



THE POETICS OF CASTE & CULTURE: READING MEENA KANDASAMY'S *TOUCH* AND *MS MILITANCY*

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Abstract

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy- a poet, translator, creative writer and activist- is the “first Indian woman writer, writing Dalit poetry in English.” In an interview with Sampsonia Way Magazine, Meena said, "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." Meena's poetry of resistance- both in *Touch* and in *Ms. Militancy*- re-examines our “national culture” and our “national history” through the mainstream protest literature of the current age. Militant Dalit literature is impregnated with the gory descriptions of atrocities hurled upon Dalits and the lives lived in wretchedness and desolation. Kandasamy spares none- neither Gandhi nor Gods. She relentlessly attacks and disrobes the age-old façade of subjugation and suppression through her fiery verses. She dares to dent the deep-rooted caste-ism in the psyche of dominant class in India and dissects the cultural bias which allows mighty shield to the caste crusaders. She offers “textual cleansing” to her people. The poems of Meena Kandasamy are illustrative of her angst and scathing criticism of the narratives which propagate the standardized form of nationalism. Her poems reveal the very complicit nature of this homogenized nationalism and nationalist narratives which camouflage the repugnant, repeat onslaughts in the lives of the third world women under the smokescreens of secularism, democracy, and ‘unity in diversity’. The purpose of this paper is to examine Kandasamy's seething expression and unique manner of resistance to endless social and cultural exploitation, assault and injustices and her struggle to topple the appercart in order to re-write and re-set the alternate histories and narratives. This paper will address the poetic departures that constructively and vehemently challenge the ‘methodological nationalism hegemonising imagination of Southasia’ and Southasian literature by offering ‘alternative imaginings’.

Key words: Dalit, caste, culture, narratives, histories, subaltern, resistance, suppression.

1. Introduction

Dalit literature is about the liberty of Dalits. And the poetry penned by a Dalit is unfailingly imbued with Dalit sensibility. It protests all that is invalid and orthodox. With regard to the poems penned by women Dalit writers, Eleanor Zelliot opines “their voices are strong and varied, echoing other Dalit themes but adding new images, new perspectives and new languages”. Helene Cixous is of the view that women writers should dismantle the customs of masculine writing. Cixous in her essay, —The Laugh of Medusa (1976), avers:

“Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them” (281).

2. Discussion

2.1 Meena Kandasamy as a poet

In his review of *Ms. Militancy* Ranjit Heskote says, “There is considerable current of surprise and elusiveness that does battle with the strain of predictability in Kandasamy’s poetry; even when she rehearses a well-established choreography of feminist self-assertion, she does so with a sharp eye for detail, a grasp of worldly insight and an appetite for phrasal shape-shifting”. Meena unapologetically uses strands and expression that are anathemas in Indian cultural context. She blatantly proclaims in the Sampsonia Way Magazine that — “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” (Sahay). Her poetry is a proof to her position in Indian English literature in general and Dalit literature in particular. Bruce King asserts: “Writing is a means of creating a place in the world, the use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion” (152).

Meena Kandasamy, from Chennai, is a poet, creative writer, translator and social activist. In an interview with Kavya Rajagopalan, Meena Kandasamy contends that “Sita is often portrayed as the obedient Hindu wife, but I find it inspiring that she is one of the first women who dare to step across, strike up a conversation with a stranger. All our myths lend to multiple readings, and my task as a poet and as a feminist, is to offer some of these alternative possible readings.”

Her poetry has won acclaim and accolades in poetry competitions. There is fiery and boisterous wit and wordplay in Kandasamy’s poetry. In her foreword to Meena’s *Touch*, Kamala Das praises her verse thus, “she wore a fabric rare and strange, faintly smudged with the Indianness of her thought that saw “even the monsoons come leisurely stroking like decorated temple elephants””. The poetics of Meena Kandasamy as “an angry young woman” is replete with endless militant attacks on the establishment, norms and traditions which have perpetually been used to validate and subsequently downplay Dalit suppression at multiple levels. Kandasamy’s poetry collections- *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*- are marked with artistic sensibilities and worldly human ties of warmth and desire and address the rigid orders of caste that consign the underdogs to a derogatory level where even their touch is seen as fouling to the upper caste people.

2.2 The Poetry Collection: *Touch*

Her maiden collection of poems- *Touch*- which comprises 84 poems was published in August, 2006 alongside a foreword by the renowned poet Kamala Das, who heaps praises on this anthology. Kamala Das states, “Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy’s anthology” (*Touch* 7). She also mentions, “Older by half a century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision and wish her access to the magical brew of bliss and tears each true poet is forced to partake of day after day, month after month, year after year” (*Touch* 7). The poems of *Touch* are segregated into seven groups: Bring him up to worship you, Touch, and some spice, To that more congenial spot, Lines of control, Slander in a slaughterhouse, and Their Daughters. The second half of *Touch* is devoted to the issues of the downgraded/Dalit communities of our society. In *Touch* Meena Kandasamy brings to the fore the miseries, frustrations, bitterness, disgrace, destruction, torment, uprising and repulsion of the depressed sidelined sections of our society.

In the poem “Another Paradise Lost: The Hindu Way”, she comes up with a story of a serpent and her tête-à-tête with it. The serpent recounts that once it was a ruler held with honor and grace on the earth and in the heaven, too. He posed questions before gods in heaven about the prevalent caste system and the demarcation of jobs on the earth, and advocated for fairness, freedom and fraternity. He was branded a rebel. He was cursed for this brashness and as a chastisement thrown on earth to walk because gods living in celestial house also want order of vernas to linger on earth. Any argument to pull apart this system is unbearable to them. Hence, the serpent unearths: “I wanted to know why/ caste was there, why people suffered because of/ their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned/ sages there. I asked what would happen if a/ high born did manual work just like the low-born. / I worried about the division of labor, this disparity/ in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel/ pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity” (56-63). Unfortunately, Gods and godmen too differentiate human beings into the rich and the wretched, higher caste and lower caste, and spread hostility among earthlings.

In her poem “Eklaivan”, Kandasamy picks up Ekalavya episode from the Mahabharata, wherein Ekalavya was disqualified from the art of archery by the supreme Guru Dronacharya, and had to pay a hefty price for the sake of being a tribe- man of low caste. He was an epitome of submissiveness who had a remarkable character. He sacrificed his thumb just to gratify his guru who had never bothered to teach him rather slighted him by constraining him from learning archery. His right thumb got severed to facilitate the dominance of an upper caste boy- “You can do a lot of things/With your left hand. /Besides, fascist Dronacharya’s warrant/Left handed treatment./Also/You don’t need your right thumb/ To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb” (1-9). The poet asks—Was Dronacharya just amputating Eklavya’s right thumb? His deep-rooted bias took the better of him. His gory decision was fashioned by the verna system.

In “Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985” Kandasamy recollects the notorious bloodshed of Karamchedu which took place on July 17 in 1985 in Andhra Pradesh where six Madiga (lower caste) men were murdered and three Madiga women were raped by the Kammas (upper caste men). The massacre followed after a Madiga woman opposed the washing of buffaloes by the Kammas in the pond whose water the Madigas consumed. Here the poet writes: “Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit/Drinking Water for the Dalits/The very same Pond. / Practice for eons./A Bold Dalit lady/dares to question injustice./Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation/Is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes. / Killings...” (1-9). Kandasamy raises a pertinent question before us- Is it justified to silence the voices of the down and depressed for raising their genuine demands? Instead of solving their burning issues and addressing their honest concerns, they are ill-treated and brutally crushed by

force. Kandasamy, through her poem, represents the supremacy of the privileged, and their undying reproachful attitude towards the underprivileged. It is indeed sad and disheartening that in spite of our political independence, the dream of having an egalitarian society is still a distant reality as the underprivileged are compelled to lead an agonizing life- bereft of honor, grace and vitality. Moreover, constant harassment dehumanizes the downtrodden and robs them of their peace and happiness, adversely affecting their physical, mental, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

In the poem “Fleeting”, Kandasamy articulates her stance that caste inscription is everlasting, it just refuses to go, even if we erase our history, or be demolished, and our memories get dissolved. The weapon of caste is mercilessly used by the higher castes to dominate the underdogs. Her resentment is exposed in this poem: “And fleeting memories are perishable-/Imagery showcase stuff having expiry dates, /Caste perennially remains/a scheming bulldozer/Crushing Dalits—/And renewing, revoking our bitter past” (1-6).

The caste-ridden society splits even gods and bars the entry of untouchables in the temples exclusively meant for the higher castes. Dalits offering prayers at their shrines is inconceivable and a harshly penalizing crime. Meena Kandasamy blatantly condemns and criticizes such vicious practices in the poem titled “Prayers”. She outlines how a marginalized is beaten to death for committing this crime. A weakling stricken from typhoid for ten days somehow dares to go near the shrine of an upper caste man to offer his prayers and seek God’s benedictions for recovery from his illness, but he is caught and slain. She writes: “He drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple. / Sadly, of an Upper caste God. /Away from the temple, he bends in supplication” (7-9)... “An irked Rajput surged forth/and smote the untouchable with an iron rode. / The warrior caste lion couldn’t tolerate encroachment” (14-16).

Kandasamy interrogates and contests the ancient caste system and unbending societal norms which prohibit inter-caste unions, especially between the upper and the lower class. Disregard for the caste boundaries results in ruthless chastisements for the daredevils. In the poem titled “We will rebuild worlds” she remarks how heinous punishments are meted out to those who in their dare devilries cross caste boundaries. She writes: “But the crimes of passion/Our passion/your crimes/Poured poison, and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/Or hanged them in public/because a man and a woman/Dared to love/And you wanted/to teach /other boys and other girls/the/lessons of /how to/whom to/ when to/where to/continue/their caste lines” (16-23). In this poem she recounts how the disadvantaged souls have been hassled, brutally treated, tormented and exterminated for ages. The poet expresses her sanguine hope that time has come for these deprived people to rebuild their fortune by unchaining themselves from the rigid caste system. She vehemently avows that the lowly and the underprivileged will rise up to fight against the mayhems and massacres unleashed upon them for the sake of caste; “So/now/upon future time/There will be a revolution” (42-43). These lines echo the emotions expressed by a renowned Dalit poet, J.V. Pawar: “These twisted fists won’t loosen now/The coming revolution won’t wait for you. /We have endured enough; no more endurance now” (ADL 143).

In “Dignity”, Kandasamy calls upon the honored men to be caring and kind towards the disadvantaged class. She exhorts them for self-respect and parity for all- “You stick to your faith/the incurable sickness/of your minds, /We don’t stop you from continuing/to tend centuries/of cultivate superegos. / We will even let you wallow/in the rare happiness/that hierarchy provides/But don’t suppress/our rightful share of dignity” (7-18).

In a caste-conscious and male-controlled Indian society, Dalit women face two-fold oppression-being Dalit and women. They face ill-treatment, subjugation and exploitation from the upper caste

men, while their husbands treat them shabbily at home. They are always at the receiving end. More often than not, they are stripped naked, mistreated, violated, attacked and burnt because they belong to a particular caste which works against them. They are treated as sexual objects by the men from the dominant class. They invariably get threats of ravishment from the upper-class men. Kandasamy expresses her exasperation in the poem “Narration” where she portrays the pathetic cries of the stifled woman who is oppressed by her landlord. The irony is that the very shadow of a lower class is seen as polluting the upper castes, but while raping a Dalit girl or woman, these upper-class men are not polluted. “I’ll weep to you about/My landlord, and with/My mature gestures-/You will understand:/The torn sari, disheveled hair/Stifled cries and meek submission. / I was not an untouchable then” (1-7).

The sorry state of affairs is that in our society, manipulation and exploitation of lower caste girls is commonplace. Worse still, the perpetrators involved in these sexual crimes go scot-free by dint of their upper caste connections. In the poem “Shame” Kandasamy describes how a Dalit girl becomes the target of gang rape. But the rapists are not apprehended as they are of privileged caste whereas the hapless girl suffers dishonor and irreparable damage to her psyche and ultimately commits suicide to save the embarrassment- ““Gang Rape’/Two severe syllables/implied in her presence/perpetuate the assault...../Public’s prying eyes/segregate her-the victim. / But the criminals have/already maintained—/Their Caste is classic shield” (1-9). “The helpless girl sets herself into fire as a solution to this sin; Bravely, in search of/a definite solution, /and elusive purification, /she takes the test of the fire—/the ancient medicine for shame” (22-26).

2.3 The Poetry Collection: *Ms Militancy*

The poet affirms in the Introduction to *Ms Militancy*— “I strive to be a sphinx: part woman, part lioness, armed with all lethal riddles” (Kandasamy 9). Kandasamy proclaims that — “This tongue allows me to resist rape, to rescue my dreams. It is not man-made...My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths” (Kandasamy 8-9).

In the poetry collection *Ms Militancy* “Back-Street Girls” pronounces women’s independence, thus far entitled to only men. Kandasamy’s women are footloose and fancy-free. They can exercise control as they please and need not adhere to the code of the institutions. These liberated souls freely choose the roles of “sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews”. They are not regulated by any man as they enjoy the liberty to select men as their partners and “strip random men” (14). The poem ends with a note – — “We (women) are not the ones you can sentence for life” (14).

The following lines from Kandasamy’s poem “Nailed” can be read as an exposition of, what Wendy Doniger calls the ‘Clytemnestra Syndrome’- “the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous, goddesses are perceived to be, the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous human women are perceived to be, and hence greater the need to keep human woman far away from the actual use of any power in the world” (Doniger 280). “Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous/portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she/will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her. . /She was black and bloodthirsty, so even Kali found herself shut/inside her shrine. / They were relatively low-risk, so most women were locked/up at home” (37).

“Dead woman walking” delineates the adversities and anxieties of the oppressed and deserted womenfolk. Kandasamy has presented the mythical character of Karaikkal Ammayar who represents Dalit women who are sexually abused by men. Karaikal Ammayar was abandoned by her merchant husband to wed “a fresh and formless wife” in spite of her attractiveness and “the magic of my (her) multiplying love”. Her love for Lord Shiva made her a sage in the mind of her husband. Kandasamy

voices the anguish of abandoned women through Karaikkal Ammayar as “i wept in vain, I wailed, i walked on my head, i went to god” (17). This poem sardonically shows how such women suffer and perish while they are bodily alive.

“Fire-walkers” embodies the predicament of underprivileged women subjugated by upper class folks. Kandasamy castigates the conservative belief of the society in making offerings to the Deity Maari. Maari is depicted as the exploiter who derives satisfaction from the sufferings of her devotees who lash and scald their bodies to please Her. Maari embodies the coldblooded persecutors of the Dalits who are mollified only by the sacrifices made by the vulnerable class.

In “Ms Militancy”, the title poem of the collection, Kannaki, who is the heroine of the Tamil Classic Silapathikaram, has been shown faithful as well as unswerving to her husband Kovalan who has a dancer-mistress Madhavi. This might represent patriarchal authority but the wrath she outpours at the demise of her husband upholds her as a revolutionary. Such is the militant woman that Kandasamy portrays in her poetics.

“Princess-in-Exile” depicts Sita who walks out when her piousness is probed. She circuitously hits back for the distrust that is hurled at her. Thus, the poet urges women to unfollow the rules set by the male-controlled society and to have the guts to retaliate- “scorned, she sought refuge in spirituality, / and was carried away by a new-age guru/ with saffron clothes and caramel words/ years later, her husband won her back/ but by then, she was adept at walkouts, / she had perfected the vanishing act” (45).

“Moon-gazers”, a compelling representation of the high headedness of the higher castes, brings forth the silent misery of the Dalits through the resemblance of a classroom situation wherein the teacher talks about bird watching during the night. A girl questions as to what the bird does on new moon days only to be scoffed and ridiculed. She couldn’t afford to get any answer except a blank, drawing in the eyes of the teacher. Similar fate is meted out to all the Dalits who remain helpless and hopeless, living an undignified life.

“One Eyed”, the short poem presents the horrid situations in which Dalit women are compelled to survive. The Poet stresses the charitable attitude of lifeless things which human beings are lacking in. The objects like pot, glass and water gratify the dryness of people while the teachers, doctors, school people and the press are indifferent to the wants of the commoners. The underprivileged lower class woman Dhanam was “torn in half” (41) when she attempts to fetch a vessel of water. She pays a heavy price for this act of valor- “..... 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 a taste of that touchable water”.

Gilbert and Gubar opine about the engagement of women writers which is about— “... assaulting and revising, destructing and reconstructing the images of women inherited from male literature...” (20-21). Fraught with endeavors to assess and reassess the binaries, Kandasamy’s poetry ensures such divisions are weakened by the challenges that stem indoors. She affirms in the Introduction to *Ms. Militancy*- — “I strive to be a sphinx: part woman, part lioness, armed with all lethal riddles” (Kandasamy 9). The linguistics of Kandasamy’s poetry is stormy and volatile. Her diction disrupts the mainstream order by revealing the insentient energies through the usage of terminologies and horror folklores. Kandasamy proclaims, “This tongue allows me to resist rape, to rescue my dreams. It is not man-made...My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths” (Kandasamy 8-9). Severe and unpolished words like— ‘Kali kills’, ‘Draupadi strips’ and the like suggest the desolate and pitiable lives of women. The violent expressions in the poetics

of Kandasamy shudder and surprise the receivers. The language of her poetry smashes all customs of command and level-headedness, giving an outlet to veiled wishes. She suggests new representational methods, new approaches for encrypting the body and new conducts to define the gender roles. Kandasamy throws up the cudgels: — “Come, unriddle me. But be warned: I never falter in a fight. And, far worse, I seduce shamelessly” (9).

Kamala Das comments in ‘Introduction’: — “I speak three languages, write in/Two, dream in one” (PoemHunter). The language used in dreams is the woman’s lyrical language. Kandasamy in “Backstreet Girls” brazenly declares: “There will be no blood on our bridal beds/ We are not the ones you will choose for wives/ We are not the ones you can sentence for life” (Kandasamy 14). The unrestrained gush of words streams from endless possessions of bottled-up inner workings.

Following the league of Kamala Das, Kandasamy is of the opinion that the world is not much acquainted with actual unruly womankind. Such women folks are pigeonholed as hysterical as it is unwomanly for a fledgling woman to express her angst. They are expected to be meek and docile in accordance with the societal norms. Kandasamy’s poem “Mascara” is about the anguish of devadasis. To make herself beautiful, the devadasi applies mascara when she dies. Kandasamy declares, “When she dons the mascara/ the heavens have heard her wishes, Kali you wear this too” (Classic Poetry 50). Such is the brashness and reformation of myths that they create a new space in Kandasamy’s *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*. This poetic panorama not only condemns the conservative means of subjugation but also doggedly strides towards a futuristic vision that remains to be shaped. The language that Kandasamy uses is purposefully murky and precarious as her poems terribly massacre patriarchal traditions.

Kandasamy subverts the mythical representation of women by crushing the veil of veneration and pseudo honor bestowed upon them and contests the air of godliness and piousness associated with Sita and Draupadi. The narratives of the period piece have become undying legends. These legends recount the accounts of women subject to manipulation and suppression in the guise of ‘pativrata dharma’. These women have become the cultural emissaries as they guard the masculine agreements. When asked to undergo another ‘agni pariksha,’ Sita finds it convenient to go beyond her designated ‘sex roles’ and reaffirm her individuality in spite of the fact that she may be condemned as evil. She develops the art of protesting and prefers to vanish forever from the tortures that are inflicted. Kandasamy portrays the legends like Sita or Draupadi not as ‘gendered subaltern’ but rebels and mutineers.

Kandasamy’s poems are fraught with the raging fires of female desires. She announces, “You are all the men for whom I would never moan, never mourn. You are the conscience on this Hindu society” (Kandasamy 8). In her poem “Random Access Man,” Sita sends away her ‘dickhead husband’ “to seek the testicle of the golden deer to activate his fervor” (46). While reframing the legend of Soorpanakha in her poem “Traitor,” Kandasamy vehemently says that for the fault of expressing her love, Soorpanakha was hushed: “He crafted it with gags, cuffs, chains, knives, harnesses. / Flattened, her protrusions torn away: ears, nose, breasts./ Taken to task, they told the world she was sharp-clawed,/Long-nosed, big-buddha-eared, pot-bellied, cross-eyed,/with a Potato-peeler voice, and a neck that grew at night” (58).

Legends put Kandasamy in the space of combativeness. She exults and takes pleasure in thrashing legends that deny women their right to live, learn, like and choose. Kandasamy proclaims in *Ms Militancy*: “I work to not only get back at you; I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs

on a stranger 's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me” (Kandasamy 8).

3. Conclusion

Kandasamy portrays the obnoxious reality of our society wherein those living in the margins are victimized based on irrational and incomprehensible notions to strip them of their fundamental rights and liberties. Her poems give voice to those who were destined to silence for ages. To make things worse, social tyranny is vindicated by the tyrants on the grounds of verna system that prevailed in the society. Kandasamy movingly chronicles the melancholies, disgrace, and cruelties undergone by those living in the fringes in *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*. Her poems are an attack on the social ills dominant in our society such as caste system, untouchability, domination, and cultural supremacy that take a heavy toll on the helpless lower caste people. She voices humanitarian perspective through her poems and records her strong protest against the grading at all levels – be it on the basis of castes, community, race or gender, underlining the significance of freedom and free spiritedness. Her poems are replete with the oppressions faced by the marginalized. She voices their freedom, parity, brotherhood and fairness to envision a space where they can afford to live with dignity and self-esteem.

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