

A Critical Study of Meena Kandasamy's Ms Militancy

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Abstract: Meena Kandasamy is the polemical writer who utilizes her pen as a sword to fight the monster that is Caste. 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. Famous for her astringent attack on the social doldrums of the constructed domination of women, Meena Kandasamy; a poet, writer, translator, and activist is one of the boldest voices of the angry, young Indian woman today. She, as a champion of Dalit's rights, uses her literary eminence to draw public attention to the plight of the marginalized, even as she draws upon her Dalit identity to enrich her works and to crave for herself– and Dalit women in general – a special niche in the world of letters. The paper intends to study her collection of poetry entitled Ms Militancy (2010) and aims to unleash the power and sexual politics by re-interpreting Hindu and Tamil myths, ancient texts and popular folk tales. It will also interrogate how in the name of tradition women's sexuality is controlled, a Sita wronged, a Draupadi wrecked. And finally, it will address women especially Dalit women, who are experiencing extreme violence due to double colonization and are in search of their identity and individuality, space and freedom.

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Introduction:

Meena Kandasamy is one such name who, though precluded from the social criteria for being a Dalit woman based in the Tamil region, continues to prove her skills of poetry and writing in her works. She is the first Indian woman writer writing Dalit poetry in English exhibiting her concerns on sexual politics, gender-inequality, and caste annihilation in her works. In her anthology of poetry entitled Ms Militancy (2010), she has applied a feminist hermeneutic perspective to re-read the scriptures, cultural norms, social and moral codes and value systems. A hermeneutical legacy is an intrinsic aspect of Indian thought and knowledge and all religious, cultural and aesthetic texts have been interpreted by male thinkers from a male perspective. Mythological prototypes considered as an idealized example of masculinity and femininity are reiterated which strengthens the immoral power relations between men and women. Such a revisionist account aims to interrogate patriarchal sanctioned norms, religious texts, epics, and signifiers from a woman-centered perspective in order to unveil its intrinsic androcentric bias thereby seeking to re-establish a strong woman-centric perspective.

Though Indian women writing poetry in English have adopted 'gender' as a principle to ground their experiences, articulating a quest for identity, self-discovery, self-assertion; writing extensively about the drudgery and drabness of quotidian life, intricacies of familial relationships, vicissitudes of

love-experience and man-woman relationship; in order to challenge phallogocentric discourse, interrogate patriarchal canons and forge an idiom and language steeped in feminine sensibility; yet their protest is mired in individualistic perspective. The tropes of 'desire' 'sexuality' and 'body' do emerge as central to the lexicon and idiom of these women but the representation of the category of 'woman' largely remains monolithic, centered on self. The engagement with 'female body,' in visualizing it as the site where the intersectional ideologies of caste, class and gender collude remains absent. The nexus/links between larger structures of domination like religion, patriarchy, caste system that discursively construct the 'subjectivity' of and 'difference' amongst Indian women, remain largely unexplored.

It is widely acknowledged that traditional Indian society was based on varna and jati. This system is very ancient in origin and through the passage of time it has undergone profound changes, but caste still a very powerful institution in our socio-economic, religious and political organization. The most disquietening and disturbing feature connected with the caste system has been the concept of untouchability. Those who were engaged in unclean occupation were considered as polluted persons and had to go with this stigma in the prevailing reality and had to accept for themselves the status of untouchables. Over the period of time, the various social and religious movements strived to make a

dent in the social system in favour of the Dalits. Several saints, social reformers and political leaders from both the Dalits and non-Dalits had tried their best for the eradication of untouchability from the social fabric. But the impact of some reform movements was short-lived because the reformers fought within the caste system. However, their attempt was to facilitate certain caste groups simply to move up within the caste hierarchy through sanskritization. In fact, these movements were reform oriented rather than providing protection against the existing inequality in the social system.

Writers in Indian English literature strived for the upliftment of Indian society for which they were supposed take on board every section of the society in their writings. These writers never hesitated in portraying the actual status of the people in Indian society. More and more writers took pen to portray the marginalized sections of the society, female issues, dalit issues, untouchability were main concerns of their writing. The post colonial writings in Indian English are mainly revolutionary writings. Indian English writers inspired by the French Revolution, Marxist Revolution, American Revolution took their writings towards the upliftment of oppressed sections of the society. It is in this sense that the name of Meena Kandasamy is important. Meena Kandasamy known as Ms Militancy not only raised the issues of dalits but to a great extent she may be called as Dalit-Feminist writer.

Indian poetry expresses the collective consciousness of India. It reflects the traditions of the country and exposes the glorious past. Poets have become the voice of the commoner. The realities of life across borders have been given life in their poems. In spite of many obstacles women writers have pushed aside boundaries and their poems have made way to the world out there. Dalit literature has emerged out as separate category in Indian Literature. A young and rebellious woman poet, Meena Kandasamy in her poem collection Ms. Militancy focuses on caste oppression and women issues. The poems in the collection focus on women empowerment and psychological pressures of women and how the poet plans to grant the women an identity. Meena Kandasamy's first poetry collection was published in 2006 named Touch. This paper throws light on two poems of the collection, Ms Militancy and the Dead woman walking. Dead woman walking is a poem that portrays the emotional and physical torments the subjugated of the society face, especially the women of the lower strata of the society. The poet has brought in the mythological figure, Karaikkal Ammayar who is a voice to the Dalit women who are exploited by the men through various means to satisfy their needs. Karaikkal

Ammayar's merchant husband abandoned her for a "fresh and formless wife" in spite of her beauty, magic of her love. Karaikkal Ammayar's devotion and love for Lord Shiva gave a picture to her husband as if she is a mystic. Meena Kandasamy slips into the shoes of Karaikkal Ammayar in order to explain the pain women face when deserted by their husbands, "I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to god." (Kandasamy 17).

Female writers of Indian English literature, English literature, American Literature in the postcolonial times primarily focused upon the problems faced and violence meted out to the women in their day to day life. In their writings these female writers stressed upon the social upliftment of the women. The marginalized and alienated women found their voice in the writings of these female writers. While as dalit women writers focused upon the problems faced by the dalit women in india and tried their best to abolish this social bias meted out to the dalits in general and dalit women in particular by giving their sigs a rebellious voice in their writings. Meena Kandasamy's writings prove that to be a female writer and a Dalit female writer is not one and the same. Tamil Dalit women are triply victimized, and the new generation of Dalit woman are not ready to accept this forced social inequality. They want the whole world to hear of their plight. They want to retaliate. They are aware of the society which only controls them by pretending to agree to all their demands. They are not fighting for a place in the old age stifling tradition. They want to rebuild this pretence of a respectable tradition. Referring to her anxiety of living in this unkind society Kamala Das says,

"Dying and the resurrecting herself again and again in a

country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and

perhaps religion, Meena carries as her twin self her shadow the

dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive".

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.

Meena Kandasamy is the polemical writer who utilizes her pen as a sword to fight the monster that is Caste. 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 ably dramatizes and clarifies the multiplicity in the uniformity. In an attempt to confront such a constructed 'sisterhood', Kandasamy advocates a sisterhood within the community (here, of sex workers) in *Backstreet Girls*- where she exclaims aloud 'to the moral police' that

Tongues untied, we swallow suns.

Sure as sluts, we strip random men.

There's self love on our minds.

And yes, my dear, we are all friends.

Meena Kandasamy, through her poems questioned all the atrocities and she reflects pain, agony, violence and restrictions of being Dalit. Meena Kandasamy indited the story of her own domesticity and the subordinated statues which she had experienced through their prevarication and she had written the story of her own seclusion within the abode and in the society. Her themes transcend the

personal, because what she endeavours to poetise is the experience of women. Meena Kandasamy addresses the Dalit community and reflects how the Dalit subaltern women are in search for self identity or individuality in the world where sexist and racist definitions of women prevail. She handles her poems with all its precision of the emergence of new woman who has transcended the boundaries of the female gender. Meena Kandasamy materializes the advent of these unprecedented women in Celestial celebrities, by displacing them from their celestial and mythological positions. She articulates, almost smugly, how

The rivers bear the names

Of fallen women exiled to earth

When the heavens found them

Too bloody hot to handle

This remains another revolutionary use of mythology by the poet. Positively, women in her poetry are in a constant pursuit to assert their subjectivity.

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. Kandasamy's poem *Touch* voices her sentiments towards the predicament of her community set by the starkly biased and hypocritical Hindu Brahmanical system:

But, you will never have known

that touch—the taboo

to your transcendence,

when crystallized in caste

was a paraphernalia of

undeserving hate. (36–41)

Kandasamy tries to prove the serenity of the touch which has been unnaturally transformed into a tabooed form when a "touchable" gets touched by an untouchable human being; the traditional Indian myth of impurity revives itself. The mere touch of a "classless" can create havoc in a caste Brahmin's world-order; everything becomes impure: water, dynasty, and even God. She explores a wide range of subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulation. Her poetry

arises not out of reading and knowledge, but out of active engagement. Touch is rich with varied dexterity that explores the states of mind and genuine feminine sentiments.

Her poetry is at best of private sensibility. Her consciousness is firmly yoked to the world around her, a world characterised by ecstasy and pain, love and despair. Meena Kandasamy regards her poetic corpus as a process of coming to terms with her identity and consciousness. Her poetic self gasps in darkness to search for her emotional root proclaiming it as her heritage. This becomes a source of vitality for the poet's journey. Kandasamy problematizes the sense of touch in her poem Touch.

But, you will never have known

The touch—the taboo

To your transcendence,

when crystallized is caste

was a paraphernalia of undeserving hate.

Conclusion: Meena Kandasamy is unabashedly angry in her works as she goes about deconstructing the stereotypical narrative of women being meek and submissive. Her reinterpretation of myth focused primarily on women's experiences, their personhood and their right to lead a life or to connect with a life of nobility and dignity. She celebrates being vocal about the female body and shows resistance through her poems. Her poetry eventuate her wish to revitalize the third world women and to cajole them to give wings to their dreams, desires, choices, independent views and to stand to speak for themselves by ensuing rebellion against patriarchal chauvinism and class system. Almost two decades of twenty-first century have passed, an era where the gender systems are changing so, we need to change our perspectives. What women want in this age is that Eve should be celebrated as a saviour and not as a sinner to be subdued under humiliation. A woman in a Dalit community is a "Dalit among the Dalits". In spite of being far more sidelined than men, Dalit women have also contributed sufficiently to Dalit literature. Dalit women poets feel strongly that Dalit woman issues have not been adequately represented in the mainstream. Condemned for centuries to a life of bondage, basic needs and questions of survival are still central for Dalit women. To understand this 'caste-gender mechanism' is not as easy as it seems. The reality is that to be a female writer and a Dalit female writer is not one and the same. Some upper-caste feminist thinkers "...who feel that women of all communities and Dalits are both victimized and discriminated by the male chauvinists and therefore all women are Dalits! These intellectuals do not, for a moment, think of Dalits who are also women. In spite of their awareness that women are divided along caste and class lines, they comfortably

draw the parity between 'women' and 'Dalit's'. Women Dalit writers like Meena Kandasamy makes voice of protest. She made her 'Touch' really burning to patriarchal high caste.

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