

Depiction of Woman in Kamala Markandaya's Novel 'A Handful of Rice -1966'

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Abstract

A human being is no doubt a complex exercise to read in full, be in its nature, behavior, mentality, decisions, promises and after all deliverance, but one who does, if gets its recognition definitely shines and one who gets ignorance definitely derails, more. A Handful of Rice is a compact story of the qualities and deliverance of the woman of Kamala Markandaya. Woman in the novel is a curable medicine of all the anxieties of a man. A Handful of Rice is a story of a dreamful young man Ravi, but tattered by hunger, poverty and anchored by a beautiful, soft toned and sympathetic wife, Nalini.

Introduction

The maxim that "truth is immortal" has a great relevance in this novel of Kamala Markandaya, the great novelist of the Indian Diaspora. In this novel she chooses an urban society where she portrayed through her kaleidoscopic camera the reality in the daily living of the people. Although, the novelist has gave enough space to the women characters as protagonists in her novels, but in A Handful of Rice and The Nowhere Man remains exception in the kind of portfolio where man is portrayed as a protagonist, but the remote control is yet given in the hands of woman characters. Ravi is delineated as a young man full of aspiration and desires but tattered with hunger, poverty and unfulfilled desires, Nalini on the other hand is portrayed peaceful, beautiful, intelligent, sympathetic and happy with the sources she have to live. Besides these two main characters there are other minor characters in the novel like Apu, Jayamma, Thangam, Kumaran, Puttana and Damodar all these exist in relation to Ravi's development. The crisis and situations that Ravi faces during the journey of life in the

novel are pinpointed and described in detail as the following paras for better understanding.

Hunger and Displacement: Nalini's Acceptance

The theme that remains the focal point of the novelist throughout her writing career is "Hunger" that gives rise to the other crises like displacement, theft, alcoholic addiction, prostitution and ultimately unsatisfied death. It is hunger and poverty that Ravi wants to eradicate from his life, compels him to displace from rural to urban, where he caught in the underworld net of Damodar and make his life futile and limited. The dreams that he wants to kiss remain as pure as they were at the time of first glimpse he seen them. It is because of the hunger he lost his morality and remains misfit for the future life. People start to shout on him as a vagabond, ruffian and thief, what *Hari Prasad Mohan* has said for *Nectar In a Sieve-1954* that "hunger appears like an octopus in the novel. It is the real evil stronger than the original Satan that distributed the bliss of the Eden garden,"¹

has a crystal clear relevance with *A Handful of Rice-1966* where it acts as the main cause of all rest evils. One can say hunger is portrayed as the epicenter of all the bad deeds and situations of the life of Ravi in particular and for the Apu's family in general. As S.K Arora writes on hunger of kamala Markandaya depicts as "A Hungry man is an angry man who knows no law, commits crimes and debases himself by facing the world through questionable means. Nothing allures him except bread and to get it, he becomes ready to do anything as his noble qualities and moral considerations, for the time being, are dried up."² while leaving his villagers and family, Ravi confronted with an underworld don "Damodar" who knows nothing except stealing, bribery, smuggling and other compact vices. He motivated Ravi to end the evils of hunger by acting on the instruction he would bring for him time to time, in nutshell on the condition of "yes boss". By doing this Ravi gives birth to a jealousy towards the wealthy ones and he feels annoyed by the luxurious life they have.

Nalini's attitude is totally contradicting towards the evil of hunger. She is content with what she has. She believes that Almighty has created people of every stratum, one rich and one poor, it is the custom or rule of world to live. Rich and poor, hungry and filled are the two wheels of the same cart, but both have the importance to move the cart smooth. One is incomplete without the other. She does her best to pacify him as she says to him:

"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?" (*A Handful of Rice* 75).

The portrayal of woman in the story is optimistic while portrayal of man is pessimistic. The "content" that the novelist delineates through her woman character in the novel is the trademark of the novel which helps a reader to inculcate the feminine sensibility of the novelist. The woman is portrayed as broad minded and able to coup-up the situation as per its merit. The man in the character of Ravi is portrayed immature and psychologically weak. The eagerness of luxurious life blinds Ravi in all senses and makes him limited vision person for the rest of his life.

Ravi's development: Nalini's patience

Kamala Markandaya has a displaced subject as the crux of the novel, every passing movement of the subject (Ravi) is offering a new dimension of the story. It is nothing if not an art of the artist to hold the things unique and steady processed. Ravi is a victim of poverty, hunger, fate and struggle, the general life demands to climb. Out of his village and family his first coincidence with a man of underworld mafia. Had it not happen the life of the protagonist may have any climax, be it good or bad, the coincidences left the life of the protagonist tattered and full of frustration and after all futile. The coincidence is responsible to compel him to make a stealing attempt in the Apu's house. The incident of stealing brings a new page in his life. However, at reception Jayamma shows him the harshness, she is known for, but soon she turns coy by asking him as:

What do you want?

Food, I told you, he said impatiently ...
(*A Handful of Rice p.7*)

The coyness soon develops and makes the household ready to embrace him as apprentice. The to and fro of his life here takes a static diversion when he aspires about Nalini as:

“Ah, Nalini, he thought, Nalini. She was worth it, worth anything, even worth giving up the sweet life for. He put it all on her, forgetting the trinity of hunger, drink and misery that had been intermittent companion to his sweet life.”

(*A Handful of Rice p.40*)

Nalini within no time offers him identity. The glimpses of respectability of Ravi's life fascinates Nalini more and more till the Apu and Jayamma become ready to tie the nuptial knot between the two. After marriage the life of Ravi faces a shipwreck again when Apu passes away and leaves burden of the big family on the shoulders of the inexperienced Ravi. The death jolts the dreams, family relations and the conjugal relationship of the newly married couple. Nalini never accepts the defeat she kept things tight and tries every skill to make him understand the nuts and bolts of life very skillfully. Through the delineation of Ravi the novelist displays the name of life in bold and coloured lines. Life once gets shipwrecked could be bring back on right track and after a while there are the enough chances of another shipwreck that is known as the philosophy life. The philosophy is already inculcated in Nalini, but the lesson is yet unknown to Ravi. He wants luxurious

life full of amusement and entertainment but by means of quarreling, stealing and robbery in nutshell by shot cut method. And in the result he faces frustration and starts beating his wife, quarrelling with his other relatives and even displaces them out of the house. The culmination of moral degradation even reaches when he raped her mother in law one night when he was drunk. Nalini bears each and every thing of her husband passively in the hope that one day he realizes the importance of each and every thing, relations and other necessities a man has to face to live peacefully. This frustration is just because of unnecessary vision of luxury life. As the novel begins by the evil of poverty and Starvation which forces Ravi to migrate leaves his life shuttered. As he recounts his disgust and disappointment as follows:

“The city was so crowded, rents so high, that even men with decent incomes searched for years squashing themselves and their families on to which ever relative had managed to secure foothold in some house it was a little easier for single men, but even sharing a room would cost ten or twelve rupees a month, too big a slice to take out of the twenty he earned”.

(*A Handful of Rice-48*)

The advent of machine made items make him more frustrate and disappointed as his business gets now for him nothing to live as it was at the time of Apu. The novelist portrays both the faces of life of an individual be it urban and rural. In rural the hunger is natural (limited sources to counter) and in urban hunger is artificial and of luxurious race. This race marks the

protagonist as incompetent and compels him to get an advice from the Damodar that:-

“Go back to your village. It is more your size, you are not fit for anything else” (A Handful of Rice-214).

The incompetency of Ravi shows that a sequence and order to do things is necessary. Ravi never shares his pain of hunger he tries to bring the curtain down on the evil by means of misleading approaches which in turn leaves him frustrated and misfit.

The slogan Life is the name of Complexities:- Responsibilities & Irresponsibilities

The well known fact that “A coin has two faces” has a great relevance here in this novel of Kamala Markandaya. Ravi, as the subject presents himself in both the characters, good and bad and makes the audiences realize the complexities of life in soft and steady manner. Ravi, at beginning as a responsible man displaced in search of food from the rural to urban localities, and there the coincidence with the Damodar, the underworld Don shifts the gear of his responsible life towards irresponsibility. After becoming a permanent member of the Damodar’s Gang, one day he plans a robbery on the instructions of his boss in the house of Apu and Jayamma, but the plan failed, as he is caught there by the households of Nalini. By the heart of humanity they feel sorry on his condition and offer him food and apprenticeship there in the business of tailoring. The shift here takes the story of the protagonist towards responsibility is useful for him not only he has the access to a plenty of food but to a gigantic life partner, Nalini. The process of

maturity to immaturity and immaturity to maturity remains continue in his life as he reflects the process as:

“It is the drag round the streets and the searching and the wait and the frustration and bearing the pinpricks that the haughty rich always had in plenty for the poor which he had not been able to endure”.

(A Handful Rice-27)

To mould one in a particular sense, demands the labour and exposure on the part of moulders, but courage and patience on the part of Mouldee. As R.K Srivastava affirms about the novel :

“A pathetic cry of protest of a hungry and anguished half grown child groping for a path haltingly through the labyrinthine lanes of quixotic dreams and ugly realities, rural poverty and urban plenty, but reaching no where”³.

The stage that Ravi is longing for since long may has come by virtue of the stealing act he commits on the Apu’s house but the failure on his part makes him repent for the rest of his life. The eagerness of wealth through illegal ways jams his ways both physical and psychological.

Institution of Marriage:- Nalini

Kamala Markandaya’s delineation of Nalini if is of little different than her other woman protagonists viz. Rukmani, Sarojini, and Mira yet her Nalini shares something common. Kamala Markandaya strongly depicts the evils of Indian marriage Institution be it in form

of Dowry, arrange marriage, divorce system and caste marriage system and collapse of individual Will. These are the facts that the novelist raises against the Indian Institute of Marriage. Ravi, a displaced man and thief by profession makes his entry in the house of Apu, a tailor by profession only by intent of stealing, who in turn caught there by them and is beaten. To take the honey of the event the Tailor family thinks of her daughter and ties the nuptial knot between the two only in fear of dowry and ceremonial expenses which in turn ruins the whole life of the beautiful young lady Nalini. Nalini, the daughter of old Apu if accepts the decision of the parents yet she have grievances with it. As it is “ Remove Nalini and Ravi would be watered down version of damodar”⁴

The acceptance of Nalini here the Novelist emphasis on the rich tradition of the Indian culture and civilization, where social will gets more prominence over the individual one.

Nalini’s Vision, Love and Solid temper: A Complete woman

Although the main protagonist of the novel is Ravi, yet there is enough and solid place of Nalini in the story to move on. Nalini, a rector force behind the Ravi, to face all the miseries be it by nature, mechanical or man-made, bravely. In nutshell, Nalini’s solid love and sympathy towards her tattered husband never let him feel down. Nalini was passive initially as is the norm of the novelist while delineating her woman character but when the time of acceptance

turns away she protests against the attitude of her husband in bold words as:

“I Just don’t want to hear them calling you vagabond again, that’s is all”

(A Handful of Rice-77).

She leaves her house when at one night her husband returns home late and starts beating her. The novelist makes the point here that everything has its limit when it reaches then there is the chance of “overflow” which in the end proves enough to disturb the peace. Nalini , affirms the situation as:

“I try and try. I swear to you. I try but it makes no difference. He is angry with me. All the time I don’t why. I can’t bear it anymore?”

(A Handful of Rice-224).

Nalini, is mature enough to understand the world as per the hierarchy it is made of. She accepts what she has, she is happy woman only issue she has with her mentally tattered husband Ravi, who without knowing ifs and buts of the world around him jumps and trappes.

Nalini is a good house wife, good sister, good daughter and after all a good mother. As wife she is sympathetic and tries each and every bolt to modify her husband in which at the end she succeeds. As sister she is sympathetic with her parasite sister Thangam and gives her cloths to her and bears no taints against her by Ravi. While in role of daughter she is affectionate to her old father in times of need when her father was lying in the bed of bye bye and as mother she loves her son Raju, very much who dies lack of treatment in the end.

Conclusion:-

A Handful of Rice-1966 is the sixth novel of Kamala Markandaya which is the one and only that delineates the psychological effects of the protagonist to reach the novel to the climax successfully. The themes that delineates in the novel throughout are poverty, starvation, displacement, wife battering, sexual abuse, jealousy, robbery, conspiracy, Conjugal Relationship, Struggle and decline of native crafts and invention of machine made crafts. The

novelist has puts her whole efforts to make the strings tight for inviting the attention of the reader. The presentation of her characters both men and women are of great importance. The novels presents that experience and exposure are the best ways to mitigate the situation and crisis comfortably. The content that the novelist portrayed through her woman in the novel is the crux of the novel that summons the whole things and fluctuations of the Ravi's life in the end.

Notes and References:

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4. "Markandaya's A Handful of Rice: A Study A Dreamy Youth" *Six Indian Novelists in English*,164.