

ISSN: 2454-5775

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A MONTHLY MULTIDISCIPLINARY PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED RESEARCH JOURNAL

VOLUME: 10, ISSUE: 02

FEBRAURY: 2020



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## THE CULTURE OF FOOD: A READING OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S A HANDFUL OF RICE

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RECEIVED: 21.11.2019

REVIEWED: 16.01.2020

ACCEPTED: 08.02.2020

WORDS: 1653

REFERENCES: 06

FIGURES: 00

TABLES: 00

### ABSTRACT

Food is not merely material used for living rather its production, its choice, its consumption, its preparation and its availability immediately connects to one's identity and survival. It is interesting to notice that food is explicitly or implicitly manifested in every social and cultural event. Food choices can affect economic and environmental changes, and can inspire people to unsocial forms of action as is discernible in Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* (1987). The novel in discussion is concerned with the theme of poverty and hunger in a ruthless society and moves a step further in making an attempt to search for identity. In this novel, the novelist presents the social milieu in urban culture, where economic forces are proving dangerous even for identities and relationships by affecting the lives of individuals. Present paper aims at focusing the bond between food, culture, and literature which has a direct concern with society.

**Key Words:** Food, Hunger, Poverty, Society, Search for Identity

There is a distinctive philosophy about food- what we should eat and what we should not, there is a defined criteria or a set of reasons as to why we should or why we should not eat those foods. According to Alice Waters, an American chef, activist and author, "Eating is a political act, but in the way the ancient Greeks, used the word 'political'- not just to mean having to do with voting in an election, but to mean 'of pertaining to, all our interactions with other people.' Every single choice we make about food matters, at every level. The right choice saves the world.

It's not exactly the food that is inherently political, but our food choices can affect social, economic and environmental changes. These choices of food are responsible for the tragic unsocial actions as evident in Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice* (1987). This paper is an attempt to understand the psyche of the downtrodden class, which is devoid of food and how the scarcity of food affects and rules their life.

Broadly the novel depicts the clash between the poverty-stricken people and the sophisticated capitalists. Ramesh K. Srivastava comments on the title as "a common expression for the requirement of food for the hungry mouths" and the novel "is a pathetic chronicle of man's vain struggle for food and the brutal demolition of his quixotic dreams." (*The Novels of Kamala Markandaya*, 157)

The novel is concerned with the theme of poverty and hunger in a ruthless society. The novelist presents the social milieu in urban culture, where economic forces prove dangerous even to identities and relationships, by affecting the lives of individuals. The protagonist Ravi Shankar runs away from countryside and his poor conditions, to take shelter in the city where adverse financial constraints grip him by the neck. Ravi insists on a forced entry into a house by breaking its rusty bars as he is starving and longs for "a meal- a nice, hot, home-cooked meal, not bazaar muck." (14) When offered the meal, "two for him

on a square of plantain leaf, with ghee, pickle, a tumblerful of coffee," (11) he imagines of having a wife who could have cooked food like this everyday. Michael Pollan, a renowned culinary master, connects food, with the pleasure equations of every kind of relationship in a society: "Food is also about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity. As long as humans have been taking meals together, eating has been as much about culture as it has been about biology." (*Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*)

Ultimately, Ravi marries Nalini, the younger daughter of Apu and settles down at Apu's, helping him in his business of tailoring, with the best of his dedication. Initially, his demands are only for food and shelter. Even his attraction for Nalini is partly for food, subsequently, however, his needs increase for luxuries and other necessities of life like a separate room- "a refuge, a place they could call their own, where he and his wife could talk, plan, dream, make love, undisturbed." (86)

After sometime Apu dies leaving all the responsibilities over Ravi's weak and unstable shoulders which shatter him completely. Everything was going on nicely till Apu was alive and they had sometimes "buttermilk and rice" (62) as their evening meal. But afterwards he fails in managing the business of family resulting in financial crisis. In frustration, now he often beats Nalini and even goes to the extent of raping his mother-in-law whom he calls "a she-devil" who "even grudges me a handful of rice." (95)

Sometimes Ravi remembers nostalgically good meal his mother in the village, used to give him, which he is not able to provide to his own children now:

One good meal, his mother would have said, clasping pious hands together thankfully, indicating the rice, the dhal, the vegetables, the thin chilli-water brew. One good meal, and he had to watch his children sucking their fingers, grown silent and anxious, long before the

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