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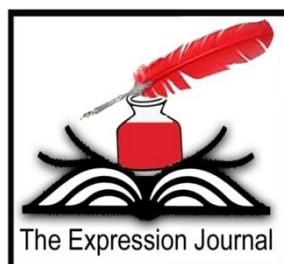


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The Aesthetics of Resistance: Negotiating Memory, Trauma and Resilience in Select Works of Meena Kandasamy and Meghna Pant

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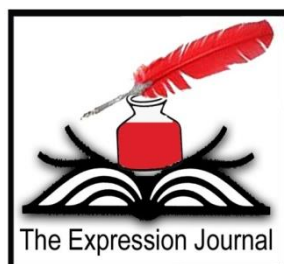
Abstract

The present paper intends to explore the issues of memory, trauma and resilience in select works of Meena Kandasamy and Meghna Pant. While Kandasamy has highlighted the sorrows, sufferings, marginalization and exploitation of Dalit women, Pant has focused on the suppression, oppression and marginalization of women in general, thus exposing the malignant nature of our gendered society. Both of them has shown how the traumatic experiences shape and regulate the activities of individuals, thereby leaving an indelible mark on their memory. At the same time, these authors have demonstrated how the protagonists display remarkable resilience in facing the challenges and forging their own identities. They are not crushed by the burden of their traumatic past or on-going sufferings. Rather, they put up a brave fight, defy their oppressive fate, and succeed in asserting their identities and individuality. Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is an eminent contemporary Indian poet, novelist, translator and anti-caste activist. Her works bring out the pain, anguish and marginalization of the Dalits in the caste-ridden society of India. Apart from that, protest and activism occupy a central place in her works. Meghna Pant is another eminent contemporary writer of India and her works are pervaded by feminism. The present study is going to delve deep into Kandasamy's poems and her novel *When I Hit You* as well as Meghna Pant's novel *One and a Half Wife* and her short story collection *Happy Birthday and Other Stories* in order to accentuate the aforesaid issues.

Keywords

Memory, Trauma, Resilience, Resistance, Defiance.

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There is no denying the fact that memory plays an important role in our life. It sometimes gives us a feeling of joy and happiness. The delights of nostalgia are always a grand feast to our mind and soul. However, on many occasions, memory proves to be a great source of pain, anguish and trauma. In fact, trauma has become part and parcel of human life. Thus, we may suffer from traumatic experiences at various stages of our life. Sometimes, childhood trauma resurfaces in our life, rendering our existence meaningless and futile. At the same time, it is also true that we need to put up a resistance and overcome all types of odds and challenges by virtue of our indomitable courage and resilience.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is an eminent contemporary Indian poet, novelist, translator and anti-caste activist. Her works bring out the pain, anguish and marginalization of the Dalits in the caste-ridden society of India. She accentuates the fact that gender, class and caste play a pivotal role in the Indian orthodox society. Our gendered society always pushes the weaker section to the margin of power and privileges. Kandasamy throws a great deal of light on the oppression, exploitation and suppression of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular in the caste and gender-based society of India. Apart from that, protest and activism occupy a central place in her works. Her two collections of poems are *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*, published in 2006 and 2010 respectively. She also enriched our literature with her novels 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 many poems and prose writings from Tamil. 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*). Pratibha points out: "... 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). Anitha J. Mattam is of the opinion that 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. opines: “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 states: “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 avers 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 puts forward the following argument: “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 opines: “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). 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). Bhaskar Ch. Sarkar observes that Kandasamy is a “polemical Dalit woman writer. Most of her works are centered on feminism and Anti- Caste Annihilation Movement” (98).

Meghna Pant is another eminent contemporary writer of India, and her works are pervaded by feminism. Her important novels include *One and a Half Wife* (2012) and *The Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Good News* (2021). She also published some collections of short stories like *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). Dreams and disenchantment, domestic violence, marital discord, rape, body-shaming, miscarriage and surrogacy are the dominant themes in her works. She highlights how women are perpetually subjected to violence, marginalization, subjugation and oppression by men. Her works emphasize the fact that the oppressive forces of patriarchy snatch away women’s rights, choices, dignity and freedom, thus transforming their lives into a constant source of pain and sufferings. However, she demonstrates how women voice their protest and assert their identities against all odds. In the article titled “The Feminine Voice Unbound: An Analytical Study of Women’s Empowerment in Meghna Pant’s Narratives”, Vrushali Ranjit Jagtap and Shashank Baburao Mane argue: “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". In the article titled "Negotiating Identity and Womanhood: A Feminist Reading of *One and a Half Wife* by Meghna Pant", Khusnaaz states: "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".

Kandasamy's poems and novels unquestionably explore the themes and issues of memory, trauma and resilience. For instance, her poem "An Angel Meeting Me" shows how the speaker recollects her traumatic past. The poem lays bare the fact that she was deprived of nutritious food and nourishment: "And he, healthy boy, well -fed, white with rosy cheeks, / will wonder about me/ pity my bony body, those thin ribs" (Kandasamy 7). Again, she was subjected to torture by her lover. Kandasamy goes on to argue that the angel will feel her "twisted ears" and the "scars on her hands" (Kandasamy 7). She reveals that she went to school and she was beaten with a cane. The poem "Another Paradise Lost" shows how a king was punished for raising his voice against the caste hierarchies. Memory plays a pivotal role in this poem. The speaker comes across a snake which tells her the pathetic story of its previous life. The snake points out that he was once a great king on earth. He was revered by one and all. After his death, he got an opportunity to go to Heaven. He earned the love and respect of everyone in the celestial place, too. But one day he raised his voice and called in question the evil practice of caste system. This was his crime. So, he was transformed into a snake, destined to roam the earth for countless years.

In the poem "Dead Woman Walking", the mythological figure Karaikkal Ammayar is used as a speaker to represent the Dalit women who are suppressed, oppressed and exploited by the upper caste men. Though she was devoted to her husband, the latter abandoned her. Subsequently, he got married to another woman. The poem under review sheds ample light on the anguish and sufferings of Dalit women who are abandoned by their husbands. At the very outset, this hapless woman gives vent to her pain and sufferings:

I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors
with faltering steps, with felted, flying hair
with hollowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes (Kandasamy 21)

The deserted woman then recollects her traumatic past and tells us that she was originally a fair woman. She married a merchant. Her married life was full of joy and happiness. But later on, her husband lost all his interests in her, and finally he deserted her. He secured a new job and went to a new city. He married a "fresh and formless wife" (Kandasamy 21). Thus, the hapless woman was plunged into an ocean of grief and despair. Her pain and sufferings are abundantly exposed in the following lines:

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, 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. (Kandasamy 21)

The poem demonstrates how the upper caste men treat the Dalit women as the objects of sexual delight. It goes without saying that traumatic experiences occupy a central position in the poem.

In Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You*, a young woman recalls her traumatic experiences of an abusive marriage. Initially, she was captivated by the revolutionary idealism of her future husband. But after her marriage, she realized that her husband was an egoist and brute. He constantly manipulated and tortured her both physically and mentally. He forced her to change her SIM card and prevented from sharing her new number with anyone else except her parents. He also compelled her to share her email ID and password with him. Thus, he robbed her of her freedom and even her existence. He left no stone unturned to make sure that she was cut off from the main world. He kept on quarrelling with her over petty matters. For instance, he rebuked her when things were out of place. He made her accept the unfair argument that it was her responsibility to keep things in order, no matter whether those things were misplaced by her or him. Each and every day, he inflicted pain and mental agony upon her, thus throwing her into an ocean of grief and despair. He grabbed whatever he got near him and thrashed her for no fault of her own. What is the worst thing is that he raped her every night. Naturally, she could not but feel a great void in her life. It was a matter of shame that she was subjected to marital rape and violence. While being violated, she felt like a living corpse. Her anguish and sufferings are highlighted 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)

Life became a veritable hell for her. Apart from that, he tried to force her to become a mother against her will. He took her to a gynecologist and gave her medicines as per the doctor's prescription. However, she adopted some home-made food-items to avoid getting pregnant. Moreover, her husband made all kinds of efforts to crush her poetic spirit and nullify her creative ambitions. He got angry with her as her writings feature the word 'lover'. So, he tried in each and every possible way 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 is crystal clear that this woman got imprisoned in an atmosphere full of claustrophobia and nausea. Quarrels became part and parcel of her life. She felt that she was destined to fight a battle in which her defeat was inevitable. The pain of the traumatic memory 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)

Life became so unbearable that she left her husband's house and began to live with her parents. She struggled hard to forge an identity for herself. Thus, the novel is charged with memory and trauma. At the same time, it shows the power of resilience which enables an individual to survive against all odds.

Meghna Pant's novel *One and a Half Wife* shows how a young woman called Amara was married to Prashant who was a rich, educated man. After her marriage, she found her husband to be a cruel and egoistic man. She made every effort to keep her husband in good humour. She began to like those things which were close to her husband's heart. All her efforts, however, proved futile, for he seemed determined to underestimate and subjugate her. He always humiliated her for no fault of her own. Throughout the novel, Amara's traumatic past has been foregrounded and accentuated time and again. Her husband purposefully maintained a distance, thus depriving her of her marital peace and happiness. As time rolled on, the gulf between them kept on expanding to alarming proportions. He began to leave the apartment before she woke up. He would come back home after she fell asleep. On one occasion, she did not see him for a long week. Gradually, she was engulfed by despair and grief. The following lines bear witness to her feelings of nothingness and pain: "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" (Pant 101). All her hopes were dashed to the ground, and she was left in a state of stupefaction. One day, he informed her that he was not going to live with her any more. This abrupt and unexpected announcement came to her as a severe shock. It left her shattered and disappointed. In a sense, she found herself on the verge of mental breakdown. In fact, life turned out to be a great void for her. Initially, she did not let her parents know this matter, but subsequently she divulged this information, thereby dealing a severe blow to their hopes and aspirations. She began to live with her parents as they moved to a small city. She, however, found herself on the horns of a dilemma. It is gradually revealed that she was caught between traditional beliefs and modern views. However, she showed adequate resilience in maintaining her balance, and finally she succeeded in asserting her individuality and identity.

In the story "Clip and cane" by Meghna Pant, we see some blind people being forced to work as bonded labourers. One of them is Sunder. In his boyhood, he lost his vision as he was thrashed by the son of a rich man and his friends: "They spared no part of Sunder's body, including his face" (Pant 16). The traumatic past keeps haunting him. Another blind man called Gyan was born blind and was subsequently sold to a racket by his father quite unknowingly.

Thus, the works under consideration bring to the fore the issues of memory, trauma and resilience in the works of Meena Kandasamy and Meghna Pant.

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