

## **The Diamonds**

**(A translated short story of Rajam Krishnan, an eminent Tamil writer)**

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### **Abstract:**

Rajam Krishnan, born in 1925 in Musiri, Trichy District in Tamil Nadu is an important Tamil writer. Her works depict the lives of women in Tamil Nadu, particularly the Brahmin women, in a realist style and lucid language. The intertwining of tradition and modernity is one of the hallmarks of her writing. She is unable to come to terms with what she perceives to be the unchanging plight of women in society, irrespective of whether they are traditional or modern. She once remarked in an interview "It is a shame that the sufferings women underwent in my days dog them even now". Krishnan's works express her anguish at the way inequities are perpetuated in one form after another. Her novels and short stories have been translated into various Indian languages and English. She is a recipient of New York Herald Tribune International Award in 1950 for a short story; Sahitya Akademi Award in 1973; Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1975. She has been honoured with several other awards such as Kalaimagal Award in 1953 and Thiru. Vi. Ka. Award in 1991.

## **THE DREAM**

Chelli is running, carrying her rice bags one on her head and the other on her hip. She is pushing the bags into the train with bubbling enthusiasm as though she had defeated demons and interfering ghosts. Somebody pulls her inside. Holding the green flag high, the guard is pretending as if, he's waiting for somebody. The train's whistle blows. Then, kuppandi runs with the train, trying to give her the bag, he is still running as the train picks up speed.

There is confusion in Chelli's mind like all her blood vessels have burst. Her whole body froze.

As the train moves, that..... he is lying on the ground. They have covered him with broken datura plants, hiding the face. The turban with checks, wound on his head seems to say, "I came running to you, didn't I? Chelli, why have you left me in lunch?"

Her body is taut like a bow on the point of breaking its strength like a broken bow gets shocked. Chelli is startled from her sleep. She is drenched in sweat.

Even now the shock of the dream hasn't vanished.

She remembers getting down from the last passenger train to collect rice, along with other women folk the previous day and waiting under the tree to pass the time. The sunlight pierces the eyes sharply. It seems that the morning mail from the city, has arrived. The bicycles that carry bundles of daily newspapers from the railway station are plying down the road. Here and there, men are standing smoking beedis. A girl in a floral designed saree and a bag and a man clad in a silk shirt get down from the train and move towards the bullock cart. There is vigorous business in the tea shop.

The girls, who came with her, went to collect the rice without waking her up. She sought their company only when she had to travel by night train. Kuppani would help her collect rice and accompany her to the railway gate.

But what a terrible dream that is!

Crossing the railway track, she walks across the fields. Spraying mud here and there, they have started ploughing the field. There is a hoarding in the centre of the field. On it, a girl smiles, holding a bundle of hay on her head. Beside her is a man holding a sickle in his hand and smiling at her. Below the big green triangle, something has been written. The words are unclear to her. Nowadays, Chelli stands staring at the advertisement. The man changes into Kuppani... she... she has grown up like the girl, wears her sari elegantly... she's enthralled. Advertisements are not new to her. In the city junctions, on posters, in railway stations, what a variety of men and women she has seen! Specially in cinema posters, the heroines, actresses wearing pants, frocks. How many different dresses they pose in? But, those advertisements never kindled desires in her. She likes this advertisement. This man with his bare body, a turban on his head. Kuppani too on some days wore sleeveless vests. Though he has lean hands and lean legs, doesn't Kuppani also smile like him?

To her knowledge, there is no one in her life who was as considerate as Kuppani "Here, eat your share", saying this he offers Pakkoda to her.

The bitter experiences of begging, with a woman who has no motherly feelings and a lame person have been branded in her heart. 'That' mother used to take along with her, to plying electric trains, railway stations and temple festivals. The woman had trained her to beg by beating and starving her. She had acted like a blind and mute. She can sing keeping time beating on her stomach. She did not get the opportunity to see the world and to know what children of her age normally know. She has never seen the finer aspects of life. But, she had the opportunity of experiencing facts of life that are usually hidden

from children of her age. Before she reached the age when these emotions should bloom naturally, she has been rudely exposed to them.

With her inadequate knowledge, she was confused by the behaviour of the lady who was acting, as her mother who had illegitimate affairs with pimps in gardens, railway stations, temple ruins which were shelters for such things. She had seen the quarrels and the compromises between those of men and women. One fine day, when she woke up from the sleep, ‘the mother’ was not found. The lame man who had an affair with her, was also missing!

Chelli after searching for them in the park, railway station and temple halls, couldn’t understand all this and wept for a while. Soon after hunger pinched in the stomach, she became one of the urchins who begged in the electric train. Though she had adapted to dirt, filth, the hoarse noise of the trains, the fightings, she used to stare at the girls of her age, boarded and left trains in their school uniform carrying books and notebooks, pent up emotions engulfed her. She leaved along a sign but that did not last. The next moment, with a sense of her present reality, she would start, “Brother, sister, its three days since I had food! Kindly give me five paise.....” with this as the first line she would sing “ChendurMuruganuku.....”

Her life continued this way until one day that boss came into her life.

He had grey hair, wore a blue shirt and gold watch.

“Will you come with me? If you carry this bag, I will give you money!” he said.

Though she was perplexed for a while, she was again tempted. He had a bundle of seven to eight khaki bags and sacks. It was the boss who used to bring bags of rice from Chengulpet or Maduranthagam.

The turning point of her life seemed to be very interesting.

Selvi used to carry the bags like a smart sparrow to the railway track. As the train approached giving its signal, she used to trespass beyond the fence; she

took and pushed the bags into the train. Some days some ‘Inspector’ used to hit her on the back with a lathi. She used to bear the pain and oblige. The boss used to get into the train, fourth or fifth compartment beyond hers. Some days, he would get into her compartment. If the bag weighed ten padi’s, she got fifty paise for a trip. She earned two rupees per day. The boss used to buy her a half ticket, idly and coffee for breakfast. The joy of travelling to other places leaving her beat like Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu and Karunguli motivated her with bubbling enthusiasm.

That day she bought a cotton long skirt and blouse for four rupees in a shop at Kanchipuram. The long skirt had large roses painted in it. She felt great pride wearing it, she rolled the old skirt and kept it on the rice bag.

The boss stood watching, while she carried the bags one by one from the shop to the usual place, where they waited near the railway track. Some more women were standing there with the bags of collected rice. She had seen the arrival of the train, while she was carrying the last bag on her head and on her hip alternatively. The alarming sound, “The inspector is checking.....” reached her ears. Chelli is an expert in handling such situations. Without crossing the track, she entered the station and ran very fast.

Her old skirt and blouse were on the bag, the new dress on her waist, Kanakambaram flowers decked her combed hair. She entered into the ladies compartment as if returning from a temple fair. A policeman poked the bag with a lathi. But, she didn’t stop.

One or two women had brought rice. But there was a commotion talking about collecting rice.

“They’ve caught bags and bags of rice. Once in a way, if they want a case, they harass us this way. They don’t leave us even if they are tipped with five or ten.....”.

“Yes. He charges a hundred or two hundred”, went such talks. She sat fearing to crane her neck to see the railway station. In addition, she froze with the fear of the thought of her boss being caught. That day, she unloaded third padi’s of rice. Halting, its compartments extending beyond the length of the platform, the train appeared as if it was bullying the rice-sellers who were caught.

At last, the train moved, when it was picking up speed, it halted giving a signal.

“Somebody has pulled the chain”

“It seems somebody fell and got hurt.....”

The women in the compartments peeped outside. Somu got down. She was scared. What if somebody noticed her? Or if somebody snatched away the rice bag which she has protected like gold, from her..... The boss would have lost his bags. He will be happy if she keeps this bag safe.

It took a long time for the train to move. It crawled slowly.

Though she wanted to be calm, Chelli could not control herself from peeping over the confiscated rice bags. She rushed and looked out of the other window.

There..... There.....?

The Blue shirt, the gold watch..... a rice bag was lying scattered. The datura branches covered the face.

“Alas! He’s boarded the moving train.....”

Chelli felt the pain as if a nerve was wrenched from her abdomen. As long as she could remember, she never experienced such melancholy. How much ever she wiped, tears gushed down her cheeks.

She protected the rice carefully and sold it in a house down a street at Tambaram for five and a half rupees per kilo. Offering one rupee to the Vinayaka under the tree, in memory of her boss, she ventured to collect rice, investing the rest of the money. Men and women adopt many ways to get rice.

The first day, she went to the places known to the boss. She did not even get one padi of rice for that rate. The offer was for four and a half and five and half. After wandering all day, she remembered a house. That was a bungalow type house in the midst of a cool coconut grove, with a compound wall all around. Once her boss, had bought a bag of raw rice there. They took two days to carry the rice.

It was when she stood there with the bag in her hand as the poorest of the poor, that she saw Kuppandi.

She had seen Kuppandi, even before that. Even then, only on that day, he came with a fresh smile.

“Why have you come? Have you come for rice?”

She nodded her head simply.

“Has Nayakkar come? Have you come with him?”

Her heart dried up at once.

“He... died.....”

“Ah!..... really?”

“Yes..... He fell down from the moving train. They caught all the rice.....”

“Ah.....! Whenever he came, he used to give four annas for buying Pakkoda” said Kuppandi.

“Will you collect five padi’s of rice for me?” Chelli asked.

“Will you give me four annas to buy Pakkoda? In the bazaar street Krishna Café, Pakkoda is delicious!”

Chelli had thirty rupees with her. She could afford to give four annas for Pakkoda.

This strange acquaintance was like an oasis in the desert. He took her to the back of the house. Asking her to wait there, he went passed the cowshed.

“Who is it Kuppandi? I told you to peel the coconut”. Somebody’s voice was heard.

“I’ll do it. The rice merchant, Nayakar has come, asking for rice!”.

“Raw is not for giving. It’s for our use”.

“Then shall I measure the boiled rice?”

“You fool, Where’s Nayakar? Has he come?” A fat lady came near the well and stood. Her diamonds sparkled. “Where is Nayakar?”

“It seem’s he died madam! That girl has come.....?”

“What?..... Is he dead?”

“Yes Madam! He fell from the train and got hurt”

“Oh God!..... Are you his daughter?”

“Ye..... Yes Madam! Give me at least five padis”?

“She is so puny, will she be able to do the rice business?”

Chelli showed the money. She gained courage. That day, Kuppani measured five padi’s of boiled rice at three rupees per padi for her.

Then, still talking her, came down to the bazaar street. He bought pakkodas for four annas from Krishna Café and gave her, half of it.

“No, You have it!”

“No, No. You take half and I’ll take half”.

I’ll come tomorrow also. Will you get me rice at a cheaper rate?”

“Oh! I know many houses. I’ll get it for you. But you should give me money to buy Pakkoda”.

“Oh.....Yes”

“Are you leaving by bus or by train?”

“Can I go by bus too?” asked Chelli

“Can go! But there also they will check at the check post”.

Chelli thought for a while She decided that the known train is better.

Happy days filled Chelli’s life. Once in two or three days she now comes to get rice; Kuppani purchases rice for her. In Krishna’s café – Idli, coffee, Pakkoda. When the train arrives, even if the rice-confiscating Kakhi clad men

come in her way, she has learnt to escape, by giving them one or two. There are regular customers for selling rice; she finds a place in those houses for keeping the extra money for safekeeping. There is brightness in her eyes; confidence.

A beggar has become an entrepreneur!

But where is Kuppandi? Usually he would stand at the corner of the bazaar street or beside the temple.

The women who travelled with her selling rice, are coming towards her with rice bags.

“How much are they charging today?”

“From three and a half to four”.

“The lady of the Siva temple had asked for idly rice for a wedding in her family”

The wedding reminds her of yellow and green colours.

There’s a large red triangle on the school wall.

There was a man and a woman clad in a saree, each is holding a child in their arms. There are danglers hanging from the woman’s ears. What large eyes! Looking at this picture, she and the cripple used to laugh.

But where’s Kuppandi?

The cart stops in front of that house. Some boys are there in the Veranda. The sun’s heat is piercing the eyes. Going around the house, she reaches the well.

“Ma.....! Ma.....!”

“Who’s that?”, someone comes enquiring. She has not seen him.

“Who are you?”.

She was afraid to say, “Rice”. “Is that..... Kup...pandi..... not there?”

“What? Have you come in search of Kuppandi?”

His eyes express astonishment. “Janaki! Janaki! See this wonder!”, he’s shouting.

Chelli feels shy.

“No Sir! he collects rice for me”.

A woman in dazzling diamonds comes out.

“The paddy hasn’t boiled. There’s no raw rice to give.....”

“He..... Is he not there?”

“Who? Is it Kuppandi? That idiot has been missing for three days. Sambandam says, somebody came in search, for operation. Somebody has taken him. He’s an idiot. If somebody buys pakoda for four annas, he will go with them. Had we known that he would go away like this we could have advised him not to go with anyone. “Sixty rupees..... four kilos rice, somebody came to take him and this idiot is gone. Come after a month. We have to boil the paddy only after he comes. Not now.

The dazzling diamonds sparkle and then fade away. It seems Chelli has understood everything. Still she’s confused too. She instinctively feels that something untoward has happened to Kuppandi like what had happened to her kind boss.

If Kuppandi should come back and get the boiled rice ready, it means that there is no danger to his life. This thought strengthens her. Until he comes, she can stop the rice business. She strolls back with an empty bag.

Amidst the green fields she sees that picture, a lady with a bundle of hay on her head, a handsome man like Kuppandi and the green triangle. Her face shines with hope.