

## INTERROGATING CASTE AND GENDER MARGINALISATION-A READING OF MEENA KANDASAMY'S SELECT POEMS

By

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### Abstract

*Indian English poetry has risen above the hegemonic canonization of art and has embraced multiple concerns that touch the lives of the hitherto muted subalterns. By expressing the malaise that throngs the lives of the marginalised section of the Indian society, Indian English poetry by women has given voice to the voiceless. Dalit women's writings bespeak of uncharted territories of caste-ridden violence, discrimination, and the burden of victim-blaming carried by every Dalit. Their writing impacts their very existence in the socio-cultural dynamics as it subtly marks their shift from a peripheral position to a central one. Dalit history is a history of torment and trauma, of agony and endless aching. It is herein that Meena Kandasamy, in keeping with the true spirit of the marginalised subaltern historian, critiques the homogenising propensity of the narrative of national history and thereby tries to advance an alternate version of history for the Dalits by reconstructing their past which remained always subdued. A voice of vehement dissent and resistance to marginalisation permeates her entire poetic oeuvre. This paper tries to underscore the poetics of protest and resistance as evinced in some of Meena Kandasamy's poems.*

**Keywords:** *marginalisation, caste, gender, meena kandasamy, protest, resistance.*

### Introduction

The inception of caste segregated, gruesome existence of the people from the lower caste in India date back to the age when Manu, the lawgiver of ancient India penned down his "Manusmriti" which is considered to be the fountainhead of social structure formation and legal dictates of Indian society and the earliest known Dharmasastra of Hinduism. Here he divided Indians into four major classes, which is known as "Varnashrama". This "Varnashrama" constitutes a Hindu class structure. Brahmins who were mostly priests and students are placed at the highest of this caste hierarchy. They are

followed by Kshatriya, who were kings, governors, warriors and soldiers, Vaishyas who were cattle herders, agriculturists, artisans and merchants, and Shudras who were considered to be subservient to all and were mostly labourers. But apart from these four varnas, another group of people was those hapless ones who were not considered to be included in this "Varnashrama" system and were regarded as untouchables. They became subject to the untold miseries of caste segregation and caste politics in India, where humiliation and forbearance became their only companions. They were strictly marginalised from mainstream society and

were relegated to a life of ignominy and ignorance. They were denied the fundamental right to educate themselves and if they defied these social norms or ever attempted to claim equal rights, they became the victim of the violence of caste discrimination and politics. The sordid details of the unnerving trials and tribulation in the lives of the Dalit remained covert in the mainstream narratives. Even in Post-independence India, the scenario remained unaltered where the people from the upper castes rose to power and the people from the lower castes were pushed to the fringes of the nation. Dalits were treated like sub-humans. The nationalist leaders evaded their responsibility to empower the marginalized people from the lower castes and convinced them about the apparent compatibility of the existing social order. It was Babasaheb Ambedkar who first set off to encourage the Dalits through proper education and also wished to convert them to Buddhism so as to salvage them from the violence of caste discrimination and caste stereotypes which have turned out to be a sad reality of Hinduism. Though their status has risen considerably within the recent past, the pain caused by the stings of cruelty remains deep within and therefore the discrimination has not been completely done away with. The impetus which had been provided by Ambedkar, emboldened the Dalits at large and gradually we find the Indian literary scene being metamorphosed by the appearance of Dalit writers.

Marxist criticism locates art within the socio-political milieu of an era. They argue that art is essentially ideological, which most of the time reverberates the dominant ideologies of the society. But one among the eminent Marxist critics Louis Althusser held that though art usually conforms to the dominant ideologies of the society, sometimes it also distances from it, which is also echoed by cultural materialists like Allan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore who formulated a concept called “dissident reading”, which aims at unearthing the subaltern voices of resistance to dominant social forces in art and other cultural forms. New historicists and Cultural materialists propound that literary, cultural and other historical narratives function as a location of circulation of power relations, where it works in a more insidious way since they influence and shape the very thought process of the individuals and convince them about the apparent compatibility of the prevailing system. The postmodern social theorist Michel Foucault stated within the first volume of his dawn-breaking book *History of Sexuality* that “where there's power there's resistance and yet, and rather consequently, this resistance isn't during a position of exteriority in relation in reference to power” (Foucault 95). So, the narratives which incorporate the prevalent power relations in order to retain the hegemonic structure of the society unaffected, need to be re-read and problematized so that to unravel the discursive traces of voices of others. Dalit literature crops up within the

middle of the twentieth century initially in Maharashtra as a counter-discourse to mainstream literature and therefore as a counter canon to the very process of mainstream canonization of literature and other forms of art and culture. The governing modalities of Dalit literature resemble that of Subaltern Studies which came to the fore in the middle of the twentieth century in South East Asia. The term “subaltern” was coined by Italian Marxist Critic Antonio Gramsci to signify the repressed sections of the society. It aims at critiquing the essentialism of culture in postcolonial and post-imperial societies, which successively unearth the long-suppressed heterogeneous voices and cultural traces of the silenced lots and people from the lower castes and other minority groups. The contributors have braved all hardships and have put their works in the forefront. The Dalits were underestimated and looked down upon for ages but through perseverance, they were able to withstand the stones hurled at them. Now they have created an identity for themselves and have also created an area for them in Indian English literature.

Some non-Dalit writers have also come to the fore to represent the exploitation of the Dalits. Within the early stages of Indian writing in English, when men expressed the issues of women, it had been argued that it'll be more appropriate and genuine if women expressed their problems because it will have a private touch which may make works more authentic. When the non-Dalits wrote

about the Dalits, an equivalent argument came up and this encouraged the Dalits to require their pen to fight for his or her cause. Dalits writers began writing in the 1950s. They wrote short stories, novels and drama and there was a considerable flow of Dalit literary writing in the 1960s. The Dalit writers express the social reality of appalling caste oppression, untouchability, and poverty through their writings. Their passionate depiction of crude society has touched the hearts of many a person around the world. Dalit writers have made Dalit writing a crucial part of Indian Literature. Through their works, they express their inexpressible and unfathomable bitter experience and feelings which are worth noticing (Deva Sudha). Dalit literature is usually compared with African-American literature as they share a standard fate. Bitterness and agony are the trademarks of their writings (Deva Sudha). They raise their voices of protest against all sorts of exploitation through their writings. Writing is their revenge. Early Dalit writings were largely in Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, and Tamil but very recently they shifted to English. A number of their works in vernacular languages have also been translated into English. A woman in a Dalit community may be a “Dalit among the Dalits”. In spite of being much more side-lined than men, Dalit women have also contributed sufficiently to Dalit literature.

**Interrogating Caste and Gender in  
Meena Kandasamy's Poems**

Meena Kandasamy born in Chennai in 1984 is a poet, fiction writer, translator, and social activist. Her poems aptly reflect her indignation and resentment towards diverse scales of ideological domination, and segregation, hypocrisy and coercive oppression of the voices of the muted sections of the society by the privileged ones (Krishanu Adhikari). Meena Kandasamy's poetry marks her critique of the documented narratives of Indian history and other nationalist narratives. Meena Kandasamy has been highly critical against these multifarious dimensions of social exploitation and oppression which is redolent enough in her endeavour to satirize the propensity of dominant social forces to camouflage the heterogeneity of experiences of the muted sections of the society (Krishanu Adhikari). Meena Kandasamy, the Dalit woman poetess is fearless in expressing her views. Marx had argued that when the proletariat shall unite and rebel against the bourgeoisie, then the category rendered stratified society shall collapse. Communism shall prevail and therefore the state as an organ of oppression shall "wither away" and cease to exist. Kandasamy is that Marxist for whom freedom from the clutches of patriarchy and casteism is possible through something radical as that of a rebellion. One can feel her anger and sarcasm while reading her poems. Her poem "Mohandas Karamchand" embodies her scathing criticism of the father of the

Nation, Gandhi, and his philosophy and ethical views. She completely denies acknowledging the honorific "Mahatma", given to him in South Africa and his ideals of nonviolence and "Satyagraha".

Her discontentment with the homogenization of the formation of nation and nationalism and her scathing criticism of Gandhi, as a nationalist and therefore the father of the nation, reach its consummation when Meena Kandasamy alleges Gandhi for classifying the people from lower castes and the underprivileged sections of the society as "Harijans", which consistent with Gandhi signifies the children of God. But consistent with the Dalit intellectuals the term "Harijan" may be a derogatory term, whose ontology is often traced back to the pre-colonial era when the people from the upper castes and elite sections of the society went to visit the courtesans and "devadasis" to gratify themselves. But later they defied all their responsibilities of impregnating the courtesans. Those fatherless children of the courtesans used to be considered "Harijans". This tradition has been continuing over the ages. Thus the Dalit intellectuals and other critics in later periods argue that by considering the people from lower castes and under privileged sections of the society as "Harijans", Gandhi under the pretence of naming them children of God surreptitiously intends to denigrate them and fasten a stigma to their identity in order that they will never overcome the caste segregation and

domination and therefore the very heterogeneity of their identity and cultures remain perpetually unaddressed.

The relentless sufferings of the underprivileged lots also are deftly manifested through the delineation of their health diseases for consuming the tax-free salt produced in indigenous ways under the supervision of Gandhi (Krishanu Adhikari). But the people from the elite sections of the society don't end up being the victims of this unhygienic product, since they're privileged with enough fortune and power to evade this hostile situation, though they're those to steer and luxuriate in the privileges of nationalism and its consequences. This inequalitarian social order and turning the people from the lower castes and underprivileged ones in the society as eternal scapegoats persuade Kandasamy to challenge and satirize the ideals of Gandhi's village-based economy and nationalism, which is echoed through the lines of her poem:

We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe... /  
You knew, you bloody well knew,  
Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.  
It haunts us now, the way you are doing  
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two  
(Mohandas Karamchand, Lines 8, 21-24).

Thus, Meena Kandasamy's animosity towards Gandhi and her propensity to unmask his hypocrisy which lies under the façade of saintliness and his supposed

concern for the underprivileged people of India.

One of the other poems of Kandasamy entitled "Becoming a Brahmin" renders another sort of exploitation that may be termed as ideological exploitation. This poem delineates the chronological steps to convert an untouchable into a Brahmin, propagated by the nationalist leaders, and more allegedly by Gandhi through the institution of marriage (Krishanu Adhikari). This poem is really supported documentation, prepared by one of the Dalit intellectuals, Periyar on the speech of Gandhiji at Tirupur on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1947. There he propagated that if a Shudra girl marries a Brahmin and provides birth to a woman child and again if that girl in future marries a Brahmin and if this step is repeated for an additional three to four times then it'll only engender Brahmin. Kandasamy questions and denounces the propensity of the dominant social forces and upper castes and other nationalist ideologies to wipe out the heterogeneity of the opposing ideologies of the people from lower castes. This attempt of the nationalist narratives and other dominant socio-political ideologies within the society to jeopardize the heterogeneous identity of other ethnic groups resembles with the second of the two modes of ideology dissemination, formulated by one among the foremost eminent Marxist critics namely Louis Althusser. He stated that this second sort of ideology dissemination works through institutions like marriage, education, family, religion

and other mainstream historical and cultural narratives which convince them about the correctness of this situation and convince them to simply accept the norms and values of the society which successively oppresses the heterogeneity of voices, identity and cultures of the relegated lots and therefore the dominant ideologies prevail over the marginalized ones. This is often made possible since these marginalized forces don't have the power to defend them and claim their own identity. This second mode of ideology dissemination is termed as consent mode of ideology dissemination, where unlike the coercive mode power circulates in an insidious way (Krishanu Adhikari). Thus Partha Chatterjee, one among the renowned Postcolonial critics and the pioneer of Subaltern studies in India proposes that the thought of a nation in the nationalist movement is basically modeled on the very concept of modernity of the west, where the formation of a nation is accomplished in three stages. In the very first stage, the natives adopt modern western ideas of progress and modernity (Krishanu Adhikari). The second stage marks the start of a turn towards the folks and popular cultural forms by the native elite class in order to get both mass support and an identity supported by the local cultures. But the foremost crucial stage is that of the third stage where the fusion of the western models and folk elements is projected as a native nationalism by the elite. So, this very process of the formation of nation and nationhood clearly shows

how the socially relegated classes and tribal people are being deliberately spoken off by the elites, where their own voices remain perpetually unheeded within the documented narratives. This view of Partha Chatterjee is perfectly echoed in his theorization of westernization of nationalism, Peasant consciousness and subsequent rebellion in his essay "The Nation and its Peasants", where he argued that the nationalist leadership sought to mobilize the peasantry as an anti-colonial force in its project of building a nation-state, it had been ever distrustful of the results of agitational politics among the peasants, suspicious of their supposed ignorance and backward consciousness, careful to stay their participation limited to the sorts of bourgeois representative politics during which peasants would be considered a part of the state, but distanced from the institutions of the state Meena Kandasamy critiques those nationalist and other historical and cultural narratives which not only support these diverse scales of caste segregation but also shape it over the years. Her plan to satirize the very project of nationalism and nationalist movement is clearly echoed through the lines of the poem "Becoming a Brahmin":

"Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin /Awaiting another Father of the nation/to produce this algorithm"  
(Becoming A Brahmin, ll, 10-12).

Meena Kandasamy's works are both feminist and anti-caste centric. Her poetry



finds a preoccupation with the marginalised third World women. She persuades to urge women to express their own desires, dreams, independent views and represent themselves instead of always being spoken off by patriarchal social order and their male counterparts. This urge of Kandasamy to evolve an alternate tradition of Feminist poetry to bring out the independent voices of women marks an affinity with the third stage of "Gynocriticism", i.e. The Feminist phase, theorized by Elaine Showalter, where she proposes the inclination of female authors from the latter half of the twentieth century to look for his or her independent voices and identity, which flouts the voicing of identity imposed by patriarchy.

But the very concept of body and therefore the spatial context of Third World women and more seminally the women from the underprivileged sections of Indian society bring it closer to the conceptualization of "Subaltern" by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She adapts the term "subaltern" from Antonio Gramsci's formulation of subaltern theory to imply the suppressed lots within the society and attempts to theorize the plight of native people thanks to the colonization and most imperatively the Third World women. Here she unravels the threefold domination of Third World women, i.e. racial, patriarchal, and subjugation by first-world feminists. These diverse spatial and temporal scales of domination in a way prevent them from

expressing their own voices, and they are deliberately spoken off by others. She refuses to conform to the traditional notion of the lack of the Third World women to talk for themselves, to validate the propensity of the others to talk on behalf of them and hence she urges them to enunciate the pangs in their life to break free the shackles of those diverse scales of domination. This epistemic shift is that of the very essence of Foucault's concept of archaeology, which he suggests are often construed both as counter-history and social critique. It's considered to be counter-history since it opts for a contrapuntal reading of traditional history whose inferences tend to rearrange instead of defying it entirely. Archeology also can be viewed as social critique because it tends to open up diverse scales of rendition and an opportunity of change through the radicalization of our perception about the contingency of our dearest biases and various social norms and values. Meena Kandasamy through her poetry attempts to contextualize these two intersecting ways of interpretation of Foucault's concept of archeology. Her poems throw light on her endeavour to critique those absolute narratives of caste and gender segregation.

The desolation within the lives of women is heightened in her poem "Mascara" with the minute details of the agony of a prostitute and her inner dilemma before embarking on another apparent consensual sexual activity. The sordid

details of her physical and psychic pain recur again and again throughout the poem together with her plan to return to her unspoken and unfulfilled variegated dreams, which emanates through her silent black tears. The metaphor of “mascara” which crops up time and again with the unfolding of the poem is her deliberate attempt to not disclose her long-suppressed indignation and to not cringe before the social order:

“The last item she does /before she gets able to die /once more, of violation, /she applies the mascara.../Mascara... /it serves to inform her /that long buried hazy dreams /of a virgin soul /have dark outlines” (Mascara, Lines, 1-4, 12-17).

The origin of this suffering goes back to the age when people from the upper castes and activity elite classes want to impregnate the devadasis and other courtesans and later evaded their responsibilities. This tradition has been continuing over the years where the bastard children and mostly the women continue their legacy and therefore the stigma attached to their identity is beyond obliteration and that they are sure to be considered as social outcasts during this hegemonic social organization which apparently evolves out of some modalities of stringent moral values. This is often deftly manifested within the poem, “Mascara”. It attempts to probe into the unease and fear of violation of her own self which precedes tiresome intercourse with a stranger

(Krishanu Adhikari). Thus “body” as a recurring metaphor in Kandasamy’s poems isn’t only evinced through the minute details of the innumerable miseries of the prostitutes in this patriarchal social order, but also tends to fuse the concept of affection there upon of consensual sex.

Her poem “My Lover Speaks of Rape” aptly renders the distress of a lady for her lover’s passivity and lack of reciprocation. The minute details of the scratches and bruises indicate the inclination of her lover to treat her as an object to satisfy his lust. Thus, the lines:

“...Tragedy in /Bridal red remains a fresh, flushing bruise across /Brown-yellow skinscapes, vibrant but made /Muted through years of silent, waiting skin. /I am absent. They talk about everyday assault that /Turns blue, violet and black in high-color symphony” (My Lover Speaks of Rape, Lines, 14-19).

imply an effort to universalize the pangs within the lives of the ladies which has been continuing over the years. The absence of their selves from relationships clearly signifies the unrequited love of the ladies, who are treated nothing but as the objects for man’s sexual gratification which has been touted to be a normal phenomenon in their desiccated lives. Woman’s body becomes the primary motif of her poetry and her propensity to unravel the various spatial and temporal scales of oppression and the way they become the topic to the multiple sorts



of social violence are an effort from her part to rejuvenate the self-consciousness of the ladies in order that they will resist the dominant ideologies of this inegalitarian patriarchal society which tend to convince them and legitimize the prevalent subjugation of girls and their confinement in smaller grooves. She also argues it's the body that suffers the foremost and hence it's the body that needs to be written. Thus Meena Kandasamy's propensity to specialise in the sordid details of the various modalities of caste segregation and violence and utter desolation, void and pangs within the lives of girls which permeate the very texture of her poetry is an effort to critique the nationalist and other historical and cultural narratives which not only reflect the dominant socio-political contexts but also shape those contexts which successively constitute a hegemonic version of history. This very process of harmonization of history and dominant discourses excludes the undercurrent of heterogeneous voices of others and other marginalized discourses. She uses poetry as a site to spotlight the circulation of resistance through the body. Power as an abstract idea needs a topic to be disseminated and thus through the imposition of it on bodies or on individuals the social identity of people is constituted. This is often termed as "subjectivation" by Foucault and this comes under the purview of Foucault's concept of genealogy. Meena Kandasamy strongly opposes this power-body relation and scathingly criticizes the propensity of

the hegemonic social forces to constitute the identity of the silenced lot of the society, which relegates them to the fringes of the state and hence divest them from their fundamental rights.

Her poem "Frenzied Light" records the frantic plea of a lady for reciprocation from her male counterpart and consummation to that extent that it'll have resulted in the immolation of their souls. She seeks for complete involvement from him within the very act of their lovemaking which can be worth enough to cherish till the end of her life. Kandasamy's poem in a way materializes her urge to resurrect third world women and to influence them to express their own desires, dreams, independent views and represent themselves instead of always spoken off by patriarchal social order and their male counterparts. Her poem "How they Prostitute a Poem" exemplifies her plan to articulate a subcultural resistance to the very process of canonization of literature. Here she assertively defies the agendas of mainstream literature and endeavours to envisage and defend an alternate tradition of literature, from the silenced sections of the society and most women from those underprivileged sections of the society which should record the unhindered voices of the ladies, and address the ceaseless sufferings in their lives which become inevitable a part of their lives, unlike the mainstream literature. This yearning of Kandasamy to awaken them to write down their own poetry of

their long-suppressed anger and desires and their silent rebellion against this age-long subjugation resonates through the very texture of the poem:

“In this brothel /of stilled hope and  
/Stagnated stories, poems /Are born  
virgin and endowed /with voluptuous  
figures of firm, /full breasts and wide hips  
where men /Prefer to plant their pastime  
dreams, /or conceive their seed, /or  
merely spite themselves, /or dabble  
ofdomination” (How They Prostitute A  
Poem, Lines, 18-27).

Thus Kandasamy's effort to dig out the encrypted voices of history and to reread the documented narratives of history is during away an effort to retrieve the discursive traces of the innumerable suffering and pangs within the lives of untouchables and ladies mostly from the underprivileged sections of the society which most of the days are overshadowed by the apparent empathy, shown by the dominant socio-political discourses towards others. Thus, Meena Kandasamy intends to problematize the absolutism of history and historical narratives which encapsulate the veiled circulation of power. So Kandasamy refuses to acknowledge and resists the modalities and agendas of the constitution of absolute historical truths in order to open up the chances of other heterogeneous histories, centred on the very multiplicities of experiences and identities of others.

## Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's poems plan to empower women by instilling in them the anger and fiery spirit of rebellion that exists within every woman. Her poem “Aggression” may be a brilliant example of how the Indian woman writer forays into hitherto uncharted territories of overthrowing male domination via anger, rebellion, and aggression. Kandasamy opines in Aggression how women's silence after an endless “wait” breaks into “wails”, on the other hand, “the revolution happens because our dreams explode. Most of the time:/Aggression is the best form of trouble-shooting. The silence that prevails during a woman's life thanks to the oppressive structures of the varied patriarchal agencies is sure to break at some point. This suppressed and passive sort of accepting defeat and denying one's niche during this world cannot continue on forever. Aggression foretells an era where the human tragedy of half its population limping on crutches will cease to be. Something almost like Shelley's raging and turbulent “West Wind” with its clarion call of liberty, freedom, and equality shall take womankind with a storm. The poem ends almost prophetically with the emphatic pronouncement that aggression or the woman's unique virangana is the pillar to prevent every sort of injustice. Shubhadra Kumara Chahuan's poem Jhansi Ki Rani proclaimed how bravely fought the manly queen, Rani Laxmi Bai. Meena Kandasamy talks about how courage shall begin of

the senile woman. By cultivating in herself the unique woman's aggressive power or the virangana, a lady doesn't need to conform to the male constructs of masculinity to prove herself to be the rebel. Her essentially feminine aggression shall provide her the resources to defy the constrictive social structures and overthrow the malaise thronging her life. Her poem "Aggression" envisions an opportunity of resistance and an ensuing rebellion against the prevalent injustices within the society, which can overturn absolutely the historical truths. The all-

encompassing trait of Indian English poetry by women where the marginalised and therefore the suppressed can express their gendered voices may be a triumph of humanity at large. Ambedkar had said that a progressive society is understood by the quality of its women. The alert consciousness and conscience of our women poets testify to a developing country with a developing sensibility. If literature is all about evolving sensibilities then truly Indian English poetry features a resplendent future for itself.

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