**Voices of Resistance: Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry**

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**Abstract:** Dalit women's poetry is a powerful form of political expression that challenges the caste system and patriarchal structures in India. It gives voice to the experiences of marginalized women, exposing social injustices and demanding social change. Their poetry raises awareness about social issues, fosters community building among Dalit women, and inspires political activism. It disrupts the status quo and demands social change. *Touch*, the debut poetry collection of Meena Kandasamy, marks a significant entry into contemporary Indian poetry. Published in 2006, this collection offers a poignant exploration of caste, gender, and identity. Kandasamy uses her sharp poetic voice to address the socio-political issues that plague Indian society, particularly focusing on the experiences of Dalits and women. This paper delves into the themes, stylistic elements, and critical reception of *Touch*, highlighting its impact on modern poetry and social discourse.

**Keywords:** Dalit Poetry, Political Activism, Caste, Meena Kandaswamy

Feminist literary criticism posits that women's writing occupies a distinct space within the established literary canon. Furthermore, the act of reading and writing by women transcends mere consumption or expression; it becomes a fundamentally political act, particularly evident in the case of Dalit women's poetry. The slogan "the personal is political" captures a core tenet of feminist thought, particularly second-wave feminism. It asserts that women's lived experiences are not isolated but essentially shaped by, and contribute to, broader social and political structures, particularly those concerning gender inequality. Writing by itself becomes inevitable rather than a choice of creative expression.
As stated by Helene Cixous in her polemical essay “The Laugh of Medusa”:

Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (1)

The themes and concerns expressed in the poems of men and women may vary drastically because of the differences in the treatment they receive in society. It is both biological and sociological. We must accept the fact that though men and women belong to the same species ‘Homo Sapiens’, they are different. What women envy is not the penis that the male possesses; they envy the ‘more equal’ treatment the latter receive in the family and society. Women resent the power and agency the male alone gets. More often than not, a regional woman writer who hails from a middle class/ lower middle class background faces this crisis even more than a woman who hails from the privileged sections of the society.

Meena Kandasamy is a contemporary Indian poet, writer, and activist whose work is characterized by its fierce commitment to social justice and equality. Her poetry confronts issues such as caste oppression, gender violence, and political injustice, making her a significant voice in the landscape of modern Indian literature. Her early exposure to Tamil literature and Dravidian politics significantly influenced her writing. As an outspoken critic of caste and gender-based discrimination, Kandasamy uses her poetry as a means of protest and empowerment. Her work is a powerful testament to the resilience and resistance of marginalized communities. When we try to identify and place the Tamil Dalit woman poet Meena Kandasamy in the larger cultural and literary milieu of Tamil women writers that includes the poetry of Kutti Revathi, Sukirtharani, Salma and Malathi Maithri, we can very well see a solidarity and sisterhood among these women writers in the treatment of themes like sexuality, casteism, gender identity, nature and female experience.

Meena Kandaswamy’s poems gained wide public attention within a short span of her literary career. She rose to prominence shortly after the publication of her two poetry collections, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Besides her poetry collections, she has
also written one novel, The Gypsy Goddess (2014) and a memoir, When I hit You or The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife (2017). The themes of caste annihilation, social exclusion and gender discrimination are the recurrent themes in her writings, particularly in her poetry. She uses language as a means of resistance and proclaims a revolution through poetry. To Kandasamy, a real poet can never escape his/her politics. Shermila Rege, in her essay “Dalit Women talk Differently” states that “the category of Dalit woman is not homogeneous” (45). Kandasamy in many ways tries to break through the conventions of Western Feminism. Though there are commonalities in the forms of suppression and suffering women all over the world have to face, there are differences in the plight when it comes to a doubly or triply marginalized woman. In India, caste plays a crucial role in the condition of the excluded sections of the society. In Annihilation of Caste, Ambedkar rightly points out that “It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set in fashion, and who had the authority to force it on their inferiors” (5.8). The writings of Meena Kandasamy are particularly relevant as a counter-discourse against the hegemonic upper caste narratives. Her poems express her disenchantment with the narratives which propagate a homogeneous brand of nationalism. The disgusting details of assault in the name of caste are played down and given a lofty rhetoric of secularism, democracy and unity in diversity.

Meena Kandasamy considers writing as a tool which can bring freedom to women. She refuses to remain silent, for she believes her silence will be condemned tomorrow. Kandasamy's poetry frequently addresses the brutal realities of caste discrimination in India. Her work often reflects her own experiences as a Dalit woman and her solidarity with oppressed communities. In her poem "Ms. Militancy," she writes, "I was born with a bomb in my mouth," encapsulating the explosive power of her words against systemic injustice (Kandasamy 2010). According to Satyanarayana and Tharu, "Kandasamy's poetry unflinchingly exposes the dehumanizing effects of caste, challenging the reader to confront uncomfortable truths" (Satyanarayana & Tharu 2013). She is in a constant ‘guerilla fight’ with the iniquitous society. Her writings are very autobiographical in nature that stem out of her inner self. Unlearning caste prejudices and making herself casteless were the goals she had before her. She explodes the myth of the upper class/caste as the most heroic and
desirable among the human race by documenting the realities of suppression faced by the outcaste. The despicable and ignominious dimensions of casteism practised by the upper caste are brought to light through these poems of protest. Hindu scriptures abound with a number of commands and instructions to be practised to retain the purity of the community and maintain the caste status quo. Manusmrithi contains a lot of anti-woman and anti-Dalit ideas, to be practised by the caste Hindus, including the pouring of molten lead in the ears of an outcast if he happens to listen to the recital of the Vedas. In the poem “Touch” she exposes the trauma of untouchability. Touch is a feeling cherished by all humans. Touch is one among the five senses through which the emotions and bonding between humans get established but the same touch “When crystallized in caste” forms the basis of hatred and repulsion. She thus says to the practitioners of untouchability:

You will have known
almost Every
knowledgeable thing about
The charms and the
temptations That touch
could hold.

But, you will never have
known That touch – the
taboo

To your
transcendence
When crystallized
in caste Was a
paraphernalia of

Undeserving hate. (Touch 35)

But the same touch does not stop the upper caste man from molesting and raping the Dalit woman to satisfy his lust.

The poems “Shame” and “Narration” discuss the theme of exploitation of women under the shield of caste privileges, which protects the upper caste men alone from shame and misconduct. In “Shame”, Kandasamy says ‘Dalit Girl Raped is much too common
place’, ‘the prying eyes of the public segregate only the victim’, but for the ‘mainstreamed criminals’ ‘caste is a classic shield’. The humiliation caused to the sixteen year old girl and ‘the scars on her wrecked body are a constant reminder’ of the age old ‘disgrace’ and ‘helplessness’. Condolences are recorded only as a formality. The verbal comfort offered to the victim does not solve the real problem. The only solution the girl in the poem finds is to take an ‘elusive purification’ by taking the test of fire – ‘the ancient medicine for shame/ Alas, her death is an irrevocable side effect.’ Concurrently, the upper caste goons go scot free as they belong to the ‘superior caste’. The poem “Narration” is particularly interesting for its scathing criticism of both the men of upper caste and the men of her own community. To be a woman in a patriarchal society is almost equal to belonging to a lower caste. The situation becomes even worse in the case of a Dalit woman who is thrice marginalized and both exploited and sexexploited. Her life and dignity are threatened by the swords of patriarchy that hang above her head. The woman in the poem weeps about the plight of being molested by her landlord and the lecherous gaze of the temple priest that disrobes and defiles her. Untouchability and pollution do not hinder them from satisfying their lust. The most pitable situation is when she faces the same kind of molestation from her own man:

How can I say
anything?
Anything,
anything against
my own man?

How?

So I take shelter in
silence Wear it like
a mask, When alone
I stumble

Into a flood of incoherencies… (Touch 56)

In “Songs of Summer” she sharply criticizes the patriarchal society for treating women as sexual objects or slaves. The issues that are being dealt with in her poems are multifaceted but at the same time universal. In India alone caste creates an insanity and what we need
right now is sanity; it is the realization “that caste is one of the most insane instruments of discrimination and that casteism is actually a real psychological condition” (Jana 7). Through her poems she tries to make her point that caste exists only in the mind and nowhere else; by annihilating caste from the mind the cruel physical manifestations of untouchability and segregation can be washed off. In “Prayers” an untouchable who has partially recovered from typhoid ‘drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple’ to bow the head in prayers to ‘thank some god’. But this very act of worship was considered an encroachment and the old man was beaten to death with an iron rod. He howled in a feeble voice for a holy intervention in vain, the lifeless god only ‘watched grimly with closed eyes’. To chant prayers is the exclusive privilege of the upper castes and the ‘Dalits die, due to devotion’. She concludes the poem throwing an unanswered question at the readers:

Life teaches: there are different gods at different temples. One solitary thought haunts recollection day and night.

Where did this poor man’s sixty five year old soul go?

To heaven – to join noble martyrs who died for a cause?

Or to hell, where the gods reside, making caste laws? (Touch 57)

For this untouchable old man, caste is more cruel and worse than disease. She questions the blind belief of people who worship a non-existing virtuous god and fail to practise the basic lessons of humanity. In another poem titled “For Sale”, she draws on the irony and hypocrisy of the Brahmins as they allow a Dalit who ‘grows damn rich’ to enter the temple. He ‘buys incense for two bucks’, ‘flowers for five bucks’ and gets ‘extra blessings for twenty bucks’. He is allowed to stand in the front line with the money he possesses. Thus, the whole idea of pollution and untouchability disappears before the person with money power. The upper castes preach the doctrine of non dualism, but in practice they do the reverse. In “Prayers in the Bathroom, overheard”, a Brahmin priest recites a prayer for making the water he takes for bath as pure as the sacred rivers like the Ganga, Jamuna, and Godavari. The prayer is overheard by an untouchable pump operator, who distributes corporation water answers to his prayers in a satirical tone. According to the answers given, the priest keeps on modifying his prayer and in the end when the pump operator reveals his
identity as an untouchable ‘the learned man’ exits the bathroom without taking a shower. Kandasamy says: “After the revelation no one/ in his family takes bath/ They have now placed/ their faith in powerful deodorants” (Touch 82).

For Dalits, in each settlement there is a separate riverbank, they were not allowed to drink or bathe from the reservoir particularly reserved for the upper caste as they believed the food or water touched by a Dalit to be impure. Kandasamy recalls an incident that happened in 1985 in her poem “Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985”. A Dalit woman strongly protested against the buffalo baths in the ponds which was their only source of drinking water. Intolerant upper caste men could not stand her indignation, they avenged her through a series of crimes, violence and rape that led to the Karamchedu massacre where numerous Dalits were killed and women were raped. Ultimately the Dalits are forced to exit and ‘set on a sojourn’ as the father of our nation prescribes. This solution is still consulted as an ‘example’ by the ‘self-seeking politicians’ and results in the ‘Dalit exodus’ and ‘total surrender’. The theorization of Karma and dharma as set by the upper caste puts blame for the fate of the Dalits on the karma of their previous births. It now becomes their dharma to serve the upper caste and suffer the division of labour. The poem “Dignity” is scornful of the ‘Virtuous deeds’ done by their ‘Virtuous fathers’ and asserts the right share of dignity of Dalits:

But, don’t suppress

Our right share of
dignity. It Might even
prove helpful

If you ever
learnt that
virtue.

Though
inherited Was
nothing
beyond The
appearance
Of the footprint
Of the bird

On water. (Touch 43)

The mainstream historiography usually excludes the material history of sufferings, labour and age old enslavement of the Dalits. They are denied a reliable account of history in the mainstream historiography, which was recorded according to the subjective perception of the upper caste historians. The valuable knowledge systems practised in the field of medicine, agriculture and food culture gets little acknowledgement in society. Dalits are the ‘Unpaid teachers’ in the society. Their contributions in the field of knowledge are neither appreciated nor recognized. “Fleeting” is a poem that exclaims the loss of history, more often than not a ‘destroyed history’. Caste acts like a ‘scheming bulldozer’ that crushes them. The history written by the upper caste only reminds them of their bitter past. The centre – periphery construction often shoots from the power centres, usually occupied by the ‘elite’ minority. The practices, customs and traditions of the elite class get appropriated in the homogeneous cultural history of India but at the same time rule out the variability in the culture. Aggression is a method of breaking silence. The oppressed have risen to rebel against all those segregations. Now, it is time to assert their right to live with dignity. Revolution comes only after aggression and it is only through revolution that freedom could be achieved. Kandasamy, in her poem ‘Aggression’ warns the society about the possible outbreak of an aggression when long silenced dreams explode:

Sometimes,
The outward signals
Of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting. (Touch 38)
Identity and resistance are central to *Touch*. Kandasamy's poems are not just personal reflections but collective voices of resistance against oppression. In "Nailed," she expresses the pain and resilience of marginalized identities: "In my name, in my pain, I am nailed to the cross of caste." This poem evokes the image of crucifixion to highlight the suffering of Dalits, while also suggesting a form of martyrdom and resistance. The poem "Becoming a Brahmin: Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin" is a potent critique of the caste system in India. It uses a satirical and ironic tone to expose the arbitrary and unjust nature of caste hierarchies. The poem takes the form of an "algorithm" or a step-by-step guide, which itself is a satirical take on the idea that one's social status could be altered through prescribed actions. Kandasamy's exploration of identity in *Touch* is a profound assertion of selfhood and defiance against dehumanization.

In “Hymns of a Hag” the poet shows herself to be consumed with revenge towards the upper caste. She fancies herself as a witch killing men whom she despises. She flies to the temple streets to haunt the oppressors and to shave their heads and to cut their ‘holy threads’. She wants to ‘defile them’ and make them bleed and to ‘Dance, rejoice my black, black deed’. The rebellious nature and her aspiration for a social reform again come in the poem “We will Rebuild the Worlds”. The poem hints at the radical reform and revolution the world will witness when the voiceless come to power. She says; “and we will refresh your minds with other histories/of how/ you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples/with the smiling promises of/ heaven in the next birth/ and in this/ a place that/ never belonged”. The histories written by the Dalits will be powerful enough to set right the artificial, constructed histories of the past.

The poems of Meena Kandasamy are poems of revolt and resistance. She questions the absolute narratives and expresses a strong tendency towards self representation of the Dalit woman. Bill Ashcroft’s observation that “marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy” (*The Empire Writes Back* 112) turns out to be particularly true in the case of Kandasamy. The fact that she is writing in the English language, the language of power and prestige, also adds to the recognition she receives worldwide. *Touch* has received critical acclaim for its bold themes and innovative style. Scholars and critics have praised Kandasamy's ability to articulate the struggles of marginalized communities with
sensitivity and power. The collection has been described as a "landmark in Dalit literature" by Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) and a "significant contribution to feminist poetry" by Gopal (2012).

References


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