



Explicating the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy: An Encyclopedia of Woeful Inventories about Dalit Women

Riya Chatterjee

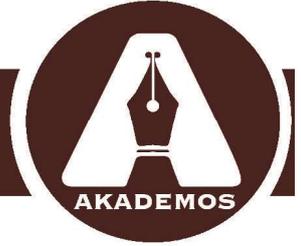
Research Scholar, Department of English, Bankura University
State-Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Gushkara Mahavidyalaya
riyachatterjee483@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender and Caste are the key words for Dalit writings. But strangely enough majority of spokespersons of Dalit assertion continues to be men and their representation continue to be androcentric, so it is quite obvious that within the Dalit literary space, Dalit women have always modicum of representation. Meena Kandasamy can be considered an exception among the Dalit writers not only because she 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 her poetry she succinctly details the innumerable sufferings and ignominy in the lives of the downtrodden women and their lived experiences for being the “marginalized”. This paper is an attempt to elucidate the poetry of Meena Kandasamy to explicate how her poetry represents the awful situation and the agonies of Dalit women.

Keywords: Dalit poetry, women, gender, caste, agonies, feminism, Meena Kandasamy





Explicating the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy: An Encyclopedia of Woeful Inventories about Dalit Women

Riya Chatterjee

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bankura University

State-Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Gushkara Mahavidyalaya

riyachatterjee483@gmail.com

Within the mainstream Indian literary space Dalit women consist only a modicum of representation. Their narratives remain marginalized in the same way as the status of the Dalit women remains – within their community and in the society. Feminism might have assumed a global significance as an ideology, yet the feminist movement in India, right from the beginning, was concerned only with the issues pertaining to the high-caste and the upper-middle class women. The struggle of Dalit women against upper-caste atrocities, untouchability and oppression were never given due consideration. In fact, the male Dalit writers, too, are accused for not providing the Dalit women their due place. 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). Strangely enough, within the Dalit literary canon, experiences of Dalit women remain unarticulated. If a woman necessarily represents the expressions of a woman more accurately in the mainstream literary canon, the case of the Dalit women is one step further, for their voice is only vocalized by a woman belonging only to their community. It has been aptly pointed out to be a woman and to be a Dalit Woman is not the same thing: “[...] 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 ‘dalits’” (Sharma 88). Meena Kandasamy is perhaps 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.





No wonder the Dalit women incur the status of being triply polluted- first for being the weaker sex, second by virtue of their defiling occupation and thirdly, and most importantly due to their belonging to the lower castes. Their sexuality is always considered available to the lascivious upper class / castes. In her essay “A Cartography of Resistance” Kalpana Kannibiran delineates how sexual slavery of the lower caste women to these upper caste men is subsumed under physical labor provided by these slave women. (K. Kannibiran) In another essay titled “Caste and Gender: Understanding the Dynamics of Power and Violence” she explicates that the gender within the caste society is defined: “The ‘manhood’ of castes is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste”. (K. K. Kannibiran). Meena Kandasamy stands exceptional in her delineating the suffering and atrocities committed against the Dalit women. This paper intends to critically elucidate the poetry of Kandasamy who, in her poetry, unerringly brings out the agonies and awful condition of the Dalit women. My endeavor is to establish how the poems of Kandasamy could be considered as an encyclopedia of awful inventories about Dalit women.

Meena Kandasamy poetry delineates different stories to picture the exploitation that the downtrodden women suffer at the hands of upper caste men. Quoting few lines from her poem “Narration” would succinctly bring out the hypocrisy of the caste system and at the same time the helpless plight of a Dalit woman:

I'll weep to you about
My landlord, and with
My mature gestures—
You will understand:
The torn sari, disheveled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then.
I'll curse the skies,
And shout: scream to you
Words that incite wrath and
You will definitely know:
The priest, his lecherous eyes,
Glances that disrobed, defiled.
I was not polluting at four feet.
How can I say
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. . .(Lines 1-22)

The lines accurately expose how the untouchable people will become touchable for the higher caste people to fulfill their needs – both materialistic and sexual. The Dalit woman, the speaker in the poem, brings out with reiteration how she is not considered an untouchable when she is sexually exploited by the upper class men: ‘I was not an untouchable then’. She again asserts: ‘I was not polluting at four feet’. Her agony is worsened by the fact that she is compelled to succumb to those ‘lecherous eyes’ by her ‘own man’. Thus, the poem not only brings out class, caste and gender are positioned in the society, even it realistically presents injustices that is inflicted upon women belonging to the Dalit community. In an interview with *Sampsonia Way Magazine* Meena justifies her choice of poetry to be a means of voicing against the social injustices as she clarifies “Yes. Poetry, it is raw. It is real. It is full of jagged edges. 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. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people” (Kandasamy, Meena Kandasamy : Angry Young Women Are Labelled Hysterics).

In another poem named as “Shame” Kandasamy delineates the life and agony of a Dalit girl after she is raped by a group of men. She will not get any sympathy since she is a Dalit girl. She has to cope up with her deplorable plight since the caste is what makes her vulnerable to this kind of brutal harassment:

Pubic’s prying eyes
Segregate her – the victim
But the criminals have
Already mainstreamed
Their caste in a classical shield.(Lines1-9)

A woman in a Dalit community is a ‘Dalit among the Dalits’. Meena Kandasamy, in spite of being sidelined as a Dalit woman, voices the voiceless. She addresses multifaceted problems faced by the women in her community. Her poetry helps her in channelizing her anger. “Firewalkers” is a powerful rendition of the plight of poor women who are exploited by the people belonging to the upper classes. Goddess Maari is portrayed as an exploiter who gains



pleasure from the pains of her believers. Maari is a mania who needs blood to drench her hair and devotees are the 'dream-chasers, the firewalkers'. Maari in "Firewalkers" is nothing but the symbolic representation of the inhuman oppressors of the Dalits:

Here they are: the dream-chasers, the fire-stampers:
Souls in sweaty soles, the flaming bare feet
Of men and women (and also, those between).
Here, the blood-splattered, whip-wrapped ones,
flaunting starry, self-flagellation scars.
Hollering here, the flashes of mortified flesh—
steel hooks piercing stretched skin;
skewers drilled through trembling tongues,
sometimes bridging cheeks, sometimes sealing lips.
Here, the hearts beat in answer to hysterical drumming.

Here, the bleeding is blessed...(6-16)

In another poem "Moon-Gazers" the story is one of the humiliations of a Dalit girl. The poet brings in a class room situation in which the teacher talks about a bird that watches the moon throughout the night. The speaker, a Dalit girl questions the teacher in the class room what the bird does on the new moon days. She is seen as impudent and mocked at. Her inquisitive voice is silenced just because her belonging to the lower caste:

The teacher speaks of some besotted bird
That watches the moon every moment of the night..
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....(Lines 4-11)

This is the common fate shared by all the Dalits they are forced to oblige without any question and are made to lead a passive life. They remain voiceless for the entire life:

I become that moon-gazing bird on new moon nights,
I sing the saddest songs of all time, I never ask questions...(Lines 19-20)



A Dalit woman is always an 'other' in the eyes of those of the upper class, so much so that they can't even fulfill their basic. The "ONE-Eyed" gives an example of the various atrocities committed against the Dalit women. In the poem the poet describes how a Dalit girl loses one of her eyes for violating the rule of touching the forbidden water.

Leela Dube in her essay "Caste and Women" points out: "in Uttar Pradesh ... It is said that just as she-goat may be milked at anytime at one's own will, so can a chamar woman be enjoyed anytime at one's own discretion. In Vidarbha, kunbi landowners who are on lookout for mahar women working in their fields say with contempt 'Give her a few measures of grain and she will be quiet'". (Dube). The same kind of sentiment against the subjugation and oppression of the Dalit women has been echoed in the poems of Kandasamy. Her poems are emblematic of her discontentment and scathing criticism of caste discrimination and the pangs of in the lives of third world women. In one of her short poems she gives an example of various atrocities committed against Dalit women. "ONE-Eyed" depicts how the people of the upper caste is intolerant about the downtrodden people. If a Dalit girl is thirsty, 'the pot', 'the glass', 'the water' may sympathize with her. But 'the teacher', 'the doctor', 'the school', 'the press', those who are the representative of the higher class and caste, see the violation of the rules when a Dalit girl Dhanam touches the forbidden water. She has to pay the offense with the loss of her one eye, her left eye lid open but light slapped away:

Pot sees just another noisy child
The glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
The water sees a parched throat slaking thirst
But the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule
The doctor sees a case of medical emergency
The school sees a potential embarrassment
The press sees a headline and a photo feature
Dhanam sees a world torn in half.
Her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,
The price for a taste of that touchable water.(Lines 1-10)

Anupama Rao, in "Gender and Caste", has elucidated the double oppression the double oppression that a Dalit woman in India faces almost inescapably, reflecting on how a more generic set of arguments about sexual subordination needs to be operationalized to reflect on the sexual experience of the Dalit women who are marked by the disabilities of the caste and gender. (Rao). Rape and sexual assault upon lower caste women by upper caste men is often effectuated



with regard to their polluted status by virtue of being a woman (periodical pollution) through menstruation and belonging to low caste according to the casteist ideology. Kandasamy addresses this problematic in her poem “Shame” and mordantly scoffs at the blatant injustice done to a gang raped girl whose rape is considered ‘much too commonplace’ and her rapists manage to roam scot-free, because of their upper caste which is ‘a classic shield’. Strangely enough it is the victim who suffers the helplessness and not the ones who commits the crime:

Dalit Girl Raped is much too commonplace
Humiliation gnaws the sixteen year old
Gory scars on a wrecked body
Served constant reminders
Of disgrace, helplessness.

Kandasamy’s poems portray such a dreadful picture of varied agonies experienced by Dalit women. Untouchable turns into touchable for upper caste when it fits their selfish deeds and lusty demands. In her poem “Mascara”, Kandasamy elucidates the system of sexual exploitation that dalit women are subjected to. She alludes to the practice of temple prostitution. Such girls, married to gods, called *devdasis* i.e ‘god’s female servant’, usually belong to the impoverished families and untouchable class. In the name of the religious service, ‘holy duty’, they are exploited sexually. The ‘holy duty’ actually involves harlotry:

Mascara. . .
It serves to tell her
That long buried
Hazy dreams
Of a virgin soul
Have dark outlines.
Silently she cries.
Her tears are black.
Like her.
Somewhere
Long Ago
In an
Untraceable
Mangled
Matrilineal
Family tree





Of temple prostitutes,
Her solace was sought.
It has happened for centuries. . .
Empty consolations soothe
Violated bodies.(Lines 12-32)

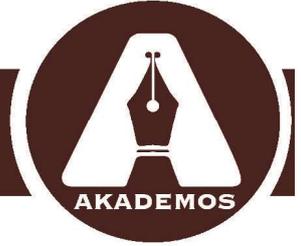
The title of the poem becomes ironical since the application of mascara is a reminder of an act of preparing one's own appearance for a sexual encounter. One can simply surmise that there is nothing religious about the convention *devdasi*, this is just a hierarchical contrivance for exploiting the lower caste women.

In her foreword to *Touch* (2006) Kamala Das rightly observed that Kandasamy is “Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps religion. Among other issues on woman, Kandasamy criticizes the oppression and sexual harassment of the Dalit women who are the victims of the lust of the men belonging to the higher caste”. The title of the collection ‘Touch’ itself is an ironical one. It is replete with multifarious significance. The ‘touch’ can be of affection and of desire, but touch of those of the upper caste men for the ‘untouchable’ women are purely sensual and not of affection. It is notable that in the collection Kandasamy not only focuses on the hazards that the women face outside their home but even within the domestic space. In one of her poem “Dead Woman Walking”, she throws light on the hardships and emotional stress of the downtrodden, abandoned women. Kandasamy has brought in the mythological character Karaikkal Ammayar who stands for the Dalit woman who are sexually exploited by men. Karaikal Ammayar was deserted by her merchant husband to marry ‘a fresh and formless wife’ in spite of her beauty and ‘the magic of my (her) multiplying love’. Her love for Lord Shiva posed her to be a mystic in the eyes of her husband. Kandasamy expresses the pain of the deserted woman through the mouth of Karaikal Ammayar ‘as I wept in vein, I wailed, I walked in my head, I went to god’. The society viewed her as a mad woman living with faltered step felted flying hair, hollowed cheeks and bulging eyes:

Once I was a wife: beautiful,
Married to a merchant: shifty-eyed.
Living the life, until he was lost in listless doubt—
Of how, what I gave him was more delicious
Than whatever, whatever had been given to me.

.....





I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to god.
I sang in praise of dancing dervishes, I made music
For this world to devour on some dejected day.
I shed my beauty, I sacrificed my six senses.
Some called me mad, some called me mother
But all of them led me here,
To this land of the living-dead.(Lines 7-26)

In another poem titled “Becoming a Brahmin” Kandasamy mirrors how caste ideology operates in a ‘codified’ fashion and how women are central to its annihilation:

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.

Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.

Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.

Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End.(Lines1-8)

As concluding remark, it is only pertinent to mention that Kandasamy’s poetry stands a testimony in Dalit literature, especially the women in Dalit literature. Her poems are emblematic of her discontentment with the pangs in the lives of the third world women. Though the upper caste women as well as the lower caste women are victims of gender discriminations, the plight of the Dalit women is far worse than that of the upper caste women. A Dalit woman is considered as ‘other’ even among women of all castes. In her seminal book *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination* Meena Anand articulates:

One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the life conditions of the Dalits [Dalit] women [woman], her suppression, humiliation, sufferings, dilemmas and exploitation. Her sufferings are twofold [twofold]; she has her own share of universal suffering as a woman [woman] and additionally, she is victim of a variety of exploitations, social, religious, economic and cultural as a Dalit women [woman]. (Meena)



The same sentiment is delivered in the poems of Kandasamy. The sordid details of the innumerable sufferings and ignominy in the lives of the down trodden sections are aptly voiced in the poems of Meena Kandasamy. (Meena)

Works Cited

- Dube, Leela. "Caste and Women." John, Mary E. *Women Studies in India Reader*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. 474.
- Kandasamy, Meena. *Meena Kandasamy : Angry Young Women Are Labelled Hysterics* Silvia Duarte. Pittsburgh: Sampsonia Way, 22 september 2010.
<<http://www.sampsoniaway.org/>>.
- . *Ms. Militancy*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2010.
- . *Touch*. Mumbai: Peacock Books, 2006.
- Kannibiran, Kalpana. "A Cartography of Resistance: the National Federation of Dalit Women." Ray, Raka. *Handbook of Gender*. New Delhi: New Delhi: OUP, 2012. 185-206.
- Kannibiran, Kalpana Kannibiran & Vasantha. "Caste and Gender : Understanding the Dynamics of Power and Violence." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26.37 (1991).
- Meena, Anand. *Dalit Women : Fear and Discrimination*. Ed. Anand Meena. Delhi: Isha Books, 2005.
- Rao, Anupama. "Introduction : Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism." Rao, Anupama. *Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003. 1-47.
- Rege, Sharmila. "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint." *Seminar* 471. Nov 1998. 47-52.
- Sharma, B.K. "Dalit Feminism: Issues and Concerns." *Re-Markings* 9 (2010).