



WOMEN AND SURVIVAL: A FEMINIST READING OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *A HANDFUL OF RICE*

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines *A Handful of Rice* by Kamala Markandaya through feminist and postcolonial frameworks, with a focus on the gendered dimensions of survival in conditions of urban poverty. The study argues that the deeper structural force of the novel lies in the silent endurance of women, particularly Nalini, even though the narrative primarily follows Ravi's struggle for survival. Women's domestic, emotional, and reproductive labour remains invisible, even though it sustains both the household and society, as the paper demonstrates through the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The analysis demonstrates that Nalini's silence and resilience do not represent passive submission. Instead, they function as a form of negotiated agency shaped by social constraints and material conditions. The novel reveals the intersection of patriarchy and poverty, showing how these forces intensify female marginalization while simultaneously relying on women's labour for survival. Through this portrayal, Markandaya exposes the structural inequalities that sustain gendered exploitation. Ultimately, the study argues that the novel redefines survival as a deeply gendered experience and offers a critique of the socio-economic systems that perpetuate inequality.

Keywords: Feminism; Survival; Patriarchy; Emotional Labour; Poverty; Subaltern; Gender; Resistance.

Indian English fiction has consistently engaged with the realities of poverty, gender inequality, and social transformation in postcolonial India. Kamala Markandaya stands as a major contributor to this literary tradition because of her realistic and empathetic portrayal of marginalized lives. Her novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966) presents a powerful narrative of urban poverty through the experiences of Ravi, a young man who migrates from a rural village to the city in search of survival. The novel appears to centre on male struggle, but it also contains a significant and often overlooked exploration of women's endurance and resilience within oppressive socio-economic conditions. A feminist reading makes clear that women, especially Nalini, sustain life despite deprivation, invisibility, and systemic marginalization.

This paper argues that *A Handful of Rice* represents survival as a gendered experience in which women's emotional, domestic, and moral labour forms the foundation of both familial stability and social continuity. The narrative highlights male struggle in visible and dramatic ways, but it presents women's suffering as silent, continuous, and deeply embedded in everyday life. Through the character of Nalini, Markandaya offers a critique of patriarchy and economic inequality by showing how these

forces shape women's lives. Nalini does not resist through open rebellion; she survives through resilience, adaptation, and quiet forms of resistance. This study uses a feminist framework to bring attention to the invisible yet essential role of women in sustaining life under conditions of extreme poverty and social constraint.

Poverty in *A Handful of Rice* functions not only as an economic condition but also as a pervasive force that shapes relationships, identities, and moral choices. The title itself reflects the fragility of human existence, where survival depends on the smallest measure of resources. The narrative emphasizes this condition by stating that "a handful of rice could make all the difference between life and death" (Markandaya 196). This image provides a central framework for understanding the gendered nature of survival, as women carry primary responsibility for managing scarcity within the domestic sphere. Ravi struggles to secure income in the external world, but Nalini assumes responsibility for organizing, preserving, and distributing the limited resources within the household.

A feminist reading shows that poverty intensifies gender inequality by assigning women roles that remain essential yet consistently undervalued. Nalini performs continuous labour through cooking, cleaning, caregiving, and emotional support, and this labour sustains the family's survival. The narrative does not present this work as visible or acknowledged, yet it remains fundamental to daily life. Ravi's struggle takes place in the public sphere and often involves conflict and confrontation, whereas Nalini's struggle unfolds within the private sphere through persistence and routine. Her endurance reflects the lived reality of many women in marginalized communities, where survival demands constant adjustment and personal sacrifice. The novel therefore presents poverty as a gendered experience in which women bear the additional responsibility of sustaining life under conditions of severe scarcity.

Nalini stands as the central figure in a feminist interpretation of the novel. She represents the quiet resilience of women who endure hardship without recognition or complaint. The narrative emphasizes her patience by stating that she "never complained" despite the physical and emotional challenges she experiences (Markandaya 118). This silence reflects social conditioning rather than personal weakness, as patriarchal norms expect women to accept suffering as a natural part of their role within the family. A feminist approach shows that this silence operates within a structure of oppression, yet it also serves as a practical strategy for survival. Nalini sustains the stability of the household through her endurance and prevents further disruption in an already fragile environment. Her silence functions as a deliberate mode of survival that places continuity and care above confrontation. She does not challenge patriarchal authority through open resistance; instead, she manages it through patience, discipline, and resilience. This approach allows her to maintain a necessary balance between compliance and self-preservation.

Nalini's character also complicates the stereotype of female passivity by revealing strength under conditions of adversity. She demonstrates control over her circumstances through emotional restraint and sustained effort. Her ability to endure without collapse expresses a form of inner strength that conventional narratives often ignore. Through Nalini, Markandaya constructs a nuanced representation of women's strength, grounded in endurance, responsibility, and the capacity to sustain life in the face of persistent hardship.

One of the most significant aspects of Nalini's role in the novel is her emotional labour. She provides stability for Ravi, who often experiences frustration and despair. Ravi recognizes her importance when he reflects that a woman like Nalini could ease a man's burdens, stating that "half a man's troubles would be over" with such a companion (Markandaya 24). This statement reveals a gendered expectation that assigns women the responsibility of absorbing emotional distress and offering comfort without expecting support in return. From a feminist perspective, emotional labour functions as

a crucial yet largely invisible form of work. Nalini supports Ravi despite her own suffering, and her efforts sustain both their relationship and the continuity of the family. The narrative does not acknowledge this labour as work because it does not produce visible economic value. This absence of recognition exposes the structural tendency to undervalue women's contributions, even when those contributions remain essential for survival.

Nalini's emotional strength also demonstrates her capacity for empathy and understanding. She maintains patience even when Ravi's frustration develops into anger, and she absorbs his emotional outbursts without retaliation. This pattern highlights the unequal distribution of emotional responsibility within the household. The narrative shows that women carry the burden of maintaining harmony, even when this responsibility imposes a significant personal cost.

The novel portrays a strongly patriarchal society in which social expectations define and restrict women's roles. Ravi's desire for a male child demonstrates the persistence of gender bias, as he imagines "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" (Markandaya 92). This preference reflects a cultural belief that places greater value on male offspring and reinforces women's subordinate position within the family structure. Nalini occupies a position within this system that offers limited autonomy and requires dependence on male authority. Her acceptance of these norms reflects a practical response to the conditions that shape her life rather than a sign of agreement with them. A feminist analysis explains that women often internalize patriarchal values as a strategy for survival, since open resistance can result in further marginalization, social isolation, or exclusion from essential support systems.

The novel also demonstrates how patriarchy and poverty operate together to intensify women's suffering. Economic hardship reduces access to education, employment, and independence, which forces women to depend on male support even when that support is unstable or harmful. This dependency strengthens existing inequalities and restricts women's ability to challenge oppressive structures. The narrative therefore presents gender inequality as a condition sustained by both cultural expectations and material deprivation.

Domestic violence in *A Handful of Rice* functions as a stark illustration of women's vulnerability within a patriarchal system. Ravi's frustration over his economic failures develops into aggression toward Nalini, and this pattern shows how poverty intensifies gender-based violence. Nalini becomes the immediate target of his anger and suffers the physical and emotional consequences of his inability to cope with hardship. The novel presents this violence as part of a continuing pattern rather than as an isolated incident. Nalini endures this treatment because her circumstances offer few alternatives, and separation would expose her to greater insecurity and deprivation. Her survival depends on her capacity to manage and endure violence while maintaining the fragile stability of the household. This condition reveals how structural constraints restrict women's choices and reinforce their dependence.

A feminist analysis identifies this dynamic as a form of systemic oppression in which women's bodies become sites of control and domination. Nalini's response to violence demonstrates resilience, but it also exposes the limits imposed on her by social and economic structures. The novel therefore presents violence not only as a personal act but also as a social condition shaped by patriarchy and poverty.

The novel's urban setting introduces an additional dimension to the analysis of women's survival. The movement from rural life to the city creates new challenges, including overcrowding, economic instability, and social isolation. Ravi interacts with the external environment in his search for livelihood, but Nalini's experience remains largely confined to the domestic sphere. This confinement limits her mobility and reduces her access to social and economic opportunities. At the same time, the domestic space becomes the primary site in which Nalini exercises control and responsibility. She organizes the household, manages scarce resources, and maintains a sense of order within an unstable environment. Her actions demonstrate resilience, discipline, and adaptability under difficult conditions. The narrative shows that her work sustains daily life even though it receives little recognition.

The contrast between Ravi's engagement with the public world and Nalini's management of the private sphere highlights a clear gendered division of labour. Men confront visible challenges in the external world, while women sustain life within the household through continuous and often invisible effort. This division reinforces existing inequalities, but it also reveals the essential role women play in ensuring survival under conditions of urban poverty.

A Handful of Rice presents a powerful exploration of survival within a context defined by poverty, patriarchy, and social inequality. The narrative highlights Ravi's struggle for livelihood, but a feminist analysis shows that women, particularly Nalini, sustain the conditions of survival. Their emotional, domestic, and moral labour supports both the family and the broader social structure.

Nalini's character represents the resilience required to endure hardship without recognition. She maintains silence, patience, and emotional control under sustained pressure. These qualities do not indicate passivity; they demonstrate a disciplined response to restrictive conditions. Her actions reveal a form of quiet resistance that operates within the limits imposed by her environment. Through Nalini, Markandaya exposes the structures that marginalize women and emphasizes the need to acknowledge their contributions.

The novel presents survival as a gendered experience in which women carry the primary responsibility for sustaining life. This responsibility remains largely invisible, even though it determines the stability of the household. By emphasizing women's resilience, *A Handful of Rice* invites a critical reassessment of gender roles and underscores the essential role of women in maintaining and shaping social life under conditions of deprivation.

Works Cited

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