

A Critical Analysis On Caste, Gender And Patriarchy In Meena Kandasamy's Works

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ABSTRACT:

Women of the Dalit caste in India's literary canon create bold political statements that criticize patriarchal institutions and the caste structure as it stands in the country. This work highlights the need for social transformation by revealing systemic inequalities and giving a voice to the experiences of underprivileged women. Poems written by these women have the potential to raise awareness about social issues, to inspire political mobilization, and to facilitate the building of communities among women who are members of the Dalit community. It calls for a change in the norms that society adheres to and poses a threat to the established order. *Touch*, the first book of poems that Meena Kandasamy has ever published, is a significant contribution to the canon of contemporary Indian poets of the modern era. The ideas of gender, identity, and caste are explored in depth in this anthology, which was released in the year 2006. The inquiry into these concepts presents a lot of opportunities for reflection. Through the use of her sharp poetry language, Kandasamy highlights the socio-political challenges that have an impact on Native American culture. Her writings focus on the struggles of Dalits and women in particular, but she also addresses other issues. This examination dives into the themes, stylistic characteristics, and critical reactions to *Touch*, with a particular emphasis on how *Touch* has inspired contemporary poetry and social discourse. An in-depth analysis of the criticism that *Touch* has received is presented in this study.

Keywords: Dalit Poetry, Political Activism, Caste, contemporary, lyrical.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major tenets of feminist literary criticism is the idea that women's literature should be placed in a separate category within the established literary canon. Furthermore, the act of reading and writing by women goes beyond the simple act of consumption or expression; it becomes an act

that is essentially political. This is especially evident in the instance of Dalit women's poetry. "The personal is political" is a statement that encapsulates a fundamental principle of feminist ideology, particularly associated with the second wave of feminism. It contends that the lived experiences of women are not independent of larger social and political structures, but rather are fundamentally formed by these structures and contribute to them. In particular, it focuses on the structures that are associated with gender inequality. Writing becomes an unavoidable necessity rather than a choice of creative expression when it is done on its own.

When Helene Cixous wrote her polemical essay "The Laugh of Medusa," she made the following statement:

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.

Due to the fact that men and women are treated differently in society, the themes and issues that are expressed in the poems of men and women may radically differ from one another. In addition to being societal, it is also biological. The reality that men and women are distinct individuals, despite the fact that they are members of the same species, *Homo sapiens*, is something that we have to acknowledge. The penis that the male possesses is not what women are envious of; rather, they are envious of the 'more equal' treatment that the male receives in the realms of family and society. The power and agency that are only given to men is something that women despise. Even more frequently than a woman who comes from a privileged segment of society, a regional woman writer who comes from a middle class or lower middle class background is confronted with this dilemma. This is the case in the majority of cases.

CASTE, GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S WORKS

Meena Kandasamy is a contemporary Indian poet, writer, and activist. Her work is distinguished by its unwavering dedication to the principles of social justice and equality. Due to the fact that her poetry addresses topics such as the tyranny of castes, violence against women, and political injustice, she has established herself as a key voice in the landscape of contemporary Indian writing. The early exposure she had to Dravidian politics and Tamil literature had a tremendous impact on her writing. Kandasamy, who is a vocal opponent of inequality based on gender and caste, used her poems as a means of protesting and empowering herself. The work that

she has done is a remarkable demonstration of the resiliency and resistance of communities who have been marginalized. When we attempt to identify and place the Tamil Dalit woman poet Meena Kandasamy within the larger cultural and literary milieu of Tamil women writers, which 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 treatment of topics such as sexuality, casteism, gender identity, nature, and the female experience. Meena Kandasamy is a poet who writes in Tamil.

In a relatively short amount of time during her literary career, Meena Kandasamy's poetry garnered a significant amount of public notice. Shortly after the publication of her two collections of poems, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), she became a prominent figure in the literary world. In addition to her volumes of poetry, she has also authored a book titled "The Gypsy Goddess" (2014) and a memoir titled "When I hit You or The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" (2017). Both of these works were published in 2014. There is a common topic in her writings, particularly in her poetry, which is the eradication of castes, social exclusion, and discrimination based on gender. Through the medium of poetry, she raises the banner of a revolution and use language as a weapon of resistance. According to Kandasamy, a true poet is unable to avoid being politically involved. In her piece titled "Dalit Women talk Differently," Shermila Rege makes the assertion that "the category of Dalit woman is not homogenous."

Kandasamy makes an effort, in a variety of ways, to challenge the norms that are associated with Western feminism. However, there are variances in the predicament of a woman who is doubly or triply marginalized, despite the fact that there are similarities in the kinds of oppression and suffering that women all over the world are forced to endure. In India, caste is a significant factor that contributes to the plight of the minority groups that are excluded from society. In his book *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar makes the observation 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". Ambedkar's observation is correct. While Meena Kandasamy's writings are particularly pertinent as a counter-discourse against the dominant upper caste narratives, they are also highly relevant. She expresses her discontent with the narratives that foster a uniform kind of nationalism through the poems that she writes. The heinous facts of assaults committed in the name of caste are minimized and replaced with a high language of secularism, democracy, and togetherness in diversity.

Meena Kandasamy believes that writing is a tool that has the potential to release women from their constraints. She is adamant about not remaining silent since she is convinced that her silence will be criticized the next day. Throughout her work, Kandasamy constantly addresses the harsh reality of caste oppression in India. It is common for her work to represent her own experiences as a Dalit woman and her sympathy with populations who are oppressed within society. In her poetry "Ms. Militancy," she writes, "I was born with a bomb in my mouth," which encapsulates the explosive strength of her words against the injustices that are embedded in the system (Kandasamy 2010).

Kandasamy's poetry, as stated by Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013), "unflinchingly exposes the dehumanizing effects of caste, challenging the reader to confront uncomfortable truths." Kandasamy's poetry is a form of poetry that challenges the reader to confront uncomfortable truths. One could say that she is engaged in a never-ending "guerilla fight" with the oppressive society. Autobiographical in nature, her writings are a direct reflection of who she is on the inside. Removing the preconceptions she had learned about caste and achieving her own castelessness were the objectives she had set for herself. Through the documentation of the facts of oppression that the outcaste is subjected to, she debunks the illusion that the upper class or caste is the most heroic and attractive among the human race. This collection of protest poems sheds light on the reprehensible and shameful aspects of casteism that are practiced by those who belong to the higher caste. In order to preserve the integrity of the community and to keep the caste system in place, the Hindu scriptures contain a great deal of commandments and instructions that must be followed.

There are several anti-woman and anti-Dalit concepts contained within Manusmriti, which are intended to be practiced by caste Hindus. One of these ideas is the practice of pouring molten lead into the ears of an outcast if he occurs to listen to the recital of the Vedas for a period of time. Through the poem "Touch," she reveals the trauma that comes with being untouchable. A sensation that is treasured by all human beings is touch. However, the same touch that "When crystallized in caste" provides the basis of hatred and revulsion is one of the five senses that are responsible for the establishment of human emotions and the connection that occurs between individuals. The following is what she has to say to those who practice 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)

The same touch, however, does not prevent the upper caste guy from molesting and raping the Dalit lady in order to satiate his desire for sexual gratification. In the poems "Shame" and "Narration," the subject of exploitation of women is discussed. This occurs under the protection of caste advantages, which shield only the males of higher castes from the consequences of wrongdoing and disrespect. Kandasamy writes in his book "Shame" that "Dalit Girl Raped is much too common place," and that "the prying eyes of the public segregate only the victim." However, he also states that "caste is a classic shield" for "mainstreamed criminals."

The humiliation that was inflicted upon the girl, who was sixteen years old, as well as "the scars on her wrecked body are a constant reminder" of the disgrace and helplessness that had been around for a very long time. This is merely a formality, and condolences are not recorded. Providing the victim with verbal comfort does not cure the underlying issue that they are experiencing. However, the girl in the poem discovers that the only way to find a cure is to undergo a "elusive purification" by undergoing the test of fire, which is described as "the ancient medicine for shame." Unfortunately, her death is an irreversible side effect. Concurrently, the upper caste goons are allowed to get away with their crimes since they are members of the "superior caste." The caustic criticism that the poem "Narration" offers, not just of the men of upper caste but also of the males in her own society, is one of the qualities that makes it particularly interesting. In societies that are dominated by patriarchy, being a woman is almost the same as being a member of a lower caste. When a Dalit woman is subjected to three different forms of marginalization, in addition to being exploited and sexually exploited, the situation becomes considerably more grave. This is because this lady is also subjected to sexual exploitation.

The swords of patriarchy that are hanging above her head pose a concern for both her life and her dignity. In the poem, the woman laments the misfortune of being molested by her landlord and the lecherous stare of the temple priest who disrobes and defiles her. She also laments the fact that she gets defiled. The fact that they are untouchable and that pollution does not prevent them from gratifying their lust both. The situation that is the most pitiful is when she is subjected to the same form of sexual assault from her own intimate partner:

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 the song "Songs of Summer," she delivers a scathing critique of the patriarchal culture, which she believes treats women as

sexual objects or as slaves. The difficulties that are being addressed in her poetry are diverse, but at the same time they are problems that are experienced by everyone. It is the knowledge "that caste is one of the most insane instruments of discrimination and that casteism is actually a real psychological condition" (Jana 7). In India alone, caste is responsible for the creation of insanity, and what we require at this moment is sanity. By destroying caste from the mind, she hopes to demonstrate that it is only in the mind that caste exists; by doing so, the horrible physical manifestations of untouchability and segregation can be removed. She does this through the poetry that she has written. The story "Prayers" tells the story of an untouchable who has made a partial recovery from typhoid fever and "drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple" in order to bow his head in prayer and "thank some god."

The elderly man was put to death by being struck with an iron rod because this very act of worship was regarded as an intrusion. The lifeless god simply "watched grimly with closed eyes" while he shrieked in a faint voice for a heavenly intervention, but it was fruitless. "Dalits die due to devotion," and the only people who are allowed to say prayers are those who belong to the upper castes. Following the conclusion of the poem, she poses a question to the audience that remains unanswered:

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)

Caste is more brutal and unforgiving than disease, according to an elderly man who cannot be touched. She raises doubts about the blind faith of those individuals who choose to worship a deity that does not exist and who fail to put the fundamental truths of mankind into practice. Another poetry that she has written is named "For Sale," and it is in this poem that she calls attention to the hypocrisy and irony of the Brahmins, who let a Dalit who "grows damn rich" to enter the temple. Incense can be purchased for two dollars, flowers can be purchased for five dollars, and he can obtain more blessings for twenty dollars. With the money that he has, he is permitted to take a position of leadership in the front line.

The concept of pollution and untouchability is rendered meaningless in the presence of the individual who possesses financial power. Although they profess to adhere to the non-dualist theory, members of the upper castes actually act in the opposite manner. During the course of the story "Prayers in the Bathroom, overheard," a Brahmin priest recite a prayer with

the intention of ensuring that the water he uses for bathing is as clean as the water found in holy rivers such as the Ganga, Jamuna, and Godavari. An untouchable pump operator overhears the prayer, and in response to his pleas, he distributes water from the corporation in a manner that is sarcastic. According to the responses that were provided, the priest continues to alter his prayer, and in the end, when the pump operator discloses his identity as an untouchable, "the learned man" leaves the restroom without the opportunity to take a shower. According to Kandasamy:

"After the revelation no one/ in his family takes bath/ They have now placed/ their faith in powerful deodorants" (Touch 82).

Dalits were not permitted to drink or bathe from the reservoir that was specifically intended for the upper caste. This was due to the belief that any food or water that was touched by a Dalit was considered filthy. Each community had its own riverside that is designated for Dalits. In her poetry "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985," Kandasamy recalls an event that took place inside the year 1985. It was the only supply of drinking water for the Dalits, thus a woman from the Dalit community voiced her vehement opposition to the buffalo baths that were being conducted in the ponds. They avenged her by a sequence of crimes, assaults, and rapes that led to the Karamchedu massacre, in which a large number of Dalits were slain and women were raped. Inexplicably, upper caste males who were intolerant of her outrage could not bear her outrage. As the father of our nation prescribes, the Dalits are ultimately compelled to leave and "set on a sojourn" in order to escape.

The "self-seeking politicians" continue to look to this solution as a "example," which ultimately leads to the "transfer of the Dalits" and the "total surrender." As a result of the upper caste's interpretation of karma and dharma, the fate of the Dalits is attributed to the karma of their previous lives, which is a theoretical framework. Serving the upper caste and enduring the division of labor is now considered to be their dharma. Regarding the "virtuous deeds" that were performed by their "virtuous fathers," the poem "Dignity" expresses disdain and asserts that Dalits deserve their fair share of dignity:

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)

In most cases, the materials history of the Dalits' miseries, labor, and centuries-old captivity are not included in the mainstream historiography. Due to the fact that the mainstream historiography was documented according to the

subjective perception of the historians from the upper castes, they are not provided with a trustworthy account of history. When it comes to the fields of medicine, agriculture, and food culture, the valuable knowledge systems that are practiced receive very little recognition from society. In today's society, Dalits are called the "unpaid teachers." There is no appreciation nor recognition for the contributions that they have made to the realm of knowledge. "Fleeting" is a poem that laments the loss of history, and more often than not, it is a piece of history that has been taken away. They are crushed by caste, which may be compared to a "scheming bulldozer."

It is only the history that was created by the upper caste that serves to remind them of their arduous history. The power centers, which are typically occupied by the "elite" minority, are frequently the locations from whence the center-periphery development originates. In India's cultural history, which is characterized by a homogeneous cultural history, the behaviors, habits, and traditions of the elite class are appropriated, but at the same time, the possibility of cultural diversity is eliminated. One way to break the quiet is by the use of aggression. In order to fight against all of those segregations, individuals who are oppressed have risen up. Let us now make it clear that they have the right to live their lives with dignity. Only after aggression does revolution occur, and freedom can only be attained via revolution. Revolution is the only way to acquire freedom. In her poem "Aggression," Kandasamy issues a warning to the society about the potential for an eruption of hostility in the event that long-suppressed dreams suddenly come to life:

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)

When it comes to Touch, identity and resistance are at the center. When it comes to fight against injustice, Kandasamy's poetry are not simply personal views but rather collective voices. She expresses the anguish and resiliency of disadvantaged identities in the song "Nailed," which reads as follows: "In my name, in my pain, I am nailed to the cross of caste." Not only does this poetry represent a form of martyrdom and struggle, but it also brings to mind the idea of crucifixion, which serves to highlight the suffering of Dalits. It is a powerful critique of the caste system that exists in India that the poem "Becoming a Brahmin: Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin" is written. The arbitrary and unjust character of caste hierarchies is brought to light through the employment of a tone that is both humorous and ironological. The poem is written in the form of a "algorithm" or a step-by-step guide, which is a satirical take on the concept that one's

social position have the potential to be transformed by the performance of certain behaviors. A powerful declaration of selfhood and a rebellion against dehumanization, Kandasamy's investigation of identity in *Touch* is a work of art.

In the poem "Hymns of a Hag," the author reveals that she is obsessed with exacting retribution on those who belong to the upper caste. She allows herself to fantasize about being a witch who kills guys whom she despises. She takes flight to the streets of the temple in order to carry out her vengeance against the oppressors, shave their heads, and cut their "holy threads." The phrase "Dance, rejoice my black, black deed" is what she wants to accomplish in addition to "defile them" and "make them bleed." The poem "We will Rebuild the Worlds" is another example of her defiant personality and her desire to see societal change brought about. The poem alludes to the revolutionary and revolutionary reform that will take place all around the world when those who are voiceless come to power. The following is what she has to say: "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 place that never belonged to you." In the future, the histories that are produced by the Dalits will have the capacity to rectify the artificial and fabricated histories that have been written in the past.

CONCLUSION

Poetry written by Meena Kandasamy is characterized by a sense of defiance and resistance. By expressing a strong predisposition towards self-representation of the Dalit woman, she calls into question the absolute narratives that have been presented. It turns out that the observation made by Bill Ashcroft, which states that "marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy" (The Empire Writes Back 112), is especially applicable to the situation of Kandasamy. The fact that she is writing in English, which is often regarded as the language of authority and status, is another factor that contributes to the widespread recognition that she obtains. For its daring topics and forward-thinking approach, *Touch* has garnered praise from the criticism community. Kandasamy's ability to communicate the struggles of oppressed people with empathy and power has garnered appreciation from academics and critics alike. The book has been referred to as a "significant contribution to feminist poetry" by Gopal (2012) and a "landmark in Dalit literature" by Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013). Both of these descriptions accurately characterize the anthology.

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