of that beggar mentality first.' Damodar has planted an idea, which, like a worm, crawls around Ravi's mind and eventually leads to the breakup of his marriage and his return to criminality.