

Study on the Characteristics of Meena Kandasamy's Poetics of Dalit Resistance

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Abstract:

Meena Kandasamy and her poetry embody a long withstanding fight against the stringent subjugation and atrocities undergone by the non-dominant caste community. While her poetry revolves around issues of caste, sexuality, political agendas, violence, gender oppression and language, her work mainly urges her readers to act. Active resistance or revolutionary activism, the discourse which seeks to analyze what needs to change and set it right, is the core theme of Kandasamy's raw and outrightly unbridled poetry, "full of jagged edges" (Duarte). Some of Kandasamy's poems even though convey a sense of ease and familiarity most of them share a sinister lament for change. These poems are jarring for an audience who knows where she comes from. But they are at loss of words once they go through the history of her times. In spite of their awareness of the social hierarchies people still exclaim as if unaware "do such systems still exist? To such a heartless question her poems are a silent reply. Society has always been harsh to people who refused to follow, and Kandasamy's case is no different. Her principal consideration in her poetry is to empower women mainly the marginalised women to acquire a comprehensive vigilance and knowledge about their miserable situation. Her poems are born out from her own experiences and her commitment with the espousing caste and gender equivalence. Her poems provide a visual effect; she has a way of roping her readers in a forceful manner. She breaks the long silence that has misled traditional Indian women, their feminine experience and their female world.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy's, Dalit Resistance, Poetics, Violence, Gender Oppression and Language.

Introduction: The contradictions of socio-economic order in India remain almost the same even after 63 years of independence. Half a century is a considerable period of time for a society, state and nation to realize its mistakes and imbalances. But even at the beginning of the 21st century neither the society nor the state in India has been able to resolve its contradictions. Despite the Constitutional commitment of the post-colonial state towards the goal of equality, liberty and justice, the age old structure of inequality has not been dismantled. Social and economic inequality still occupies the centre-stage of Indian reality. The ideals of social democracy and distributive justice, in their essence, remain elusive. On the contrary, the vast majority of the Indian population is deprived socially, economically, politically and educationally. The social opportunities, offered to the citizens by the state, are confined to the privileged sections of society.

One of the emerging faces of intersectionality in the Indian scene is Meena Kandasamy. She is a poet, writer, translator and activist who fiercely uses her works to speak for the marginalized, and has gained immense appreciation from the literary networks. Meena is widely known for her unapologetic approach towards fighting patriarchy and the caste system. Being born into a marginalized nomadic tribe, she views caste oppression through a feminist lens, and presents them in the form of anthologies, novels, columns of different magazines, and her social media. Her first poetry book, *Touch*, with a forward by Kamala Das, was published in 2006 received widespread acclaim as a unique piece. In an interview with *Sampsonia Way Magazine*, she says "My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people."

I recently read her second poetry collection, *Ms Militancy* – a title which perfectly suits its unapologetic verses. In this book, her resistance is targeted towards the two main oppressors; the caste-based Brahmanical Hindu society and patriarchy. She tackles multi-layered oppression

through confrontational lines, directly accusing the players of this system, stripping them down of their so-called reverence, and exposing their hypocrisy.

Meena Kandasamy and her poetry embody a long withstanding fight against the stringent subjugation and atrocities undergone by the non-dominant caste community. While her poetry revolves around issues of caste, sexuality, political agendas, violence, gender oppression and language, her work mainly urges her readers to act. Active resistance or revolutionary activism, the discourse which seeks to analyze what needs to change and set it right, is the core theme of Kandasamy's raw and outrightly unbridled poetry, "*full of jagged edges*" (Duarte). Hailing from a caste-conscious background, her poetry reflects a society that grants inhuman sanction to caste discrimination and violence on Dalits. Kandasamy uses her poetry as a means of violent resistance against the nationally ingrained and prevalent system of caste which enables dominant caste people to subjugate the non-dominant caste persons. The title of her first anthology *Touch* reiterates the most inhuman of stigmas attached to Dalits – their very touch being considered polluting.

In the preface '*Should You Take Offence*', she tells "*I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me.*"

Female desire is almost always a matter of scrutiny, and Meena uses it to inaugurate her book. In the very first poem called '*A Cunning Stunt*', she speaks of the brunt of family and community honour a women's sexuality has to bear, and that her choices should benefit everyone in the society but herself:

*"cunt now becomes seat,
abode, home, lair, nest, stable,
and he opens my legs wider
and shoves more and shoves
harder and I am torn apart
to contain the meanings of
family, race, stock, and caste
and form of existence
and station fixed by birth"*

The poem ends with the emergence of the woman's 'cunningness' as she starts pretending in an attempt to not displease the man. "*I am frightened. I turn frigid. I turn faker.*" There is a violent seduction in her words, aiming to make the reader uncomfortable, and rattling them towards an ugly reality. She uses themes in contexts often conflicting with the original, which might sound blasphemous to some. She particularly takes on Hindu and Tamil epics, where women are attributed a virtuous and uncorrupted status, which confines their desires and abilities, putting them at the disposition of men to 'save' and 'take care' of them. Like in '*Backstreet Girls*', she challenges the chastity forced upon them:

*"Tongues untied, we swallow suns.
Sure as sluts, we strip random men.
Sleepless. There's stardust on our lids.
Naked. There's self-love on our minds.
And yes, my dears, we are all friends."*

The stanza concludes with the sense of solidarity between women who refuse to fit into the archetype and stand together to fight opposition. Venturing further into her world of irreverence, she uncovers the cravings of self-righteous men who often mask themselves in piousness in order to maintain their holy position. The human-ness that they hide to portray themselves as higher beings is knocked down in her poem '*Six Hours Of Chastity*':

*“To increase the number of his sins against recoiling skin,
To drown his sorrow and his loss, to fight the knives
Who make him what he is, in walks the gambler.
‘After the fifth man, every woman becomes a temple.’
In the darkest hour before dawn, the priest enters there,
Enters her, to make love to her leftovers, fidgeting in his
Guilt and cowardice, like the clinging of holy cymbals.”*

A priest visiting a whorehouse is unthinkable but real, and Meena affirms this. The apparent holiness in humans is a sham. No one is spared of their weaknesses, not even the Brahma who is considered one of the sacred trinity of Hinduism as she speaks to that ‘villain’ in *‘Prayers To The Red Slayer’*.

She calls Brahma out on his self-proclamation of the creator and a father-figure, despite the existing narrative of him raping his own daughter. *“If you’ve ever called to pose for the camera, or give interviews, drop that pen and stop writing our story as if it were your own.”* She snatches away his entitlement over people’s lives, of deciding their future.

Moreover, she portrays the women of these myths as self-determined and making decisions on their own terms. For example, *Sita* from *Ramayana* is shown refusing to succumb to her husband’s flickering attitude towards her in *‘Princess-In-Exile’*:

*“Years later, her husband won her back
but by then, she was adept at walkouts,
she had perfected the vanishing act.”*

Some of Kandasamy’s poems even though convey a sense of ease and familiarity most of them share a sinister lament for change. These poems are jarring for an audience who knows where she comes from. But they are at loss of words once they go through the history of her times. In spite of their awareness of the social hierarchies people still exclaim as if unaware “do such systems still exist? To such a heartless question her poems are a silent reply. Society has always been harsh to people who refused to follow, and Kandasamy’s case is no different. In spite of the harsh criticisms meted out to her second collection of poems *Ms. Militancy*, she stands firm. She agrees that her language is dark and explosive.

*My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its
eagerness to slaughter your myths. My lines are feverish
with the heat of the bodies you banish in your Manusmriti
and Kamasutra. Tamil woman that I am, I do not spare the
ageist, lassicist, sexist Tholkappium either. The criticism that
I embark on like your codification and like my cunt is beyond all culture.*

Her poems do try to dislodge the myths that claim female mind and body. After all a little explosion is essential to crumble the age old superstitions.

Sita was abandoned when her husband questioned her chastity, but came back to claim her after some time. But she rejects his call, and decides to never go back with the person who doubted her at the first place.

Another example of *Sita* putting herself first is illustrated in *‘Random Access Man’*. Here, tired of waiting for her husband to come to her, she chooses a random man to satisfy her. The poem concludes by giving the reader an insight into her perception of masculinity.

*“By the time she left
this stranger’s lap
she had learnt
all about love.
First to last.”*

Along with desires, the book also advocates Dalit feminism and the atrocities of caste system. Meena lays bare the obstructions and impediments lower-caste women often have to

bear as they stand at the intersection of two marginalized identities. In *Once My Silence Held You Spellbound*, she writes:

*“You wouldn’t discuss me because my suffering
was not theoretical enough.”*

Here, one can locate the powerlessness of Dalit women as they are unacknowledged not only because of their gender and caste, but also because of their inability to voice themselves in the upper-caste dominated academia.

Perhaps one of the most compelling poems which vigorously exposes the structured subjugation of our society is *One-Eyed*:

*“the pot sees just another noisy child
the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst
but the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule
the doctor sees a medical emergency
the school sees a potential embarrassment
the press sees a headline and a photofeature
dhanam sees a world torn in half.
her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,
the price for her a taste of that touchable water.”*

The brutal discrimination and suppression faced by a little girl means different things to different outfits. While the inanimate well of water only sees a thirsty child, as we move forward towards human establishments, her act starts taking shape of an infringement. This is used for self-interest, as the school attempts to uphold its reputation, and the press sensationalizes it to make money. But for the girl, this episode is only a reminder of a prejudiced world.

Kandasamy Uses Her Poetry As A Means Of Violent Resistance Against The Nationally Ingrained And Prevalent System Of Caste.

Kandasamy’s attempt to bring out an alternate version of feminist poetry to give independence to the voices of non-dominant caste women strikes a parallel with the final phase of Gynocriticism. The very notion of the ‘body’ of the third world woman, especially the underprivileged woman bring it closer to the postulation of the “subaltern” in Spivak’s essay *Can the subaltern speak?* (1985).

Spivak points out the threefold oppression faced by these women i.e. patriarchy, race and domination by first world feminists. Spivak asserts that the “subaltern” should favour to write their own body and stories. Kandasamy’s attempts to dig out the inscribed voices from history and to reread them retrieves the diffusive traces of suffering and pain which are often overshadowed by the facade of empathy shown by the dominant existing socio-political discourse. Meena Kandasamy tries to problematize this camouflaged circulation of power through her intensely inquisitive poetry.

Kandasamy’s poetry, in a way, materializes her urge to express and fight for non-dominant caste women: their desires, dreams, independent views and speak for themselves rather than always be spoken for or of by the existing patriarchal social order and their male counterparts. Her poem *Aggression* envisions a possibility of resistance and an ensuing rebellion against the prevalent injustices in society. This spirit of rebellion resonates through the poem:

*Ours is a silence
that waits. Endlessly waits
... But sometimes,
the outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode (1-2,7-10)*

She uses the symbol of the vindictive female body as a means of defiance and confrontation against the patriarchal subjugation of women. She proves that the Dalit woman can absolutely speak and when she does, her writing proves to be so scathingly powerful that it comes to formulate itself as an elaborate yet blatant tool of political dissent. This emboldened writing of Meena Kandasamy topples the world of Indian women's writing by setting a distinctly defiant standard in the world of feminist poetics.

Status of Marginalized Women The strong women characters portrayed in the poems of Kandasamy wage open wars to fight against patriarchal sovereignty to free women from their inferior position with the vigour of cognizance to provide them a transformative action. With prophetic understanding she examined the convivial and political system of society and fight against the austere caste system of India. Her principal consideration in her poetry is to empower women mainly the marginalised women to acquire a comprehensive vigilance and knowledge about their miserable situation. Her poems are born out from her own experiences and her commitment with the espousing caste and gender equivalence. Her poems provide a visual effect; she has a way of roping her readers in a forceful manner. She breaks the long silence that has misled traditional Indian women, their feminine experience and their female world.

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Conclusion:

Meena Kandasamy's select poems from the collection *Touch*, presents the unadorned truth of the society where people living in the margins are still victims of senseless and irrational beliefs which bereave them of fundamental rights. It is also the voice of those who are chided to silence for centuries. Her poetry is an attack on the social discriminations enduring in the society such as caste system, cultural hegemony and suppression of women. Her poetry is a literary document of the humiliations, dilemmas, and barbarities experienced by Dalit women.

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