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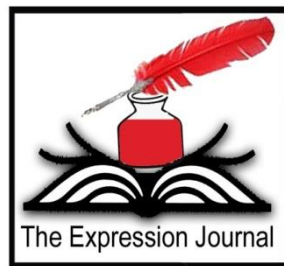


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Marginality and Marital Discord in Select Works of Meghna Pant and Meena Kandasamy

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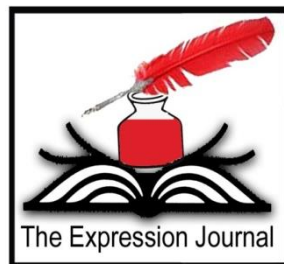
Abstract

Meghna Pant is an eminent contemporary writer in India. She is known for her robust feminism and resistance. She authored some important novels like *One and a Half Wife* (2012) and *The Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Good News* (2021). She also brought out some collections of short stories such as *Happy Birthday* (2013) and *The Trouble with Women* (2016). Moreover, she wrote a few works of non-fiction like *Feminist Rani* (2018) and *How to Get Published in India* (2019). The dominant issues in Pant's writings include dreams and disenchantment, marital discord, domestic violence, rape, miscarriage, surrogacy, body-shaming, resistance, resilience and so on and so forth. Through her writings, she shows how women are constantly subjected to marginalization, violence, oppression and subjugation by men. On the other hand, Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is another contemporary eminent Indian poet, novelist, translator and anti-caste activist. Her two collections of poems, namely *Touch* and *Ms Militancy* came out in 2006 and 2010 respectively. She also brought out some notable works of fiction such as *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), *When I hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as A Young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). Moreover, she has translated several poems and prose writings from Tamil. Her poems and novels highlight the pain, sufferings and marginalization of the Dalits in general and the Dalit women in particular in the caste-based and gender-based Indian society. Protest and activism are the hallmark of her works. The present paper intends to explore the themes of marginality and marital discord in select works of Meghna Pant and Meena Kandasamy.

Keywords

Marginality, Marital Discord, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Disillusionment, Violence.

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Meghna Pant is an eminent contemporary writer in India. She is known for her feminism. She authored some important novels like *One and a Half Wife* (2012) and *The Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Good News* (2021). She also brought out some collections of short stories such as *Happy Birthday* (2013) and *The Trouble with Women* (2016). Moreover, she wrote works of non-fiction like *Feminist Rani* (2018) and *How to Get Published in India* (2019). The dominant issues in Pant's writings include dreams and disenchantment, marital discord, domestic violence, rape, miscarriage, surrogacy, body-shaming and so on and so forth. Through her writings, she shows how women are constantly subjected to marginalization, violence, oppression and subjugation by men. In fact, her works bear witness to the fact that the oppressive forces of patriarchy rob the women of their rights, choices, dignity and freedom, thus reducing them to the level of a mere puppet. However, she does not forget to emphasize that women must resist their protest and assert their identities in the face of all odds. In the article titled "Negotiating Identity and Womanhood: A Feminist Reading of *One and a Half Wife* by Meghna Pant", Khusnaaz points out: "In *One and a Half Wife*, Pant writes a powerful story about what it means to be woman while navigating concepts of identity, displacement and self-realization through the lenses of patriarchy, migration and cultural hybridity". In the article titled "The Feminine Voice Unbound: An Analytical Study of Women's Empowerment in Meghna Pant's Narratives", Vrushi Ranjit Jagtap and Shashank Baburao Mane have pointed out: "Meghna Pant's narratives vividly depict the journey of women as they confront and challenge gender roles and societal expectations. In *One and a Half Wife*, Amara Malhotra evolves from a submissive, culturally confined woman into a figure of resilience and independence".

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy (born in 1984) is an eminent Indian poet, novelist, translator and anti-caste activist. Her poems and novels highlight the pain, sufferings and marginalization of the Dalits in the caste-based Indian society. She brings to the fore

the fact that caste and gender play a crucial role in the Indian orthodox society. Our gendered society leaves no stone unturned to push a section of the people from the centre of power and privilege to the periphery. In other words, she makes every effort to highlight the oppression, suppression and exploitation of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular by the high- caste people. Apart from that, protest and activism are the keynote of Kandasamy's works. Her two collections of poems, namely *Touch* and *Ms Militancy* came out in 2006 and 2010 respectively. She also brought out some notable works of fiction such as *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), *When I hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as A Young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). Moreover, she has translated several poems and prose writings from Tamil. In his article entitled "Voicing the Trauma of Caste: A Reading of the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy", Sudheer Chandra Hajela has aptly remarked on the poetry of Kandasamy: "Hers is the poetry of anguish, a search for identity and a yearning for liberation from the stigma of being untouchable" (6). Pratibha notes: "... Kandasamy declares with an air of certitude her political stance in her poetry, locating herself within the post-colonial discursive space of the "subaltern woman", throwing her lot with the marginalized" (92). Bhaskar Ch. Sarkar points out that Kandasamy is a "polemical Dalit woman writer. Most of her works are centered on feminism and Anti- Caste Annihilation Movement" (98). According to Anitha j. Mattam, Kandasamy highlights "the pain, agony, violence and restrictions of being Dalit... She handles her poems with all its precision of the emergence of new woman who has transcended the boundaries of the female gender" (152). Resliya M. S. notes: "One Important aspect in the poetry of Kandasamy is the discussion and resentment directed at the sexual exploitation of women" (689). In her article, "Explicating the poetry of Meena Kandasamy: An Encyclopedia of Woeful Inventories about Dalit Women", Riya Chatterjee has rightly observed: "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 classes". (57). C. Shanmuga Priya argues that Kandasamy's poems "not only touch upon aesthetic considerations and sensual human bonds of affection or desire but refers to the rigid hierarchies of caste that relegate them to a sub-human level as their mere touch is considered to be polluting to the upper caste people" (292). In his article "Subjugation and Resilience in the poems of Meena Kandasamy", Anik Sarkar has rightly pointed out: "Power is often exerted over the marginalized in society and it forms a zone of violence, discrimination, xenophobia, inequality, and so Dalits can be considered to be on the receiving end of the oppression from the power politics that emerge through societal hierarchies" (37). Jyotsna Bidave observes: "As one reads the narratives of Dalit women one realizes that there is a uniqueness in the problems these women shared that needs another kind of feminism to understand Dalit women's literature... This uniqueness consists of the domestic violence, experiences of discrimination on the basis of caste, class and gender" (29). Kandasamy said in an interview: "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: *Angry Young Women Are Labelled Hysterics*).

The title story of the collection *Happy Birthday and Other Stories* written by Meghna Pant, shows the boredom, alienation, mental torment and anguish of a

housewife, named Nadia, who gets no attention or love from her rich husband called Danesh. Her husband is always concerned with his business prospects and deals. He turns a deaf ear to Nadia's craving for real love and care. The story narrates her bitter experience in a party thrown by her husband's business partner. She is continually ignored and neglected by her husband, though she expected to receive his attention and love in the party: "After all, Danesh had lost his way with her a long time back: twenty-one years of marriage had rid him of any interest in his light weight and easy-to-brush-aside wife. Now, whenever they meet someone, he would direct his attention resolutely towards that person as if he was a ball facing the front wall of a quash court" (Pant 58). Pant's another story titled "Dented and Painted" shows how a simple housewife, named Meena, has been forced by her husband to become a call-girl. Though her husband has pushed her to the miserable life of a sex-worker, he keeps complaining about her character. Meena suffers a lot of physical injuries in the hands of her clients. She is not even allowed to contact her near and dear ones while on duty. Moreover, she is perpetually oppressed and abused by her husband. Pant's another story, namely "Clip and Cane", highlights how a simple woman, called Parvati, is constantly subjected to physical torture and mental torment by her husband.

Meghan Pant's novel *One and a Half Wife* sheds ample light on the sorrows, sufferings and marginalization of a woman, named Amara Malhotra, who is married to a Harvard educated millionaire. She is constantly ignored, neglected, humiliated, suppressed, oppressed and marginalized by her egoistic and tyrannical husband. Initially, Amara tries her best to please her husband by accepting the dress code and make-up dictated by him:

She spent four hours getting dressed. To avoid the mistake of repeating the mistake of 'the day to impress Riya', she carefully followed an online step-by-step guide on how to apply make-up. She wore a purple velvet dress with a bow tie in front. Right before they were to leave for dinner, she emerged from the guestroom where she had been trying to transform herself, and stood before Prashant, proud and shy, wondering what he would think of her new look. (Pant 94).

These lines show how she desperately adopts a new appearance to prove to be a so-called good housewife. But all her efforts go in vain. Her husband, Prashant, is determined to underestimate and humiliate her. He leaves no stone unturned to insult and underestimate Amara. The gulf between the couple keeps widening with the result that Amara seldom meets her husband in their apartment:

In the fifth month of their marriage, Prashant came to the house only twice for dinner. One day he texted saying that he was staying at work the whole night. By that time Amara had spent eight days inside the house without seeing him, for he left for work before she woke up and came back when she was asleep. The walls in the house bore down on her. She had to leave. She had to be around people. She stepped out of her apartment building to take a walk around the block. (Pant 101).

One day Prashant tells Amara that he has made up his mind to divorce her: "And believe me I am sorry. I know this is unfair to you. I hope one day you can forgive me. You are a good person and you will be fine. You'll move on and meet someone. But this has to be done" (Pant 134). This announcement leaves her in a state of utter shock and grief. She

is stupefied, shattered and devastated. After the collapse of her marriage, Amara returns to her parents and gets herself caught between old beliefs and the new ones.

Meena Kandasamy has expressed her resentment against the forces of patriarchy and casteism. Her poem “Ekalaivan” uses an episode to highlight how the so-called low-caste people are perpetually suppressed, oppressed and marginalized by the upper caste people. In the Mahabharata, Guru Dronacharya did not agree to teach Ekalavya simply because the latter belonged to the so-called low-caste community. Not only that, he demanded the right thumb of Ekalavya as a ‘Guru Dakshina’. Ekalavya cut off his right thumb and offered it to Guru Dronacharya. The real intention of Dronacharya was to suppress the talents and skills of Ekalavya who belonged to the low caste. It shows how the upper caste people always marginalize the so-called low-caste people on various pretexts. In the poem “Hymns of a Hag”, Kandasamy imagines that she is a witch out on a mission to kill her oppressors:

I fancy myself being a witch
Broomstick borne and black as pitch.
Thin, stark- naked and with fire for eyes
Killing men whom I despise. (Kandasamy 37).

A note of revenge and protest is quite unmistakable in this poem. She really enjoys the sight of her oppressors bleeding or groaning in pain. She is determined to take revenge upon them:

Haunting oppressors to shave their heads.
Cutting all their holy threads.
Experiencing joy as they bleed.
Dance, rejoice my black, black deed. (Kandasamy 37)

Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You, Or A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* deals with dreams, disenchantment, marital discord, marginalization, rape, violence, resilience and resistance. Having been captivated by the communist ideals of a professor, the woman protagonist falls in love with him and their relationship acquires physical intimacy over time. However, he leaves no stone unturned to deny his love affair with her in public. One day he gets admitted to a hospital and many people come to see him. His beloved also visits him in the hospital. But he pretends not to know her. After her marriage, she finds to her utter despair and shock that her husband is an egoist. She is oppressed by the humdrum domesticity as well as by her husband's cruelty and indifference. Not only that, her dress and looks are manipulated by her tyrannical husband. She is made to take a new SIM card and she is not allowed to share her contact number with others. She is robbed of her freedom, happiness and peace of mind. She is cut off from the entire world. She is not even allowed to write freely. He tries in each and every possible way to crush her creative zeal. Worst of all, every night she is raped by her husband. Her pain and anguish are revealed in the following words:

I also have to find out the technique to show its exact opposite, how the rooms begin to close in on this woman when she is being violated, how the walls chase her corners, how the house appears to shrink the minute her husband is home, how there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, nowhere to evade his presence. (Kandasamy 21)

Her husband looks upon her as her student. He seeks to gain complete control over her mind and behaviour. He makes every effort to instill his own ideas in his wife's mind. It

is crystal clear that this hapless woman is constantly suppressed, oppressed and marginalized by her husband. This man leaves no stone unturned to crush the creative spirit of his wife. He does not want to let her become a writer. He likes to control and subjugate her all the time. He gets angry with her simply because her writings contain the word 'lover'. So, he does anything and everything to thwart his wife's creative endeavours:

My husband is railing at me, slapping me, throwing my laptop across the small kitchen, forcing me to delete a manuscript, a non-fiction book in progress because somewhere in its pages there is a mention of the word 'lover'. He accuses me of carrying my past into my present, and this treason is evidence enough that there is no hope or space for the future to flourish. (Kandasamy 87)

It goes without saying that this hapless woman finds herself in a claustrophobic atmosphere. Quarrels have become an inseparable part of her life. Her husband always quarrels with her over petty matters. She feels that she is destined to fight a battle in which her defeat is inevitable. The pain of being marginalized and oppressed is revealed in the following lines:

The battle of the adversaries is structured like a chess game. Here, there are only two players. I'm the king, constantly under threat. I'm the king who can move only one step at any given time. He is the drama queen. There is no move he cannot make. The board is empty except for us. He corners me whenever I move. There is no hiding. In the end, he always corners me. (Kandasamy 150)

In the end, one must point out that both Meghna Pant and Meena Kandasamy have explored the themes of marginality and marital discord in their own way. Thus, there is no denying the fact that women are always marginalized and oppressed by the forces of patriarchy. The case of Dalit women is worse because they are doubly oppressed by the forces of patriarchy and casteism.

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