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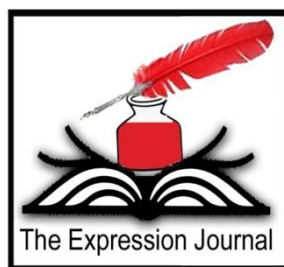


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Caste as Catastrophe: Rethinking Disaster in Meena Kandasamy's

The Gypsy Goddess

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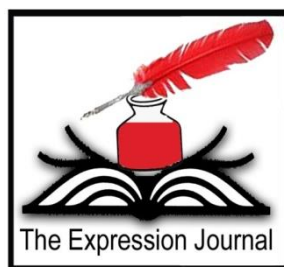
Abstract

This article examines *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) by Meena Kandasamy as a powerful literary engagement with the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968, interpreting the event not only as caste violence but as a form of socially produced disaster. The novel departs from conventional narrative structures by revealing the outcome at the outset and focussing instead on how such a catastrophe can be narrated, remembered, and understood. By exploiting its fragmented and experimental narrative, the novel foregrounds the difficulty of representing collective trauma while resisting its reduction to spectacle. Situating the massacre within the everyday lives of Dalit agricultural labourers, the narrative traces how demands for fair wages and dignity provoke escalating hostility from dominant-caste landlords. This gradual intensification of caste conflict reveals how disaster emerges not suddenly, but through entrenched inequality, caste hierarchy, spatial segregation, and systemic exclusion. The burning of the hut, which results in the deaths of women, children, and elderly villagers, is thus presented not as an isolated incident but as the culmination of ongoing structural conditions that render certain communities perpetually vulnerable. The novel's engagement with the massacre further expands the boundaries of disaster from the event itself to unequal social structures that entail such massacre and produce violence. Ultimately, *The Gypsy Goddess* redefines disaster by revealing how social hierarchies shape both vulnerability and hatred. It transforms a historical atrocity into a profound account of loss, underscoring, at the same time, the ethical responsibility of literature in documenting histories of the marginalised.

Keywords

Caste as Disaster, Caste Hierarchy, Dalit Labour, Kilvenmani Massacre, Structural Violence.

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Introduction

The Gypsy Goddess, by Meena Kandasamy, revisits the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968, an incident in which Dalit agricultural labourers were burned alive in a violent assertion of caste power. While the event has been historically documented, it has not received sustained attention within literary and cultural discourse. Kandasamy's novel addresses this absence by transforming the massacre into a narrative that foregrounds memory, voice, and the difficulty of representation. Rather than presenting the incident as a self-contained episode, the text situates it within the everyday realities of rural labour, inequality, and social exclusion.

This article argues that the novel reimagines the massacre not simply as an instance of violence but as a form of disaster shaped by entrenched social hierarchies. By tracing the gradual escalation of conflict between landlords and labourers, the narrative reveals how catastrophe emerges from prolonged conditions of vulnerability. The novel's self-reflexive style further complicates the act of storytelling, drawing attention to the limits of language while insisting on the necessity of bearing witness. Through its engagement with memory and loss, *The Gypsy Goddess* compels readers to reconsider the relationship between literature, history, and marginalised lives.

Caste, Labour, and the Conditions of Catastrophe

Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* begins not with suspense but with disclosure. The narrator proposes that the story should begin by stating that an old woman "loses her extended family during a massacre" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 14). This narrative decision disrupts conventional storytelling by foregrounding inevitability rather than uncertainty. The catastrophe is not something that unfolds unpredictably; it is something structurally determined. This gesture aligns closely with B.R. Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a system that produces predictable patterns of violence through the obnoxious system of inequality. The massacre, therefore, is not an aberration but a logical outcome of caste-based society.

The novel's representation of agrarian relations and caste hierarchy can be more sharply understood through Ambedkar's theorisation of caste as a structural system. As Ambedkar argues in "Annihilation of Caste", "caste is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers" ("Annihilation of Caste" 47). This distinction is crucial in reading the condition of Dalit agricultural workers in the narrative, whose labour is inseparable from their caste identity. Their economic exploitation is not accidental but structurally enforced, ensuring that vulnerability is built into their everyday existence. The workers' dependence on landlords for wages, land, and even spatial habitation reflects what Ambedkar identifies as a system of "graded inequality," in which each level of hierarchy is sustained by the subordination of those below ("Annihilation of Caste" 72).

This structural vulnerability is further intensified by spatial segregation, which echoes Ambedkar's analysis in *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*. Ambedkar demonstrates how untouchable communities have historically been relegated to the margins of the village, excluded from its central spaces both physically and symbolically (*The Untouchables* 280). The novel's depiction of Dalit huts located in precarious, peripheral spaces reproduces this historical pattern, revealing how caste operates through the control of space. Such spatial marginalisation is not merely descriptive but constitutive of disaster, as it renders the community both visible as targets and invisible in terms of protection. The conditions that lead to catastrophe, therefore, are not sudden but sedimented in everyday structures of caste-based exclusion.

The novel situates the Kilvenmani massacre within a broader agrarian conflict in Tamil Nadu, where Dalit labourers, influenced by Communist organising, demanded higher wages and dignity. The landlords' response reveals both economic anxiety and caste arrogance. Their complaints about labourers filing police cases—"every Pallan and Paraiyan who walks into the party office" now asserting rights (*The Gypsy Goddess* 73)—signal a disruption of traditional hierarchies. What is at stake is not merely labour but authority itself. This transformation corresponds to the Dalit insurgency that emerges as and when the oppressed begin to articulate political agency.

The agrarian structure depicted in the novel is one of extreme inequality. Landlords possess both land and power, while Dalit labourers remain dependent on them for survival. This relationship is encapsulated in the assertion: "Do our coolies even stop to think that their huts stand on lands that we own?" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 78). This statement reveals the totalising nature of landlord control, where even shelter is contingent upon obedience.

The novel repeatedly emphasises how caste ideology transforms labour into stigma. Dalits are despised "because they work with their hands" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 219), suggesting that manual labour is not merely economic activity but a marker of social inferiority. This ideological framework ensures that exploitation appears natural and inevitable. As Gopal Guru argues in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, caste operates through everyday practices of humiliation that normalise inequality (*Humiliation: Claims and Context* 4). At the same time, Kandasamy highlights the emergence of resistance. The labourers' protests take "democratic forms: hunger strikes, hartals and road-blocking rokos, demonstrations and processions" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 80). These actions represent a collective assertion of rights and dignity, challenging the stereotype of the Dalits as passive victims. Yet this assertion provokes a violent backlash. The landlords insist on suppressing strikes and rejecting demands, revealing the limits of negotiation within a caste-based system (*The Gypsy Goddess* 80). The escalation of conflict ultimately leads to the massacre, which Kandasamy presents as the culmination of structural violence. The attack is described with

chilling immediacy: “the mob soon arrives on its rampaging feet... and in a fury sets the hut ablaze” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 163). The collective nature of the violence transforms it into a spectacle of annihilation, underscoring the extent to which caste hatred can mobilise communal brutality.

The aftermath further reinforces the catastrophic nature of the event. The novel records the “death of 42 innocent women, children and old men” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 232)—a figure that functions both as documentation and as indictment—emphasising that the victims are not combatants but vulnerable members of society. This indiscriminate violence aligns with Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” a delayed and continued destruction, as stated in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, where prolonged structural oppression culminates in sudden catastrophe (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 2). The massacre is thus both an event and a process—a moment of explosion rooted in an age-long history of exploitation. Kandasamy’s narrative is deeply self-reflexive, repeatedly questioning how such violence can be represented. The narrator asks whether the story should be reduced to a “one-line synopsis” or a “sixty-second sound bite” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 37), critiquing the commodification of suffering in media discourse. This metafictional strategy exposes the inadequacy of conventional narrative forms in capturing the complexity of trauma.

The novel also foregrounds the role of the state in perpetuating caste violence. Survivors encounter systemic bias when seeking justice, as reflected in the statement: “We were all untouchables in their eyes. Listening to our case was going to be a ridiculous, empty gesture” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 253). This passage highlights the institutional dimension of caste oppression, where legal systems fail to protect marginalised communities. As Anupama Rao argues in *The Caste Question*, caste violence cannot be understood as external to the state, since “law-preserving violence is the banal, regularized violence that passes for law,” where violence becomes “intrinsic...to state power” (*The Caste Question* 165). Moreover, legal frameworks can even “legitimize...caste inequality” (*The Caste Question* 116), suggesting that the state does not merely fail to prevent caste violence but participates in structuring the conditions of its persistence. In representing these dynamics, *The Gypsy Goddess* functions as a counter-history that challenges official narratives. The novel reconstructs the experiences of victims, preserving memories that might otherwise be erased. This approach resonates with Sharmila Rege’s emphasis on Dalit testimony as a form of resistance because, according to Rege, Dalit narratives cannot be read as merely personal accounts, since the very identity “Dalit” indexes both “subject of suffering and revolutionary agent” (*Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 15). Testimony thus becomes a site where the act of narration reconfigures “relationships between words and bodies” and produces new ways of seeing and speaking within the social field (*Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 15).

At the level of narrative form, the novel’s fragmentation reflects the difficulty of representing collective trauma. The story is interrupted by commentary, digressions, and shifts in perspective, creating a polyphonic structure that resists closure. This technique not only mirrors the fractured nature of memory but also challenges readers to engage critically with the text. Importantly, Kandasamy refuses to present the victims solely as passive sufferers. The novel emphasises their agency, particularly in their participation in collective struggle. Their resistance represents a form of political awakening that challenges the inevitability of caste hierarchy. Through its integration of historical detail, theoretical insight, and narrative experimentation, *The Gypsy Goddess* redefines the concept of disaster. The Kilvenmani massacre emerges not as an isolated event but as a structural catastrophe

produced by caste, class, and state power. By foregrounding subaltern memory, the novel transforms historical trauma into a site of political resistance.

Fire and Violence: The Making of a Social Disaster

If the opening movement of *The Gypsy Goddess* by Kandasamy establishes the inevitability of catastrophe, its middle movement intensifies this claim by embedding the Kilvenmani massacre within overlapping frameworks of caste oppression, agrarian capitalism, and epistemic erasure. The novel insists that disaster is not an isolated rupture but the culmination of accumulated violences—economic, social, and symbolic. This layered understanding resonates with the insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argues that the subaltern is systematically denied the capacity to speak within dominant epistemic frameworks. The subaltern cannot speak as they have no history to their credit (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287). Kandasamy’s narrative repeatedly dramatises this denial while simultaneously attempting to reconstruct a fractured archive of subaltern experience.

At the same time, the landlords’ hostility toward the agricultural workers is driven not only by caste prejudice but also by economic interests. The Dalit labourers are not merely exploited workers; they are marked bodies subjected to ritual degradation and social exclusion. This intersection of caste and class becomes particularly visible in the landlords’ rhetoric, which frames Dalit assertion as insubordination. The complaint that labourers now dare to challenge authority and “file police cases” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 73) reveals a deep-seated fear of social inversion. The possibility that the Dalits might claim legal rights disrupts the symbolic order that sustains caste hierarchy. In this sense, the violence that culminates in the massacre is both punitive and preventative—it seeks to restore dominance while deterring future resistance.

The novel also highlights the spatial dimensions of caste oppression. The segregation of Dalit settlements, the precariousness of their housing, and their dependence on landlord-controlled land all contribute to their vulnerability. In Kilvenmani, space itself becomes a mechanism of control, enabling the conditions under which mass violence can occur. The massacre scene marks the convergence of these forces into a moment of catastrophic intensity. The mob’s attack, culminating in the burning of the hut, is described not as spontaneous violence but as organised brutality. The deliberate targeting of women, children, and the elderly reveals the totalising nature of caste hatred. The victims are not simply killed; they are annihilated in a manner that seeks to erase their existence. The eruption of violence in the form of the burning of the hut must be understood not as an aberration but as the logical culmination of structural inequality. Here again, Ambedkar’s insights from “Annihilation of Caste” illuminate the narrative. If caste is a system that rigidly organises labourers into hierarchies of value, then violence becomes one of the mechanisms through which this hierarchy is enforced and maintained (“Annihilation of Caste” 47). The massacre, in this sense, is not an isolated incident but a systemic act that reasserts caste dominance. The inevitability that permeates the narrative highlights the fact that caste is sustained through social practices that normalise exclusion and, when necessary, deploy violence to preserve order.

Kandasamy’s narrative further emphasises the sensory dimensions of the massacre. The imagery of fire, confinement, and suffocation transforms the event into a visceral experience for the reader. Yet the text resists voyeurism by interrupting graphic description with reflective commentary. This oscillation between immersion and distance prevents the reader from consuming the violence as spectacle. Instead, it demands ethical witnessing—a

mode of engagement that acknowledges the limits of representation. The aftermath of the massacre reveals the persistence of structural violence beyond the event itself. Survivors encounter systemic indifference and hostility when seeking justice as Kandasamy notes that “criminal landlords can break civil laws to enforce caste codes” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 31). The law, rather than functioning as an instrument of justice, becomes a mechanism for reproducing inequality.

The novel’s engagement with memory is equally significant. By reconstructing the events of Kilvenmani, Kandasamy challenges the erasure of Dalit histories from mainstream narratives. The massacre is not widely commemorated in official discourse, and its victims remain largely invisible. The novel’s insistence on naming and remembering them constitutes an act of resistance. This approach resonates with Paul Ricoeur’s concept of memory as a site of ethical responsibility (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 21). To remember is to acknowledge the suffering of others and to resist its repetition. At the same time, the text complicates the notion of memory by acknowledging its limitations. The narrator repeatedly admits the impossibility of fully recovering the past. The voices of the victims are mediated, fragmented, and partially lost. However, Kandasamy does not interpret this impossibility as a reason for silence. Instead, she embraces narrative experimentation as a means of approximating subaltern experience. The novel’s polyphonic structure reflects this commitment to multiplicity. By incorporating different voices, perspectives, and registers, the text resists singular interpretation. This strategy challenges the authority of dominant narratives and creates space for alternative histories. It also reflects the collective nature of the tragedy, emphasising that the massacre cannot be reduced to individual experience.

The concept of disaster itself undergoes significant transformation in the novel. Traditional disaster studies often focus on natural events such as floods, earthquakes, or famines. However, Kandasamy’s text expands this framework by demonstrating that disasters can be socially produced. The Kilvenmani massacre is not a natural calamity but a human-made catastrophe rooted in systemic inequality. This perspective aligns with Anthony Oliver-Smith’s argument that disasters are shaped by social vulnerability and power relations (“What is a Disaster?” 34). Moreover, the novel reveals the temporal dimensions of disaster. The massacre is both an immediate event and the culmination of a long history of oppression. The everyday experiences of humiliation, exploitation, and marginalisation constitute a form of slow violence that precedes and exceeds the event itself. This temporal layering complicates the distinction between normalcy and catastrophe, suggesting that for marginalised communities, disaster is an ongoing condition.

Remembering the Massacre: Memory, Justice, and Silence

The closing movement of *The Gypsy Goddess* by Kandasamy intensifies its interrogation of narrative, memory, and justice by returning to the fundamental question that animates the text: how does one write a massacre that history has failed to remember adequately? The novel refuses to provide a consolatory resolution. Instead, it leaves the reader suspended within the unresolved tensions of grief, anger, and ethical responsibility. This refusal of closure is not merely a stylistic choice but a political intervention that challenges the very frameworks through which violence is understood and processed.

The aftermath of the massacre, particularly the failure of the legal system to deliver justice, can be read through Ambedkar’s critique of institutional structures in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Ambedkar repeatedly underscores how political and legal institutions often fail to address the realities of caste oppression, instead

reproducing the very inequalities they claim to resolve (*What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* 14). The acquittal of the perpetrators in the novel reflects this systemic failure, demonstrating that justice is not merely denied but structurally inaccessible to marginalised communities. The absence of such safeguards in the world of the novel exposes the fragility of Dalit life, where survival itself is contingent and unprotected. The disaster thus extends beyond the moment of violence into its aftermath, where the denial of justice perpetuates trauma and erasure. At the same time, the novel's insistence on remembering the victims aligns with Ambedkar's broader project of reclaiming the history and dignity of oppressed communities. By narrating the massacre and resisting its erasure, the text performs an act of ethical witnessing that counters the silence imposed by dominant historiography. Memory, in this context, becomes a form of resistance, ensuring that the violence is neither forgotten nor normalised.

One of the most striking features of the novel's concluding sections is its insistence on the inadequacy of language in capturing the scale of atrocity. The narrator repeatedly gestures toward the limits of description, suggesting that even the most detailed account cannot fully convey the horror of the event. This hesitation is evident in the narrative's oscillation between direct description and self-reflexive commentary, where the act of writing itself becomes a subject of scrutiny. Therefore, the massacre, it can be said, is not only a historical event but also a crisis of representation.

In addition to these recurring images, the text introduces further reflections on the conditions that made the massacre possible. The landlords' perception of the Dalits as expendable is articulated in moments that expose the dehumanising logic of caste. The idea that labourers exist solely as instruments of production—and can therefore be punished or eliminated when they resist—permeates the narrative. This logic is encapsulated in the broader cultural framework that stigmatises manual labour and associates it with impurity. Such representations reinforce the argument that caste violence operates not only through physical coercion but also through deeply ingrained ideological structures. At the same time, the novel exposes the broader social complicity that enables such failures. The indifference of dominant-caste society, the reluctance of authorities to intervene, and the normalisation of caste hierarchy all contribute to an environment in which violence can occur with impunity. The Kilvenmani massacre thus emerges as both a discrete incident and the culmination of an ongoing process of marginalisation.

Kandasamy's narrative also foregrounds the importance of memory as a form of resistance. The novel positions itself against dominant historiography, which often marginalises or ignores subaltern experiences, and instead offers an alternative archive grounded in empathy and critical reflection. The text's metafictional strategies play a crucial role in this process. By drawing attention to its own construction, the narrative invites readers to question the authority of all historical accounts. The repeated questioning of how the story should be told—whether through linear narration, fragmented episodes, or reflective commentary—underscores the contingency of representation. In addition to its engagement with representation and memory, the novel also offers a powerful critique of development and modernity. The agrarian conflict that underlies the massacre is situated within broader processes of economic transformation, where traditional hierarchies are challenged by emerging forms of political organisation.

In synthesising the insights of Dalit studies, subaltern studies, and disaster theory, this article has argued that *The Gypsy Goddess* redefines disaster as a structurally produced phenomenon rooted in caste hierarchy. The Kilvenmani massacre is a manifestation of

systemic violence that operates across multiple levels—economic, social, and institutional. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit labourers, the novel challenges dominant narratives and offers an alternative framework for understanding catastrophe. Ultimately, *The Gypsy Goddess* emerges as a text that not only documents a historical event but also transforms it into a site of critical inquiry. Its narrative strategies, theoretical resonances, and ethical commitments make it a significant contribution to contemporary literature and to interdisciplinary debates on violence and inequality. By insisting on the centrality of caste in understanding disaster, the novel challenges scholars to rethink existing frameworks and to develop more inclusive approaches that account for the experiences of marginalised communities. The significance of this intervention extends beyond the specific context of Kilvenmani. In a world where disasters are increasingly understood in terms of environmental crises, Kandasamy's novel reminds us that social structures play a crucial role in shaping vulnerability and resilience. The recognition of caste as a determinant of disaster opens new avenues for research and underscores the need for intersectional approaches that address the complex interplay of power, inequality, and violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Gypsy Goddess* stands as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of literature in engaging with social and political issues. Through its innovative narrative form and its uncompromising focus on caste violence, the novel challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths and to reconsider their assumptions about disaster, history, and justice. It is this capacity to provoke critical reflection that ensures its continued significance within both literary and academic contexts.

The Gypsy Goddess ultimately transforms the Kilvenmani massacre from a historical episode into a sustained reflection on violence, memory, and responsibility. By refusing linear narration and foregrounding the challenges of representation, Kandasamy creates a text that resists closure and demands ethical engagement from its readers. The novel reveals how caste structures produce conditions of extreme vulnerability, where catastrophe is not sudden but the result of long-standing inequality and exclusion. In re-presenting the massacre, the narrative restores visibility to lives that have been marginalised or forgotten. It insists that remembering is not merely an act of preservation but a form of resistance against erasure. At the same time, the text challenges readers to confront the continuing relevance of such violence in contemporary contexts. By framing caste oppression as a form of disaster, *The Gypsy Goddess* expands the scope of literary engagement with catastrophe and underscores the role of storytelling in acknowledging and addressing social injustice.

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