

Filial relationship in Kamala Markandaya's a handful of Rice

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Abstract

This research paper is a study of the filial relationship in the novels of kamala Markandaya. Family plays a vital role in the life of human being it works as a sheltered grove in the life of a person to fit into a social contract. The filial ties, therefore often have a long lasting effect. The child's mother and father are given and fixed.

Keywords: filial, relationship, Kamala, Markandaya

1. Introduction

Kamala Markandaya's fifth novel, *A Handful of Rice* 1966 is a good example of human relationship. It deals with the theme of urban economics while her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* represents the rural economics and its impact on human relations. Ravi is the central figure of *A Handful of Rice*. He is a rural breed but has began to live in the city. His father is rooted to his native village and does not like to leave it. In Madras Ravi has come in close contact with a city breed Damodar. He has learnt many things from Damodar and is grateful to him for getting training from him. Like Ravi's father his father-in-law Apu is also a village breed since his childhood, he is trained in village tradition by his ancestors. He is a tailor by profession. Both the village people are satisfied with their lot. They do not complain or have any questioning. They also do not believe in rebelling the existing circumstances. For sometime, Ravi feels a good change in his city life.

But by and by Ravi is exposed to the evil that rages in its many forms in the city. The in-sensitiveness of the affluent, their mania for conspicuous consumption, their hardness of heart: the exploitation of small fish by the big, the worker by the capitalist, the Apus of the world by the Big Shops in Mount road; and the infernal success of the boot legger the blackmarketeer the drug-peddler at the cost of the poor the down and out, the desperate - these are the images of the modern city. (445)

Ravi's dream is materialized and a vagrant lout transformed into a domesticated husband with the pain of hunger nearly forgotten for many years to come. But the time takes a bitter change. After Raju's death, a lot of difficulties arise for him in making both ends meet. Ravi becomes hopeless. He sees only one ray of hope and goes to Damodar to resume his earlier work in partnership. But the later knows the character of Ravi. Damodar understands it very well, that Ravi is not the person who would face the challenges of the society. He has no courage. He is "empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts" (232). When Ravi goes with the mass of people to attack the rice godown. Kannan warns him not to do such an action because it is a wrong action. He does not pay any attention to Kannan's warning and goes to the rice godown with the people. The police catches him and beats him mercilessly. Economic hardship lead to disintegration of the filial ties. The novelist reiterates her faith in the Indian social values. He says that the

parent child relationship is one of the basic facts of human existence, to renounce it is neither easy nor advisable. Ravi is disgusted with the extreme poverty of his parents. He leaves the village and comes to the city to secure employment. But he loses in Madras his village innocence and honesty. In the city, he degenerates into a petty thief, pickpocket and bootlegger. His involvement in the shady activities of urban life wipes away from his mind the memory of his village and his parents. A queer turn takes place. He gets his entry in Apu's house and falls in love with his daughter, Nalini,

In the days that followed Ravi thought about her a lot-this girl with the bright eyes and the thick, glossy hair, who could transform a man's life. He would have liked to meet her properly, not as a labouring coolie in her father's house, to talk to her as an equal, to get to know her, as other young men came to know young girls, within the approving, carefully conducted circle of mutual friends and family relationship. (25)

In the novel all relationships, are beset with conflicts. When children mature, the differences of opinion on certain issues takes discodant notes. Ravi is sad to see his parent's misery and squalor Ravi, like any other youngman, wants to lead a sweet life which he does not get, so Ravi is full of rage. Graham A. Allan observes that the quality of relationship depends upon the frequency of contact between the individuals. Unduly long intervals rob the emotional bonds of the quality of ease, familiarity and confidence. In the novel Ravi meets his father after a long gap. This long spell of silence loses the warmth of relation's and he feels as if his own father were a stranger. He feels it difficult to converse with his father and their meeting leads to stress. Markandaya has given a long description of the meeting between Ravi and his father in the novel,

It was afterwards jogging along to the coffee shop that Ravi became acutely conscious of the embarrassment that stress and urgency had suppressed. Here opposite him, sat his father : his father; the man from whose loins he had sprung and instead of closeness it was even worse than sitting next to a total stranger, with whom at least he would have had no difficulty in exchanging a few idle words. On a lesser level, what about all those promises to keep in touch he had dutifully made and never kept.. until now when he needed help ? What must his father think of him? Ravi felt his cheeks burning. (50-51)

Ravi feels discomfiture. He realizes that his long spell of silence for his filial duty towards his father is a sign of his guilt. The

neglect of duty towards his parents makes him shameful and it is a pure selfish act on his part. He thinks what must his father think of him? But his father is a generous man and does not feel his son's neglective behaviour towards him. He has no such irritants to make him feel awkward. On the other hand, he being kindly disposed narrates the important events and happenings at his end. He encourages Ravi and appreciates his wisdom with the passage of time the nature of filial ties always change and so is the case with Ravi. The novelist is right when she says that in the fast running life of the modern people often their emotional quality vanishes and a utilitarian attitude develops. The great emotional bond degenerates into a mere sense of duty physical nearness is a coveted aspect of these tender ties. As a child, everybody craves the physical proximity of one's parents. The fondling, the caressing provide a sense of security. But in adult hood, Ravi finds the touch with his father unappealing. He just listens to the old man's tales out of a sheet sense of duty.

Ravi has no respect for Rama's help. He does not feel any type of obligation for him. He only wishes to take his father's support and succour. He is proud of his wisdom and so he congratulates himself of not tearing away completely his relations with his parents. He realizes that this breach is inevitable and it is only temporarily postponed. Ravi remembers how he and his brothers had gone and not returned, not kept in touch, accepted the rift as he had come so close to doing.

He was glad now that he had not. Where would he have been without his father to give him identity and status, to gesture over his shoulder to a back-ground and roots that were solid and stable and reassuring in his in-law's eyes? Yet he knew the gestures were empty, the final rupture only postponed, for he felt there was nothing for him in his village, and its people and their living had become so remote as to be utterly meaningless to him. (57)

In the filial bonds, financial status plays an important role. Ravi's parents belong to the below poverty level. Their financial status plays an important part in maintaining the solidarity of the filial bonds. The protagonist exploits his relationship with his father to his own advantage; yet, Ravi does not mind when the old man is neglected at the time of his marriage ceremony. On the other hand, he gives more value to his friends Apu and Jayamma who help him financially. Both of them bear the entire expenditure of the marriage ceremony. They play an important place in his wedding ceremony while his old father is neglected. He is unceremoniously neglected to the background,

He looked up, he looked round. He was even able to focus and recognize faces in the throng, Foremost among the men were Apu and Varma, as befitted members of the more prominent family. His father stood several places behind because though Ravi, he had contributed little to this affair, a poor man, relegated to the fringes not from any exercised intentional unkindness, but from a sort of natural fall into the appropriate slot. If Ram was aware of this, he showed no resentment. He beamed and joyous, his face filled with pride that all this should be in honour of his son, his grand lavish affair. (60)

Parents are the real well wishers of their children. For them, their children's happiness is above everything else. The old father is not at all conscious of being neglected. He feels it his great pleasure when he sees his son, Ravi, settled and happy. He is perfectly happy to see his son so honoured.

That material aspect is a vital factor in the preservation or reverence of filial relationships is unmistakably proved by the affairs of the Apu household. It is crowded place where Apu's

married daughter Thangam, her useless unemployed husband Puttanna and their two children, lotus-eater Varma and the cripple Kumaran are surviving on the hospitality of Apu. Of course, Nalini, his younger unmarried daughter and Jayamma, his wife, are rightfully with him. Apu is the sole breadwinner in the family. Even then, Puttana, Thangam and Varma do not think of leaving him. They have neither the will to work nor the self-respect to avoid dependence on crumbs offered grudgingly by an old man. (160)

Parents are the centre of love and regards for their children. They, whether sons or daughters are attached to their parents. But in the world of materialism, financial aspects play a major role. They have loveable close relations to their parents as long as they can fulfill their basic needs. The moment the sense of security becomes slippery under unredeemable circumstances, the bonds become weak. The protagonist of the novel has a first hand experience of this unpleasant facet of human ties. But even then everybody is interested in having a son. Ravi also wants to have "preferably a son" rather than a daughter. He believes that his son would be a support for him in his old days, though, in the presents world it is not sure. "He did not care, his heart was singing. More than anything on earth he wanted a son. A bed, a bicycle...he had wanted these, but now in an extravaganza of divestiture he flung them away. They no longer mattered. They were externals. This was something real and precious a son" (93).

In the family, the parents hope that the first child should be a son who is a source of economic support and so with the birth of a son they feel a source of great delight. The same feeling we notice in Ravi's life. The birth of a son is an important even in his life. He is a perfectly happy man, basking in the warmth of the love of his wife and son. Nalini is overjoyed having a son. She plays with him as if with a toy,

She cuddled him, loving his warmth, his milky baby smell, and for a few second he was willing to rest in her arms before struggling to break free. Ravi watched him wriggle and twist with pleasure; then --- tentatively, with a sudden wrenching remembrance of yesterday --- he held out his arms. He need not have worried. Raju wasted no time in harbouring grudges, although his back and seat were still sore from the beating he had received. He threw himself with unreserved delight at his father who held him, thinking: I am lucky (140).

Ravi in the company of his son, Raju, is overjoyed. He feels a sense of supreme happiness and fulfillment. He does not mind his early awakening as playing with his son relieves him of his tensions and frustrations. He enjoys his serene moments. When the child grows into a sturdy, independent little toddler, the father's joys knows no bounds. The novelist has painted a realistic description of the dialogue between the father and the son,

There! More comfortable than the floor isn't it? He said with a forced, robust joviality.

Raju nodded, but warily, for he did not often see his father in his gentle mood. Presently he said shyly, earnestly looking up, 'Do you still like me?'

'Of course I do'

'Why?'

'Why?' Because you're such a rascal, Ravi was about to say, pushing his joviality along, but then he saw how still and anxious Raju was and he answered seriously, 'Because you're may first-born child. Because you're my only son.' He felt the child cling to him, but by now his other preoccupations were

crowding him and he had no further time for Raju. Loosening his hold he set the boy down, turning his attention to other things. (201)

Markandaya has portrayed the filial relationship in a nice way. In the words of Nicholson "the suffering and destitution of a family in the style of Charles Dickens ----- there are affiliation between Ravi's attitudes and those of *Oliver twist* and *David Copper-field*" (105). Children resent it when parents have no time to be near them and listen to them. They feel rejected and insecure. The grinding poverty and Ravi's last ditch efforts to pull himself out of it leave no time for his children Raju sulps and pines for his father's loving attention.

The novelist narrates an incident when one day Raju falls sick. But Ravi being engrossed in his work, has no idea of the gravity of the situation. His wife, Nalini cannot to make him see that the child is not having an ordinary fever. It is something serious with him. They are short of money and therefore it is difficult for them to call a doctor and to pay him his fees. Anyhow, when Raju's condition deteriorates a doctor is called, but it is too late and with the suffering for two days and three nights Raju dies in his father's arms.

Markandaya has sketched a very realistic and painful description of Raju's slowly approaching death, Two days and three nights. He was aware of darkness and light alternating, but with no pattern that he could discern, time sometimes telescoped, and at other hideously expanding, somewhere in the middle Raju opened his eyes and said, echoing some distant memory of childish heartache, 'Do you still like me' (229)

Ravi is filled with remorse, His affectionate love compels him to accept that Raju is dear to his soul. He hopes that his darling will survive and their joys will return back but alas! it could not be so. He thinks that to be a poor, is a sin. He realizes that close relationship of the children and the parents can not be neglected in a low voice, he accepts that his love for Raju is very deep Markandaya narrates,

'Of course, my son. I always have, I always will, Do you have to ask?'

No answer.

'Why do you have to ask? Answer me.'

No answer, only those hazy eyes, slowly closing. How deeply sunk they were, dark hollows, the face was too young for such deep hollows too young to take them'. (229)

Raju was still alive. He again comes to his consciousness and asks his father by opening his eyes, "Why do you like me?" Raju's eyes look into his parents. But he was "so dull with fever, with pain what kind of a being could inflict suffering on a child" (229)? Ravi tells him that he is his first born son.

Swami Vivekananda in his book *Women of India* has paid a befitting appreciation to a mother in these words: "It is the father in India who thrashes the child and spansks when there is something done by the child and always the mother puts herself between the father and the child." (30)

It is an old proverb that the father corrects the child while the mother comforts the child. This truth we find in the case of Ravi and his son Raju. Once Ravi and his wife Nalini are on the beach with their son, who tugs at the loin cloth of the pattani seller, the tray tilts, scattering a handful of pattani. Ravi is beyond himself with rage and beats his son mercilessly. But the mother is unhappy to see her son cruelty beaten by his father. She comes to Raju's rescue. But it is useless because Ravi could not be stopped. He keeps beating the child and sometimes his blows fall on Nalini, who had intervened. The innocent wife is

annoyed with her husband and she walks ahead with her son in her lap of express her resentment. She goes in front. Her head high and stiff.

This incident reminds us the incident in R.K.Narayan's novel *The Dark Room*. Like Nalini its heroine Savitri also intervenes between the father and the son when the son is beaten for no fault of his. Markandaya like Anita Desai pays an importance to mother-daughter relationship. This relationship is tremendously fascinating in her novels. Mothers are also protective towards their daughters. For them there is no difference between a son or a daughter. Here we see that Kamala Markandaya neglect the views of American Psychologist Freud who believes that a mother has son fixation while a father has daughter fixation. For the novelist it is not true in the Indian context. However, in some cases father are not trusted the mother is a true protector for her daughter. They watch minutely their movements and put restrictions if they find any wrong movements especially during the adolescent year. In *A Handful of Rice* Nalini's mother keeps a protective watch on her. She does not trust the young girl alone in the company even of Ravi. Ravi at times, feels mortified, as the strict vigil kept by Jayamma does not let him go near Nalini.

Ravi had sisters, and so he knew the strict watch that was kept on young unmarried girl in their community, in all communities except shameless ones like the European, or, so they said, the American, or even, though only occasionally, among Indian Christian converts who copied their way as well as their religion. Nevertheless it irked him unbearably to see how assiduously Jayamma glued herself to her daughter whenever he was present and unoccupied. (40)

Ravi in his hearts, however appreciates and knows the strict watch that was kept on young unmarried girls in their community;

And yet, maddening though he found Jayamma, the moral standing of the whole household... not least that of Nalini... would have fallen in Ravi's eyes had such vigilance not been exercised. Between obiding by this inculcated ideal, and coping with its practical difficulties without benefit of family and friends, Ravi's spirits, despite the propitious first steps he had taken, sank abysmally low. (40)

The same feeling we see in Dr. Mulkraj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. Sohini, an innocent untouchable girl, becomes a victim and she is molested by the priest of the temple. She is motherless and has to bear the hard-ships of the male-dominated society. Mothers are the best protections of their daughters when the blessing and protected hands of the mothers are overtaken, the daughter become orphans and are left for the social cruelties. The same case we find in Dr. Anand's novel *Two Leaves and a bud* 1937 where Leila is safe only till her mother is alive. Mother is the best guardian for her daughter. The same feeling we find in all the novels of Markandaya.

A Handful of Rice is a novel, which pays an importance of kin-bonds and human relationship. The novel is a continuation of the novelist first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. *A Handful of Rice* also deals with the struggle for survival at the physical, moral, and psychological levels. The novelist wants to make it clear that the economic stress disrupts the social and filial bonds. Ravi is lured by the riches of the cities. But as soon as he discovers that like the village cities, too, have nothing to offer to the poor. In a bid to earn his livelihood, he becomes a part of the underworld of smugglers and bootleggers. Thus, the hero of the novel has a first hand encounter with hunger, want and deprivation. The

theme of the novel is urban economics. Prem Nandakumar compares it with Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*.

In Malamud's novel, a stray christian walf, who comes to steal from a Jewish shop, stays on to help the shop-owner and win the love of the daughter. He is nagged by his mother-in-law and tortured by poverty. But the shop-owner's sudden breakdown makes him indispensable in the house and the shop. An identical situation is contrived in Kamala Markandaya's novel when Ravi breaks into Apu's household. He stays on to become an assistant to the tailor Apu and marries Apu's daughter, Nalini. Apu, falls ill and Ravi takes charge of the house and the business. After Apu's death, he takes up Apu's daily struggle to keep his home and hearth alive. But though the story harks back to Malamud, it must be said in fairness to Kamala Markandaya that she completely transforms the atmosphere. It is a purely Indian tale, realistically linked to the present Indian economic situations. (445)

The novel incorporates balanced, familial bond, which provide one with the strength to bear the onslaughts of cruel nature and an all-pervading urban atmosphere. it deals with hunger and poverty and its annihilating impact on the emotional bonds that exist between husband and wife, parent and child. In the novel, Markandaya is successful in focusing the impact of the diverse contemporary problems primary ties of human relationships.

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