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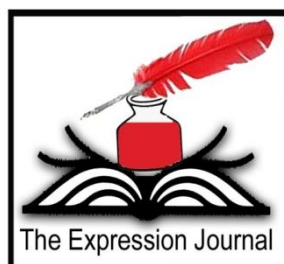
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Voices of the Marginalized Other: Exploring the Themes of Oppression and Resistance in Select Poems of Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy (born in 1984) is an eminent Indian poet, novelist, translator and activist. She has enriched Dalit literature by writing poems and novels which centre around the pain, sufferings and marginalization of the Dalits in the caste-based Indian society. She shows how caste and gender play a crucial role in the Indian orthodox society, thus pushing a section of the people from the centre of power and privilege to the periphery. In other words, she leaves no stone unturned to highlight the oppression, suppression and exploitation of the Dalits 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 published 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. The present paper intends to examine select poems of Meena Kandasamy to foreground the themes of oppression and resistance.

Keywords

Meena Kandasamy, Poetry, Caste, Gender, Oppression, Marginalization, Exploitation, Resistance, Activism.

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Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy (born in 1984) is an eminent Indian poet, novelist, translator and activist. She has enriched Dalit literature by writing poems and novels which centre around the pain, sufferings and marginalization of the Dalits in the caste-based Indian society. She shows how caste and gender play a crucial role in the Indian orthodox society, thus pushing a section of the people from the centre of power and privilege to the periphery. In other words, she leaves no stone unturned to highlight the oppression, suppression and exploitation of the Dalits 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 published 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 the poem "Aggression", Kandasamy not only reveals the sufferings and silence of the Dalits but also strikes a note of revolt and resistance. She states that their silence is quite unmistakable and it seems to have no end: "Ours is a silence/ that waits. Endlessly waits" (Kandasamy 5). The poem sheds ample light on the fact that the so-called low caste people have to tolerate sufferings and oppression in silence. She points to the caste-based discrimination and violence to which the Dalits have been subjected. However, their silence is broken by their wails when their pain and torment exceed all limits. Sometimes, their lamentations prompt them to raise their voice:

And then unable to bear it
any further, it breaks into wails.
But not all suppressed reactions end
in our bemoaning the tragedy. (Kandasamy 5)

Kandasamy proceeds to point out that the oppressed and the marginalized finally rise in revolt when all their hopes and dreams are shattered. At this juncture, the expression of their inward struggle assumes colossal forms and consequently a revolution occurs:

Sometimes,
The outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode. (Kandasamy 5)

Thus, it is crystal clear that Kandasamy not only foregrounds the wretched plight of the Dalits but also seeks to infuse a spirit of revolution in them. This poem is pervaded by protest and activism. She concludes the poem with her belief that "most of the time/ Aggression is the best kind of trouble- shooting" (Kandasamy 5). Instead of bemoaning the tragedy of marginalization and oppression, she comes forward to unite the oppressed and the downtrodden so that they may get rid of the caste-based discrimination and torture.

In the poem "An Angel Meeting Me", Kandasamy presents her encounter with an angel in an ironic tone. Here, the angel is not a celestial entity but a representative of the high class people who always enjoy power, privilege and riches. The poem offers a stark contrast between the affluent, healthy angel and the impoverished, oppressed speaker. The poem opens with a seemingly romantic mood:

And maybe he will
almost fall in love.
I will look into his eyes
and he into mine. (Kandasamy 7)

However, she breaks the illusion of romance by exposing the violence against her: "the unfortunate other/ blinded by a disciplinizing slap" (Kandasamy 7). She shows how the Dalits are tortured and tormented by those in power. Whenever a Dalit boy or girl tries to protest, he or she is subjected to torture and oppression by the upper- caste people. Now, the speaker points out that the angel is a healthy boy who has never faced the scarcity of food. His physical beauty has been accentuated by the image of the rosy cheeks. She is sure that the angel will wonder about her emaciated body and wretched state:

And he, healthy boy, well -fed, white with rosy cheeks,
will wonder about me
pity my bony body, those thin ribs. (Kandasamy 7)

These lines bring to the fore the fact that the Dalits are deprived of the basic sustenance like food and nourishment. They have to work hard from dawn to dusk. They grow pale and emaciated on account of their hard labour. But it is a pity that they do not have the opportunity to live a decent life. They are underpaid and therefore economically exploited. The images of “bony body” and “thin ribs” poignantly demonstrate the oppression, suppression and deprivation of the Dalits by the upper- caste people. On the other hand, the expressions like “healthy boy”, “well-fed” and “rosy cheeks” represent the luxurious life of the upper- caste people who always enjoy the abundance of food, money and power. Kandasamy proceeds 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. It shows the brutal torture and discrimination to which the Dalit students are subjected in schools. 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 the poem “Composition”, Kandasamy shows the social injustice in a caste- ridden society. She tells us how her poetry is born out of pain and anguish. However, she makes it clear that she is prevented from realizing her poetic potentials by the forces of patriarchy and caste- system. She graphically presents the oppression of the Dalits by the upper caste people in the following lines:

At that brief time
When you wait
For the audacious cane
To strike your skin... (Kandasamy 20)

The speaker points out that short poetic lines arise in her mind at this critical juncture like “bullets from a machine gun” (Kandasamy 20). A ray of hope is seen as poetry begins to come out:

The poem comes with the
Freshness of a life set free,
Whistling its way
Painfully, like wind searing
Through the palm fronds (Kandasamy 20)

However, her poetry is stifled as she is brutally thrashed with a cane. She shows how a Dalit woman is crushed by the oppressive forces of gender- discrimination and caste- based marginalization. All her poetic qualities are dampened and nullified by both casteism and patriarchy. She unequivocally reveals the double colonization of a Dalit woman in terms of caste and gender. The following lines exhibit the injustice done to a Dalit woman poet:

The cane thrashes
Your skin, dancing cruelly
And bouncing in wooden joy
Before you scream,
Or shake, the poetry stops. (Kandasamy 20)

It goes without saying that power- politics is a major theme in Kandasamy’s writings. It leads to subjugation, suppression and exploitation. 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)

In the poem "Dead Woman Walking", Kandasamy uses the mythological figure Karaikkal Ammayar to represent the Dalit women who are oppressed and exploited by the upper caste men. This mythical woman was deserted by her merchant husband though she was devoted to him. Then, he married another woman. The poem in context exhibits the pain and sufferings of the Dalit women who are abandoned by their husbands. The poem begins by showing the wretched sufferings of the deserted woman.

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 speaker, i.e. the deserted woman now recalls her past and tells us that she was once a beautiful woman. She was the wife of a merchant. She led a happy life until her husband turned hostile to her and abandoned her. He got a new job and moved to a new city. He married a "fresh and formless wife" (Kandasamy 21). Having been abandoned by her husband, the hapless woman was plunged into an ocean of grief and despair. Her anguish and sufferings are poignantly revealed 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)

Thus, the poem shows how the upper caste men look upon the Dalit women as the objects of sexual gratification. Once their carnal desires are fulfilled, they do not hesitate to abandon the Dalit women. Hence, it goes without saying that the Dalit women are socially and sexually exploited by the upper caste men. In fact, the forces of casteism and patriarchy crush the jovial spirit of Dalit women beyond repair. In this context, it is worth pointing out Dalit feminism reigns supreme in Kandasamy's works. 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. (Kandasamy 29)

The poem "Nailed" exposes the oppressive attitude of the caste-ridden patriarchal society towards women in general and Dalit women in particular. Here, Kandasamy exhibits how women have been perpetually subjugated, oppressed and silenced by the male-dominated society. She also tells us how Dalit women continue to suffer not only in the hands of their male counterpart but also in the hands of high caste people. At the outset, the poetess points out that the men are afraid of those women who voice their feelings and resentment in their poetry. Besides exposing the oppressive nature of patriarchy, the speaker strikes a strong note of protest. She goes on to argue that the men cannot stitch the mouth of the women poets. So, they use all possible means to choke their voice. Now, she offers some examples in which women have been tortured, subjugated, oppressed and even killed. A woman was "bolted

within a box and dropped in the Kaveri” because “her pet parrot developed an atrocious fetish for the flesh of sacrificial goats” (Kandasamy 60). The speaker proceeds to narrate how a woman was “thrown into a well by a wandering socialite god man” because she had “teased and tormented his celibacy” (Kandasamy 60). The poem is replete with instances of violence against women. The speaker next narrates the pathetic story of a woman called Durga who was “inaccessible and unattainable”: “... Durga was put in an iron trunk that settled on a river bed and even the men and women who tried to approach her were informed in a prerecorded voice that she was out of reach and network range and coverage area” (Kandasamy 60). Next, the speaker tells the story of a Dalit woman who was brutally killed for possessing the skills of oratory. This woman was an orator, and she had the capacity to join the parliament. To stop her progress and growth, her Brahmin fiancé instructed some ruffians to kill her. A nail was driven into her head and her “coffin was left in the river to drift” (Kandasamy 60). This story lays bare the oppression and suppression of Dalit women by high caste men. Whenever a Dalit woman begins to grow and shine, her progress is stopped by the upper caste people. The poetess drives home the fact that the talents and potentialities of women in general and Dalit women in particular are always nipped in the bud by the oppressive forces of patriarchy and caste discrimination. There is no denying the fact that Kandasamy has demonstrated the double oppression of Dalit women. First, they are oppressed and suppressed by patriarchy. Second, they are subjugated, exploited and tyrannized by the high caste people. The poem ends with a reference to Goddess Kali who was shut inside her temple for being black and blood thirsty. 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).

In the poem “Moon gazers”, Kandasamy presents a classroom situation in which a fifteen-year-old Dalit girl asks a question while the teacher is discussing a Hindi poem. The teacher describes how a bird keeps watching the moon throughout the night. At this juncture, a question comes to the head of the Dalit girl. She asks: “What does that bird do on new moon nights?” (Kandasamy 56). Instead of answering the question, the high caste teacher looks upon her questioning voice as a sign of impudence, and so he ridicules and humiliates the girl. The whole class laughs at her and she feels ashamed:

The teacher says the bird watches my face

The class turns all at once, stares at me

Ashamed, I shrink, I sit. (Kandasamy 56)

These lines show how the Dalit students are humiliated, suppressed, oppressed and marginalized by the upper- caste teachers in the schools. Caste discrimination and oppression reign supreme even in the educational institutions. Had the girl belonged to the so-called high castes, the teacher would not have got angry. In that case, he might have answered her question. But in reality, the teacher humiliates the Dalit girl simply because she belongs to the so-called low caste. Thus, it is crystal clear that Dalits are subjected to discrimination, marginalization and torture at each and every place. Now, the speaker goes on to point out how she is oppressed in later years, too:

Twenty-two, lost in any space,

I restlessly seek the strength

of his shoulders and I hunt

Like a hungry beast to catch a glimpse

of my coal black lover and I crave to look once more

Into his limitless eyes where I sank and never surfaced. (Kandasamy 56)

Thus, the above-quoted lines shed a great deal of light on the oppression and sexual exploitation of Dalit women by non-Dalit people. The poem concludes with the speaker's assertion that she has been silenced and she never asks questions again:

As I desolately count each passing hour

I become that moon-gazing bird on new moon nights

I sing the saddest songs of all time, I never ask questions. (Kandasamy 56)

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).

To sum up, one must point out that Kandasamy emerges as a voice of dissent and resistance through her writings. On the one hand, she throws a great deal of light on the oppression, suppression, exploitation and marginalization of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular; on the other, she registers her protest against the injustices done to the marginalized and the oppressed.

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