

KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION IN 'A HANDFUL OF RICE'

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya, the great and gifted novelist, shows remarkable skill in portraying her characters. She has deftly delineated fully developed and charming characters in all her novels. Her characters are typical sons and daughters of the soil who undergo noticeable changes with the change of place. Kamala Markandaya's art of characterization evinces development with the advancement of her career as a novelist. In her earlier novels, as in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Some Inner Fury*, her characters are depicted only from the outside and she does not pry deeper and deeper into human heart and soul. In her later novels like *Possession* and *A Handful of Rice* she dexterously reveals her characters from the inside. In these novels she employs stream of consciousness technique and she reveals to the readers the psyche of her characters.

Keywords: Characterization, Advancement, Kamala Markandaya, Consciousness.

A HANDFUL OF RICE

As a novelist Kamala Markandaya is a typical representative of the feminine sensibility. She shows greater power and insight in portraying women characters. Rukmani, the narrator heroine in her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is powerful tragic character. She is elevated to the sublime dignity of a Mother of Sorrow. She suffers shock after shock but she does not accept defeat. Her husband Nathan betrays her, her daughter indulges in flesh-trade to save the

family from starvation and her child, Kutie, dies. She is forced to leave her village. Markandaya minutely and realistically portrays her psychic condition when Rukmani along with her husband, Nathan, leaves her village with a heavy heart:

“This home my husband had built for me with his own hands.... In it we had lain together, and our children had been born. This hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us.”

Nathan and Rukmani leave the village to join their son but they are disappointed to know that abandoning his wife and son he has disappeared. Then their sufferings further increase. They become stone-breakers on very small wages. Nathan died. Rukmani was left forlorn. She returned to her village where she found peace. The sons and daughters can find peace only in their native surroundings. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Markandaya delineates Rukmani's character with great insight, understanding and delicacy.

In *Some Inner Fury* Markandaya has portrayed varied characters. Mira, Premala and Roshana are well-drawn female characters. Premala is a charming heroic character. She symbolises motherly compassion and love. Mira's character is psychologically important. K.R.S.Iyengar regards *Some Inner Fury* as “Mira's extended recollection of the recent past : the emotions and passions and stolen ecstasies and thwarted purposings recollected in a mood of comparative tranquillity.” Mira, the heroine of the novel is “a creature of imagination and memory.” Roshan is a rich lady who angers in the troubled waters of emancipation and revolutionary politics. Govind, the male Indian character, is a rebel. Kit, Richard and Hickey are typical English characters. Kit marries Premala. Hickey, the missionary, is a variation of Kenny of *Nectar in a Sieve*. He is noticeable for humanitarian work. Richard loves Mira.

Kamala Markanday's characters in *A Silence of Desire* and *Possession* are psychologically and spiritually drawn. Her famous novel *A Handful of Rice* deals with the theme of urban economics and stands a comparison with *Nectar in a Sieve* which deals with rural economics. Characters in *A Handful of Rice* are ably drawn. All characters in it are well developed and lively. Besides Ravi, the hero of the novel, other important male characters are Apu and Damodar. Ravi, a literate boy, is able-bodied and healthy. He is a vagabond involved in petty criminal activities. He loves Nalini, the daughter of Apu, who is a poor tailor. Soon he begins to work as Apu's assistant. Now he gets much opportunity to see Nalini. His love for Nalini is true and he wants to marry her. But before his marriage he wants to be respectable and

worthy of her. He wants to get rid of his bad habits and soon he marries Nalini without receiving any dowry. Even as a wife Ravi loves her very much.

For a long time, he faces the problem of accommodation. Before his marriage he had no quarters and slept on a pavement or on a bench in a park. Even after his marriage he has to face this problem. He gets no private room to talk, plan dream or to make love with his wife. He prefers to be the father of a son to whom in time he would hand over his skills and profession. He is a very ambitious young man and dreams to possess much wealth. As he works for rich English ladies, he becomes more and more ambitious day by day. He likes to show off like rich people. So, he often goes to the sea beach and prefers to sit in a coffee bar because it gives him the satisfaction of being a rich man. He wants to have cars and to drive them. Though, Ravi is ambitious but he does not like the idea of being dishonest.

Ravi has no toleration for social injustice. He hates the idea that the poor are only to suffer and the rich to rule over them. When he forcibly enters Apu's house, he feels conscious of commanding dominion. He feels like the rich and powerful who always give orders and expect the poor to follow it. He loses his temper when he becomes aware of the fact that his one jacket is sold for Rs.125 while he gets Rs.80 per dozen. He sometimes hates rich people because he thinks that they are not made of different clay, why should they trample over the poor. He is angry by nature also. He becomes irritated soon and quarrels with his father, Apu, Puttana and Nalini. Sometimes he beats Nalini, he hates Nalini, he hates Nalini's sister, Thangam.

He is a very industrious man. He never neglects his work and realises and fulfils his duties well. He is a lustful man. Before his marriage he had relations with a number of girls. We are stunned to see that he rapes his mother-in-law. As Ravi is an immigrant to the city, he suffers with the problem of rootlessness. He has no house, no land, no friends and no relatives. He always lives in Apu's house as his son-in-law. Ravi is "not so very unlike us", says Professor T.A. Dunn : His problem, his family, his thoughts and hopes are not very different from ours."

Apu, Ravi's father-in-law is a memorable character. He is expert in tailoring. He is an old professional and knows everything about business. He is the head of his family. **His is a large** family.His daughters are also living with him with their family. He manages all the household affairs. Apu is a town-born and town-bred man. He is an affectionate father and father-in-law. His elder son-in-law is unemployed and idle, but he provides everything to him

and his family. In Nalini's marriage he spends money open-heartedly. Like Ravi, Apu also desires keenly to have sons in his family as he wants to hand over his business to them after him. He is a hard-working man and always hates the idea of wasting money. Ravi finds him mean enough to pay bus or any fares. Everywhere he has to go with a huge bundle like a dhobi. He is not loved by his wife, Jayamma. Though she always neglects him, he fulfils all his duties towards her. There is much age-gap between them. When they married, she was young and he past his prime. Apu's end is very tragic. His elder son-in-law, Puttana steals all his savings and leaves the house. Apu is very much shocked as his own children cheat him. He fed them, sheltered them and forgave their follies and asked for no return. Apu, a virtuous and sweet-natured man, is betrayed even by his close relatives and is discarded by his wife. All through his life he labours hard to support his family but ultimately meets a tragic end.

Damodar is the leader of a gang of the criminals. He is the representative of smugglers and black-marketeers and other anti-social elements of India. He becomes a sort of guide to Ravi and involves him in criminal activities. He is a perfect criminal who knows the brewery, knows all the bootleggers in town and town and knows the town like the back of his hand. He always escapes the clutches of the police. He wants to earn money anyhow and calls it decent money. He calls them 'cattle'. Finally, he becomes very rich. He has no respect for his parents. He is a very cruel man. When Ravi goes to him for help, he treats him badly and clearly denies to render him a helping hand.

Besides these main male characters, there are two minor male characters in the novel. They are Ravi's father, Ram and Puttana, Apu's elder son-in-law. First, he was a shopkeeper but later he depends completely on Apu. Nobody in the family likes him. Even his wife, Thangam, nags at him. He is an idle man and finally steals all his father-in-law's money.

Ram is a typical villager. He is an affectionate father, sends his son, Ravi, to the city for his good future, gives him some education and helps him when Ravi needs his help for the settlement of his marriage.

The female characters in the novel are also dexterously portrayed. There are only three female characters in the novel. They are Jayamma and her daughters, Nalini and Thangam. All these three women have no semblance in their nature. They are not so important in the novel as Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Mira in *Some Inner Fury*. They play their role in the novel as individual characters.

Jayamma, Apu's wife and mother of Nalini and Thangam, is a typical woman. She is cruel, mean and selfish. We are introduced to her as "a fat, middle-aged woman who sat nearly, half fearful, half ferocious, a rolling pin clutched in her hand." When Ravi enters her house forcibly, she beats him very cruelly. She is a greedy woman. He comes to know that Ravi wants to marry Nalini, she begins to exploit him and they are married without any dowry. She is "a bitch greedy for free labour." She trapped Puttana for Thangam when he was a shopkeeper. She does not even help her poor daughter, Thangam. "she was too mean to do so a meanness which she privately explained away as a prudent care for the future, when she might be widowed and have to count every pic." She wants to dominate entire household. She has a tendency to dominate and dictate. She is a lazy woman having the zest for fetes, festivals and junketing of any kind. She goes out with Ravi and Nalini and enjoys eating and drinking. She has no love and sympathy for her husband. Even after his death she cannot regard him. When Apu is on the verge of death, she finds it useless to call a doctor. She is sure that he will die and money will be wasted.

Jayamma is a lustful woman. She is attracted towards the youth and masculinity of her son-in-law, Ravi. "She shivered a little thinking of Ravi's masculinity: and there was even the seed of a thought in her mind". She is a shame-proof lady. She has physical relation with Ravi and feels no shame for it. When Ravi reminds her of her last night, she says, "What for last night?" Do you think I care about that? Who cares what goes on between four walls?" She is a worthless lady – neither a good mother nor a good wife.

Nalini, the heroine of the novel, is a young and pretty girl. Her fascinating beauty attracts Ravi towards her. He is always lost in the thoughts of her bright eyes and glossy hair. Nalini is not an ambitious girl. She is satisfied with the little, they have. She is practical girl and knows the difference between the rich and the poor. When Ravi tells her about his dreams, she says, "Do you think we are grand people? Isn't this enough for us? I am happy,". She is really happy, "Really and truly happier than I thought possible." She is an obedient girl. She always listens to her elders without any complaint. She has a keen desire that her husband must not be insulted by anybody. She does not like quarrelling and wants to maintain peace and harmony in the house.

She is a hard-working and tolerant girl; she leaves the house when Ravi orders her to go out. She has to bear the loss of her father and son. She is always a source of peace to Ravi. "She was constant, a rock to which he (Ravi) could cling and keep his head level when his views

and values began their mad dance.” She has great love for her sister and that is why she even overlooks her faults. She is endowed with qualities of head and heart – beautiful, gentle, modest, obedient, tolerant, hard-working, satisfied, loving and lovable.

Thangam, Apu’s elder daughter, is a mean, jealous and shameless girl. Her marriage life is not a happy one. Often, she quarrels with her husband. She is fond of fairs, movies, processions etc. She is jealous by nature. When Ravi and Nalini arrange many things for their coming baby, she cannot stop herself turning sour. She has no sympathy for Nalini when she is in a difficult situation. Thangam is mean enough to cheat her parents. She knows everything about her husband’s plans, when he steals Apu’s money and leaves his house, she joins him later.

“What is, however, astonishing is the woman’s power of patient endurance, her inexhaustible capacity for love, her smile tenderness. The sisters, Nalini and Thangam are the salt of the earth. And the character of Nalini is exquisitely drawn. She is the sort that can redeem even an errant husband like Ravi.”

Thus, it is obvious that in *A Handful of Rice* Kamala Markandaya has shown great dexterity in the portrayal of the characters. All her characters are well-developed and life-like. In the opinion of Mrs. Nayantara Sehgal her characters seem to be made of flesh and blood.

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