



The Angry young Dalit Voice of Aesthetics Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's Selected Poems

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Date of Submission: 28-06-2024

Date of Acceptance: 06-07-2024

Abstract:

Dalit literature is based on Dalit consciousness and it represents the harsh lived experiences of marginalized Dalit people.

Although Indian literature and culture has been following among the most ancient traditional heritage in the world, the literature rarely focuses on the problems of inequality, poverty, and pain of the down-trodden people. Indian society was very clearly demarcated through a clear gradation in the exercises of power and privilege. The reason behind this disparity is that the pen has always been in the hand of those who have wielded power and position. Dalit literature has formed an alternative culture, ruptures the structured social frames and it results in the production of counter cultural resistance to existing and predominating culture of India. The literary tradition of Indian narrative technique and language is replaced by the auto narrative of Dalit writers. Dalit literature based on the emerging Dalit consciousness of the marginalized Dalit people. As Dalit literature is primarily a literature of resistance, it generally consists of autobiography and fictionalized incidents which depict the solid reality and the struggle of their life. So usually they avoid expressing their emotions in poetic diction. That is why there are very few number of dalit poets who often echo either the agony of the repressed or the anger of the rebel is suspicious of convention and protests against the hegemony of caste and class. The expression of intense emotions in unembellished, direct language is a major characteristic of Dalit poetry. Among the major poets Meena Kandasamy is one of the eminent dalit female poets whose poetry projects the discursivity in the micro-politics of power and oppression. The attempt of this paper entails an exploration of the depiction of some recurrent themes in Kandasamy's poetry like sexuality, gender roles, feministic approaches, and her aesthetic resistance in her angry young voice, which carries a vital

importance in the critical study of gender roles within feminist discourse.

Key words: Dalit-poetry, resistance, feminism, gender role, aesthetics.

I. Introduction:

A writer of Dalit literature is a literary activist who through his work gives voice to his protest and in the process various hidden agendas, motives, truths, intentions, inordinate ambitions get a proper exposure and in this capacity the writer instills knowledge and fear in the audiences creating a possibility of collective awareness and timely action which help in sustenance of life. Aristotelian Idea of "Poetics" is totally conferred, when we look after the active phenomenon of the creation of art that is iconoclastic, consciousness-raising, and genuine and a form of resistance. When Reality manifests itself through art, using images, symbols and metaphors, paradoxes and rhetoric pertaining to real-life situations; various discrepancies, severities and flaws resurface making art a weapon against multifarious, unmarked injustices and violence. Dalit Poetry reveals this social reality inviting the readers to a world of deprivations, hopelessness, anguish, pain, anger, where darkness inhabits physical, material, mental spaces; where the question of purity and impurity is predominant; despair is the order and habit of life, liberation is possible only through death and there is a sense of guilty, fear, loss of control over life. Dalit Poetry attempts to break the dangerous silence of the graveyard that persists and pervades the history of a race; speaking to the readers assertively aloud about the whispers and outcries of the oppressed. Similar to their autobiographical writings there is also an autobiographical note readers can sensed in dalit poetry.

Whatever may be the reasons, there are numerous young Indian Dalit poets and their poetry is brilliant in terms of form and content and invites



a fair evaluation of their craft. One of such outstanding women writers in India, is Meena Kandasamy, a young Chennai based poet, fiction writer and translator. Her first book *Touch* came out from Peacock Books, Mumbai in 2006. It contains Foreword by renowned poetess Kamala Das, where she finds her 'poetic vision' appreciable. She is all praise for Meena's verse that "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" In her foreword to Meena's *Touch*.

Kandasamy regards her poetic corpus as a process of coming to terms with her identity and consciousness, she declares her "womanness, Tamilness and low/outcasteness" are labels that she wears with pride. Her poetry reflects her awareness of what it means to be a woman in a caste ridden social environment of Tamil Nadu. For Kandasamy, 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 in the Indian context where to be a woman and to be a Dalit woman is to be doubly marginalized and oppressed. Meena Kandasamy is considered as an exceptional figure among the dalit writers not only because she just only maintains her focus, in most of her writing, on caste and particularly on the plight of women belonging to the Dalit community, even because she is hailed as the first Indian poet, writing Dalit poetry in English.

In the book *Dalit Literature and criticism* Raj Kumar discussed about the emergence and exercise of the prevalent of Dalit literature. Indian society for centuries has been a hierarchical civilization with a clear gradation of the exercise of power. Michel Foucault's thesis of knowledge and power can be applied in the emergence and relevance of the dalit literature. His premise is that knowledge –its production and dissemination– cannot be separated from the complex activity of domination.

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as negative instance whose function is repressive. (Foucault, 119)

This concept of power relations very precisely happened in the caste-ridden society. The hegemony of the high castes is very pervasive

because the all knowledge is generated, processed and channelized by them. They use Sanskrit language and barred Dalits and Women from having access to this language. In order to this reading and writing were not allowed for the Dalit writers. They articulate their artistic energies through orally, mostly through songs and poetry. This emerging folk creativities were only performed by untouchables, participated by the untouchables, pleased by the untouchables or rather marginal uncultured and uncivilized groups. Upper class believed that even viewing these performances would be 'polluting' them.

Thus during the Bhakti movement roughly from eight to eighteen century we got an ear to the voices of the untouchables through several songs and poetries. Chokhamela, a Dalit (Mahar) saint-poet of Maharashtra, writes *abhangas*. There was the tailor Namdev, the weaver Kabir and the cobbler Ravidas. The language of their poems and songs is the local colloquial language. *Dohas* and *Abhangas* very often uses the metaphor connected with their daily works and sometimes imbued with philosophical connotations. Kabir protests against the glaring disparity between rich and poor and high and low caste. He emphasis on the direct relationship with God without mediation of Brahmins and Mullahs. In one of the *Abhangas* Chokhamela writes that he has born as an outcaste Mahar because of his punishment he says,

*'Why have you thrown
this challenge god?
Solve this riddle of mine;
enter my shoes, know
in your own self'* (Mokashi-Punekar¹⁴)

After considering Dalit Panther movement in 1972 and Dr Ambedkar's vision of 'Educate, Agitate, and Organize: Have faith in your strength', Dalit woman gets bloom in a very small span of time. Their first significant achievement is their education and the second is their consistence progressive writing which gradually gives them a social space. While Dalit Women Poets are struggling to justify with their identities in their poems, mainstream poets are talking about love, patriarchy, equality, beauty, religion, myths and legends, social class, heritage, consciousness, position, children, food, economy, etc. Dalit poets concern is more liberal and autobiographical compare to other modern poets. Their poetry is their past and present and future hence it is rebellious as well as reflective in nature. With regard to the poems penned by women Dalit writers, Eleanor Zelliott 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).

To provide the dalit women their due places, Sharmila Rege rightly points out that “Since many of the vocal feminists of the 1970s were white, middle class and university educated, it was their experience which came to be universalized as ‘women's experience’. From such an epistemological position, there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of Dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood” (Rege 47-52) Meena Kandasamy thus the first Indian woman writer to champion the cause of Dalit individuals in general and Dalit women in particular. She articulates the suffering and oppression that the Dalit women are subjected to and very minutely details the unrelenting experiences of Dalit women. Her writing aims to deconstruct trauma and violence, while spotlighting the militant resistance against caste, gender, and ethnic oppressions. Kandasamy acknowledges in one of her interviews with Ujjwal Jana “*The struggle to annihilate caste will be victorious*”, that she chose poetry consciously, because it deals with language and language is the site of subjugation and oppression. It is poetry which has the power to challenge the oppression of language and its inequalities. She offers her resistance through language. She is conscious of her being a Dalit and a feminist. Kandasamy thinks that writing in English has a power to reach the corridors of power and gain a wider audience. Kamala Das, struggles for her language too, 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. Following the path

of Kamala Das, in her poem “Mulligatawny dreams”, she says that she dreams of an english which is free of white means sway and from the control of elite society. An english which she thinks will be full of the words of own mother tongue.

“I dream of an english
full of the words of my language
an english in small letters
an english that shall tire a white man's
tongue...”

In another poem “*Touch*” she glorifies the main essence of touch. She says touch is the elementary sensation which keeps oneself retained with their self and as well as to this earth. Though the essence of touch is served in different caters to the different people such as upper caste people enjoyed being touched after being transcended in ling mediation and after awakening Kundalini. But that touch foe the untouchable is a taboo. Their own touch cannot even transcend their untouchability. Touch for the upper caste means ‘connection’ where as touch foe the lower caste means ‘rejection’.

“But, you will never have known
that touch—the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate.”

In another poem ‘Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985’, she lashes out at the act and attitude of the people of the higher caste by recapturing the massacre of Karamchedu, Andhra Pradesh in 1985, where many low caste men were killed and their women were raped by the upper caste people, “Her indignation is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes. Killings.” (Kandasamy,52). She is again taking instances from Mahabharata and depicts the caste discrimination in that seminal text, which always justifies the caste hierarchies. She debunks Hinduism. She critiques the mythological stories which are replete with oppression of the Shudra, the lowest caste. The poems titled ‘Ekalaivan’ she takes up the episode of the Mahabharata where Dronacharya declines to train Ekalavya because of his birth in a lower caste rather than Kshatriya. Where Ekalavya was debarred from the art of archery by the great Guru Dronacharya, and had to pay a heavy price for being a tribe- man of so-called low caste. He possessed the noblest of soul character. He parted with his thumb only to gratify the will of a guru who had not taught him rather humiliated him by debarring from learning archery. His right thumb was amputated just because he would not become



better archer than a boy of upper caste. The poem runs thus:

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)

In her poem she not only talks about the caste discrimination but her affirmation towards the feminism, asserts an individual place, she asserts her dignity as a woman and as a dalit. Gopal Guru Says in the article 'Dalit Woman Talk Differently': "The independent and autonomous organisation of dalit women has the potential to counter dalit patriarchy from within and state-sponsored globalisation from without". 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). In another title of the poem is "Dignity" asserts dalit women's awakening consciousness and concern about her dignity,

Sons of the oppressor castes
we don't stop you
from continuing
to tend centuries
of cultivated superegos.
We will even let you wallow
in the rare happiness
that hierarchy provides.

But, don't suppress our rightful share of dignity.

She again talks about woman sexuality and prostitution where woman are not treated as a human being even. Lower castes woman sometimes forced to be a prostitute just because of her poverty. It is the belief of the upper caste man that lower caste woman are meant to fulfill their sexual desire. In the poem *Mascara* she very ironically tales the plight of a prostitute. She uses the symbol of the vindictive female body as a means of defiance and confrontation against the patriarchal subjugation of women.

The last thing she does
before she gets ready to die
once more, of violation,
she applies the mascara.

In another poem entitled "Shame" the poet describes the fate of a gang-raped girl who fails to gain any kind sympathy from the people because she was a Dalit. It is the victim who gets victimized time and again. Gopal Guru says "also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in

terms of intensity and magnitude". It is the food and water, the most precious commodities for which a Dalit has to struggle the most.

Public's prying eyes
segregate her—the victim.
But, the criminals have
Already mainstreamed—

Their caste is a classic shield.

Kandasamy's second collection *Ms. Militancy* includes full-blooded and highly experimental poems which challenge the dominant mode in contemporary Indian poetry in English. Her second anthology *Ms. Militancy* (2010) is flavoured with an experienced wisdom of the gendered and caste-based issues prevalent in society. These poems portray the "twice Dalit" state of Dalit women. They speak against the prevalent structures, ancient conventions and customs which have been and still are used for repeated subjugation. Kandasamy attempts to deconstruct the idea of Western Feminism which tries to universalize the female experience. Apart from asserting her varied cultural and social identities, Kandasamy works at subverting them through poetry. She takes images of female characters from existing male literature and reconstructs them to portray an alternative image of them. In her introduction to *Ms. Militancy*, she writes, "My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs onto a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me" (Kandasamy 9).

The title poem of her anthology *Ms. Militancy* is named after the revolutionary female character of Kannaki in the classic Tamil text *Silapathikaram*. Kannaki, though initially portrayed as a subject of patriarchy in the play, towards the end symbolizes female revolution of such intensity that Kandasamy places her as the epitome of the revolt she seeks to see in the female Dalit persona. She articulates: "Vending vengeance, she made a bomb of her left breast and blew up the blasted city" (Kandasamy, *Ms. Militancy* 21–22).

Critics claim to read tinges of 'hysteria' in Kandasamy's poetry. Kandasamy states, "Society will not let angry young women exist, we will be labelled hysterics" (22). Women aren't allowed to rebel or rage. If they do, they are tagged as hysterical. This fiercely biased view of patriarchy which has hitherto silenced women from expressing their stark resentment towards prevalent ideologies is challenged by each of Kandasamy's female protagonists in the poems of *Ms. Militancy*.



Gopal Guru gives a details significance of Dalit women's representation as they are facing a noval struggle unlike the other uppercaste females, they both have internal and external factors:

Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the' patriarchal domination within the dalits). (p, 2548)

Karukku means palmyra leaves, which, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. By a felicitous pun, the Tamil word *Karukku*, containing the word hare, embryo or seed, also means freshness, newness. In her foreword, Bama draws attention to the symbol, and refers to the words in Hebrews (New Testament), "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews, 4:10)

"Backstreet Girls" is a poem addressed to the moral police. This poem breaks all shackles and grants independence to women. They don't have to play by the rules anymore. Like men, they too can act according to their will. They can choose their own roles – "sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews". No more can they be kept within the iron bars of culture and tradition. No Manu can limit or contain them. Men can no longer choose them for wives but they are the ones who pick up and "strip random men". The poem ends with a note. "We (women) are not the ones you can sentence for life." (14) This is the freedom Meena Kandasamy wants to achieve for her people.

"Moon-gazers" depicts the unquestionable superiority of non-dalits over the dalits the poet brings in a class room situation in which the teacher talks about a bird that watches the moon through out the right when a girl questions that the bird does on new moon days. She is seen as impudent and is mocked at. She sinks into the teachers limitless eyes without ever reaching the surface. This is the common fate shared by all the dalits. They are force to oblige without any questions and made to lead a passive life devoid of any sign of existence. In this way they always shup them up and break down their confidence level which kandasamy delicately presents in this poem.

I stand up and ask,
What does that bird do on new moon nights?
Peeved by what she thinks is impudence,
The teacher says the bird watches my face.
The class turns all at once, stares at me.
Ashamed, I shrink, I sit. (p, 33)

In many of her poems, time and again, we see her offering the written word or rather poetry as a source of deliverance to Dalit women. In *Nailed*, her famous line: "*Men are afraid of any woman who make poetry / and dangerous Portents*" (p, 1–2), we see her trying to propagate feminism through words and the act of writing. Writing comes across as a means of deliverance and protest for dalit women.

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 that is -patriarchy, race and domination by first world feminists. This essay addresses the way in which the "Subaltern" woman is constructed, as absent or silent, someone who is not listened to. 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. In Ape Theatre, Suhasini Srihari comments: Her poems reflect a blatant crisis in dalit literature — that is, a purely dalit or purely feminist movement cannot adequately help dalit women. It is in this context that Kandasamy's poems reiterate on a collective dalit women voice, where caste and gender play a vital role in doubly victimising a human entity.

II. Conclusion:

Meena Kandasamy is one among those few Indian poets who have managed to convert their deepest anguish into brilliant poetry. The poet herself has a militant spirit. She takes up myths and characters from Classics myth and demythifies them by providing them with an identity entirely different from their original one. As a woman, she has forced her way to the forefront to represent her community through her powerful language and rebellious writing. Her soul is endlessly protested through an aesthetic resistance. Most of her themes and her choices of diction are taboos in the cultural context of India but she never hesitate to utter her



dignity through her angry young voice. This can be justified because crude realities cannot be explained in sophisticated forms and language. As Ranjit Hoskote puts it in his review of “Ms Militancy” in *The Biblio*, “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).

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