

Character Kamalampal is the wife of the main character and the person whose life (carittiram) is noted in the title of this satirical, yet realist novel. She is the quintessential virtuous woman, who suffers yet does not become bitter and retains her devotion to her husband. Kamalampal, however, is not an automaton, a lifeless paragon of goodness. She is concerned with what others think of her and falls prey to self-doubt when gossip is spread about her limitations. She is also no wilting flower and stands up to her husband's sometimes unreasonable behaviour in ordering her around. She is quick-witted and articulate and able to reply to his words with humour and light-hearted banter. After her husband leaves her (wrongly believing her to have been unfaithful), she begins to doubt her faith in god. 'What good is it if we are virtuous?' she asks herself. 'Still, it is better to worship god than your husband. Maybe I wanted too much...the pleasure we enjoy is our true enemy.'

Activities Throughout the novel, Kamalampal stays within the domestic sphere, caring for her husband, her daughter and her son. She plays the vina and sings devotional songs. She is the ultimate mother, even providing a home for her nephew when he gets in a fight with his parents.

Illustrative moments

Happy Although she suffers as the novel progresses, in the opening scene, Kamalampal is a confident and content woman. She openly jokes with her husband about the roles of 'husband' and 'wife'. She teases him about his pretensions to being a 'raja', and when he suggests that she should give him a son, she replies that he is her son (in other words, an immature man who requires her love).

Kind When she is insulted by her sister-in-law, who is piqued by the wide praise for Kamalampal's virtue, Kamalampal does not get angry. In contrast with her irascible husband, she treated her sister-in-law with extreme kindness and spoke sweetly to her.

Reflective When her husband leaves her, Kamalampal begins to reflect on her life, analysing it for her own failures. She thinks that perhaps she enjoyed her domestic bliss too much, that the pleasure she knew was ephemeral and that she was too self-centred. As readers, we know that these self-accusations are unfounded, which makes her pain seem even greater.

Wise When she is insulted by Suppu, the village gossip, Kamalampal is wise enough not to get riled but to send her away with gentle words. On another occasion, the same village gossip makes innuendoes about her family's past, but she remains calm enough to serve her husband's guests with good food.

Discussion questions

Is Kamalampal a stereotype of the virtuous Hindu wife, as celebrated in Hindu mythology and Indian cinema? Or is she a more complex character, with negative as well as positive traits?

How should we view the ending, where Kamalampal, having been deserted by her husband, seeks spiritual salvation? Is this the action of a defeated woman? A proud woman? A self-less woman?