

Body and Sexuality: Reading Meena Kandasamy's Ms Militancy as Poems of Resistance

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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. 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. 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 out rightly 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.

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Introduction:

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.

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 the y are at loss of words once the y 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 out rightly 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:

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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