

Women Perception in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction
A Handful of Rice: A Critical Study

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**Women Perception in Kamala Markandaya's Fiction
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Abstract

Owing to remarkable talent Kamala Markandaya's niche in Indo-Anglian Literature is distinctive in many respects. So far, there are nine novels to her credit. She is an exceptional realist and the head among the women novelists of the Post-Independence era. Her sense of association in the social life of India, her keen remarks combined with critical insight and her feminine but lively sensibility bring her international fame. William Walsh calls her "the most gifted" of women novelists and she is the most distinguished writer on the literary scene today. Many articles have been published on her works which highlight the varied aspects of Kamala Markandaya's writings. And yet, it cannot be said that she has really received the kind of attention that she really deserves. Hence this paper aims at focusing on women characters in her novel *A Handful of Rice* to study how they act in various shades of life to prove that they are far ahead of their counterpart and analyze if they can be united to emerge as a new creative force for the humanity touching traditional and modern image of women.

Key Words: Women, Perception, Traditional, Modern, Image, Colour, Reformation etc.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya has presented varied tensions in her novels viz. East-West confrontation, religious and racial tensions, tensions caused on account of maladjustments or marital disharmony, tensions arising out of poverty, hunger, natural as well as man-made calamities. There is a considerable ambiguity about the nature and status of woman in Indian society. Some sacred texts give them an exalted status by saying, 'where women are worshipped, Gods reside there'. But there is another profile of woman. She is regarded as the root of all evils. These two images are contradictory. This male dominated society never tries to go into the depth to collect the pearls of virtues but satisfies in picking the straws of vices that float on the surface.

To understand her complex and rich personality is as enigmatic and difficult. She receives different names, viz. mother, sister, beloved, wife, etc; adapts herself to the changing circumstances and performs the allotted duties efficiently, enthusiastically and above all emotionally. She cannot be caged in one particular image, as she possesses images in infinite variety. While judging her, one should keep in mind that the image of a woman may be different and various but they will be of the same woman. These variations may be different facets of her being. Many Indian English women novelists have analyzed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and the role towards them and the society. In post-independence era, it is Kamala Markandaya who has taken the initiative of holding the flag for women protagonists and, to some extent, winning the battle in their transformation from 'possession' to 'person'. From her first to last novel, one realizes that the weight and substance for her works have not been properly studied and her contribution to the fictional literature is not suitably evaluated in India. Hence the purpose of this study is to explore the unexplored aspects of her women, to present the change in the identity from 'possession' to 'person', to highlight the new image through a voyage in the world of her novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966), and finally, to show her feminist moral concern into sexual and familial relationship.

Discussion

***A Handful of Rice*- The Novel of the Women's Victory through Reformation**

A Handful of Rice (1966) is a novel of Nalini's victory in reforming her husband. Poverty and hunger is the major theme of the novel. Here, the setting is not rural as in *Nectar in a Sieve* but an urban one. The novelist paints a harrowing picture of the economic problems. Both the novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* deal with the problem of social injustice but here the problem of existence is of paramount importance. Alongside the problem of economic insecurity, there is also the problem of moral ethics. Through her female protagonists, Kamala Markandaya reveals the virtues and potentialities of woman by providing that a woman is not inferior to man in any way. Her women protagonists have given a ray of hope and a goal to the countless women by infusing a crusading spirit into them for the welfare of humanity and the alleviation of human suffering.

A hungry man is an angry man who knows no law, commits crimes and debases himself by facing the world through questionable means. Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* is no exception to this and it is he who represents the people who are surmounted by the devil. Ravi, having no control over his hunger, enters forcibly the house of Jayamma who asks him what he wants.

What do you want? Food, I told you, he said impatiently, and be quick. (*A Handful of Rice* P- 7)

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A Handful of Rice begins and ends with the hero's fight to get food. He tells Apu, the tailor, "I'm starving. I'm hungry. I want a meal". Apu's wife hits him with all her force for breaking in like a ruffian and blood drips from his face. "I was hungry", he explains. Hunger forces him to leave his village. It is Nalini who brings a drastic change in his life. He falls in love at first sight. He longs for marriage that provides solace and mental peace to his agitating mind. He dreams of her and feels elated when he thinks of her.

If I had a wife, he thought as he ate, she would cook for me, it would like this every day – but what had he to offer to get himself a wife? – I'll buy her a little house, small but nice. (P-11)

He flourishes in marrying her but fortune sends monsters like poverty and hunger to smash his ideas. Poverty and hunger take the life of his dear son Raju and inside him to beat innocent Nalini. The evil comes when out of thwarting and wrath; he rapes Jayamma, his own mother-in-law.

None can deny socio-economic factor that is indispensable for existence. In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya has shown that poverty and hunger have psychological effect on human relations. Ravi approaches to the city with delusion and becomes disappointed. He falls a prey to the underworld activities.

You are getting high and mighty; putting yourself on a level with high-class folk. How can we ever be like them? Why can't you be content with what we have? (P- 75)

Ravi is tempted by the fascination of modern life in cities. He becomes a prey to various vices and falls in the hands of the underworld King Damodar and his men. Kamala Markandaya's novels deal with full range of feminine experiences. Her female characters rule the situation and are loftier to male part. Her skill of painting the portraits of women with different colours, viz. Socio-religious and Socio-ecological, is laudable. With the alchemy of her heart, she has transmuted them into bright stars and her male characters into planets that have no light of their own but receive it from the stars that shine brightly with their own light.

Old Image of Woman

The Indian arrangement is focused by male-dominated society with a few exceptions, which recognizes male supremacy and female demotion. The leading role is in man's share and woman who has to be satisfied with the secondary role, remains in the background. She is anticipated to change herself in the form of the family into which she is wedded and fused her own personality into that of her husband. She converts her into husband's shadow and follows him through the course of life. She is expected to support him in all kinds of weather, adding her strength to his. In bedchamber, she loves her husband and calls him with respect, as he is not less than Idol for her; she

worships him and offers him flowers. She holds a number of fasts to certify the same husband for generation to generation. She also longs for her husband to avoid the pains of widowhood. The Kitchen principles that she gets from her mother carries politeness, decorum, order and fragrance. She imagines this as her future prospect. This is the mindset a girl adopts in her mind in childhood. She is taught to be obedient, dedicated and lenient so that she may ascertain herself an ideal woman not only for her counterpart but also for her father-in-law, mother-in-law and others –in-law. She is supposed to keep the family- tree grows and prospers. She is taught not to copy male qualities that make her polluted and demonic. A traditional woman, being deeply religious, develops stoicism that gives mental potency and protects her from tension and conflict. Kamala Markandaya ventures her female characters fundamentally outmoded women with all their distinguishing qualities and innate talents. She is aware of the quiet obstacles that are put against women.

Various Shades of Woman

Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* is drawn with a masterstroke. She is virtuous, decent and comely with bright eyes and thick glossy hair that can transform a man's life. Her ability to speak is always mild and low which is an admirable value in woman. Ravi drops in love with her at first eyesight and yearns to be assured in matrimonial bond. Nalini's charm makes Ravi adopt an honest job of tailoring and makes him aware of respectability. She is a flesh and blood personification of his delusion. She gives him a sense of satisfaction, a comfort. Nalini has some traces of Apu's uncomplaining temperament, endures poverty, faces other difficulties and puts up with thrashing at the hand of her husband even in the advanced stage of her pregnancy. Ravi sees her fighting for breath, massaging "her abdomen or arching her back for relief against the cold granite stone, but he has never heard her complain". (P-195) Hers is stoic ungrudging attitude towards the 'sea of troubles'. In fact, she adopts all those traditions and ceremonies, which are followed by her father Apu. She is modest and humble on account of this traditional upbringing; she is satisfied with her present condition and does not pine for what is not.

Presenting an ideal of good sister, she helps her sister Thangam in her need and gives new dresses to her daughters. When her husband Ravi condemns Thangam for the act of stealing Puttanna, she opposes him raising her voice. She has compassion for her sister but clutches Puttanna answerable for thieving Apu's funds. She is not only a good sister but a good mother also. She takes all troubles to give her children comfort and gets upset when Ravi beats Raju near the beach. She is shocked when her son dies in the absence of timely medical assistance. Being a true daughter, she looks after Apu in his illness. She passes sleepless night for her father. She is righteous, virtuous and owns child-like virtue on her face. She plays well her traditional role of a good mother, an affectionate

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sister, an obedient and dutiful wife and a lovable daughter. Quite contrary to Nalini, paragon of virtue her sister Thangam betrays not only her father but also truth and honesty. She is an eccentricity of old-fashioned copy of woman simply a tinge on the reasonable sex. She is mean, callous and incurable woman.

Jayamma, mother of virtuous daughter like Nalini and also a mean one like Thangam she is shown as cruel, selfish and mean. She beats Ravi violently and chains him but hearing that he wants food, she feeds him. She is sympathetic, though she does not look so outwardly. She is a practical woman gifted with down to earth common sense. When she realizes that Ravi is mad in love with her daughter Nalini, she exploits him. She makes his income theirs and wishes to get rid of the burden of a daughter's marriage. She virtually manages the household affairs and skillfully celebrates the marriage. She is a greedy woman who looks both for money and sex. She has a redeeming feature. With a strong sense of duty, she cares her husband in his illness, though without love.

Modern Image of Woman

A new woman is completely different from the woman who thinks of seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and emphasizing on her own rights as a woman. Thus, the new woman, clinging to her basic values modifying herself according to the modifying circumstances, goes ahead on the way seeking for her own identity with new depth and getting recognition but never like the aberration type. There is something distinct in the women characters of Kamala Markandaya – something in their emotional and spiritual make up that express it in their attitude to persons and events. Kamala Markandaya has realistically presented emotional, moral and spiritual problems of the new woman.

Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* is the only sheet anchor of Ravi's life. She is quite satisfied with what she has. She realizes the conditions and circumstances and makes him dispel his romantic notions. No doubt, she is traditional but a new woman emerges in her when she takes out her husband from the mud of amoral world. She attracts him from his erratic movements to her own self, checks his wild flights of imagination and thus with the passage of time, becomes the voice of realism and sanity. Nalini is emotionally mature. She has none of Ravi's foolish cravings. She lives not in the dream world but in the world of reality and makes Ravi realize of it.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice* is primarily a study of the basic fact of awakening of feminine consciousness. Her female protagonist Nalini has shown that she is not inferior to her male counterpart in any way and makes the male oriented society realize of their integral position and

importance. Though, Kamala Markandaya has projected the traditional image of woman, it will be injustice to carve her woman in this image as she has rediscovered, redefined and asserted her identity as person, not as possession and welcomes modernity to the best of her caliber and sensibility. She very intelligently keeps pace with the new developments of the world. The light stuff of modernity enters her soul electrifying the moral strength, which expresses itself at the surface in the form of her equipoise. By making the new carbon copy of woman, Kamala Markandaya has developed her as a link between the tradition and modernity.

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