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## Influence of Society in Meena Kandasamy's Social and Poetic Identity Reflected in her Poetry

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This paper unfolds the reflection of the social structure on the works of Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) and influence of the society during formation of her social and poetic identity. The poet belongs to that category which has the past tendency to get subjugated and suppressed the most – Dalit and Female. The current paper studies selected poems of Kandasamy's two poetic volumes that are *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*. The titles of her both volumes imply perception of social deprivation that accumulates in history as cycles of violence and coils of collective guilt. Kandasamy's poems are conversant with wisdom of gender relations that suggest being a female in a fundamentally patriarchal culture is another form of being a part of minor social group. Kandasamy's anguish and temper against casteism is notably fired up and reflected in many poems wherein she, very furiously, expresses the feminist approach and offers valuable thoughts on the question of social identity of downtrodden group of the society.

According to Jonathan Culler, "the fundamental identity of characters emerges as the result of actions, of struggles with the world, but then this identity is posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions" (111). The same cause is mirrored in the works of Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) who belongs to that category which has the past tendency to get subjugated and suppressed the most – Dalit and Female. Kandasamy regards her writing as a process of coming to terms with her identity: her "womanness, Tamilness and low/outcasteness" that she wears with pride (Sarangi, par. 1). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests, "I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. 'Man' is such a word in common usage. Not a word, but the word" (Lodge and Wood 495). And one can note surprisingly that Meena Kandasamy changed her given, official and a very poetic Tamil name, Ilavenil to her pet name Meena. The titles of her both volumes imply perception of social deprivation that accumulates in history as cycles of violence and coils of collective guilt.

Her book of poems *Touch* was published in 2006. It is a collection of ardent poems dealing with oppressor-oppressed twofold conflict. Her second collection *Ms Militancy* was published in 2010. Kandasamy's poems are well-versed by a wisdom of gender relations that suggest being a female in a largely patriarchal culture is another form of being a part of minor social group. "You don't have to be a Dalit—by being a woman the caste is in you," she says (Stancati, n. pag.).

Kandasamy realizes that a politically alert poet has to be transparent to herself so as to be a dependable voice of dissent and resistance. In the title poem of her debut volume "*Touch*", she talks about various shades of touch during particular moods and activities like meditation, distractions, at rising of Kundalini and touch of tongue and the poem is addressed to upper class society and each stanza ends expressing her anguish towards this society,

*You will have known this.*

But the concluding note states a very disheartening and bare fact about the treatment given to untouchable by the high caste people. The close relationship is very instrumental in shaping a Dalit poetic self. The prime demand causing immediacy on a Dalit self results from his

understanding of age-old politics of the negation of one's own body and mind. Being now awakened, the persona here speaks about undeserving hate and the forbidden touch,

*But, you will never have known*

*that touch – the taboo*

*to your transcendence,*

*when crystallized in caste*

*was a paraphernalia of*

*undeserving hate.*

Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective 'Dalit is dignified' thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order (Mishra, par. 5). Kandasamy's hatred against casteism is remarkably revealed in the poem "Mariamma". A collective identity and its agony is expressed through 'we' who are very well aware of the discrimination between lower and upper caste and even the Gods of upper caste are different and do not prefer to come to Dalit street,

*We understand*

*why upper caste Gods*

*and their 'good-girl' much-married, father-fucked,*

*virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses*

*borne in their golden chariots*

*don't come to our streets.*

And she takes a strong objection against the Goddess Mariamma for joining the group of upper caste and admonishes Her,

*Maari, our girl,*

*since when did you join their gang?*

During the national movement, Gandhi began using the term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. Many lower caste members, however, found the term to be patronizing (Deshpande, par. 23). "Becoming a Brahmin" opens with algorithm which was advocated by Father of the nation at Tirupur for converting a shudra into a Brahmin with a very so called unproblematic six steps,

*Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.*

And display, "*the end product. It is a Brahmin*" in a concluding step.

Stating a pathetic condition of a dismal class, it records the gloomy predicament of the so-called lower class people of Indian society. It is a social document, a startling reality where gender identity and casteism take a shape of anger, protest and self-assertion in which she talks about the journey of becoming a Brahmin, by recording a hypocrisy of a society,

*Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin.*

*Awaiting another Father of the Nation*

*to produce this algorithm.*

“An Angel Meeting Me” may be a follow poem of “One-eyed” and “Moon gazers” that reveals the horrifying truth about the girl education which is still rare in certain areas of the country. Birth in a particular caste confines a person to staying in this caste and restricts and individual’s mobility up or down the hierarchy (Pyakurel n. pag.). A female persona suffers a lot and has to pay her one single eye for her education,

*(the unfortunate other*

*Blinded by a disciplinizing slap).*

And a persona is fined with twisted ears and the beating by a mean cane leaves the scars on her hands,

*the scars on my hands,*

*(reminders of the flirtation*

*of my skin and a cruel cane)*

“Woman has no reason to envy either the penis or the phallus. But the non-establishment of the sexual identity of both sexes results in the fact that man, the people of men, has transformed his penis into an instrument of power so as to dominate maternal power” (Irigaray 134). In “Apologies for living on”, there is firm and ferocious search of “I” by a female persona with various assertions with a poignant note of misery marked in these poetic lines. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, it still exists in the community to certain extent,

*I am living on*

*because providing apologies is easy*

Kandasamy imagines the women to be; argumentative, persistent, rebellious, fearless and ready to face all sorts of troubles. “Ekalaivan”, though is about a male character, it is an indiscriminate psyche of Meena’s women, which goes in the same stroke of “Ms Militancy” and the protagonist suggests that the militant spirit can be kept full of life even after losing the right thumb as one can pull a trigger or hurl a bomb even with left hand,

*You can do a lot of things*

*With your left hand.*

Recalling in *A Room of One’s Own* how she had been prohibited from entering the university library, the symbolic sanctuary of the male logos, Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is ‘unpleasant to be locked out... it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in’ (Woolf). “Firewalkers” is also a potent and expressive version that articulates the similar troubles of underprivileged women. The people of superior class subjugate these women. Maari is portrayed not as a Goddess but she is an exploiter and derives pleasure from the pangs of her followers. It crushes down the probable image of Goddess Maari. Maari in this poem is just

like the brutal tormenter of the Dalits. Maari is the mad craze who needs blood to douse her mane and her devotees are “*the dream – chasers, the firewalkers*”.

Patriarchy idealizes motherhood and thereby forces women to be mothers and also determines the conditions of their motherhood. Patriarchy restricts women’s mobility and reproduces male dominance (Bhasin). Looming the story of Karaikal Ammayar, a legendary figure from mythology who was intensely in love with Lord Shiva, in different acuity, “*Dead Woman Walking*” depicts the misfortune and pitiful trauma of the subjugated and deserted women. Karaikal Ammayar represents the Dalit women who become prey of sexual exploitation by men.

Kandasamy’s most of themes and her choice of words are somewhat constrained in the refining social context of India. But this can be defensible for the reason that coarse realities cannot be elucidated in sophisticated forms and language.

Though the status of Dalit has risen considerably in the recent past, the damage caused by the stinging of inhuman treatment remains immense within and the discrimination has not been completely done away with. Meena Kandasamy asserts the social truth of dreadful caste repression, untouchability and the pain of deprived clan through her writings with the passionate depiction of crude society. “*Mohandas Karamchand*” is a much unsurpassed example of it which has the epigraph of Albert Einstein and the poem expresses hatred towards so-called double standards.

The poet herself has a militant spirit. She takes up myths and characters from Tamil Classics and demythifies them by providing them with an identity entirely different from their original one (Deva, par. 20).

More recently, Kimmel has pointed to the crucial distinction that the sex-role paradigm is based on traits associated with "female" and "male" roles rather than their enactments in real life. This, he argues, leads to traits being idealized and "essentialized" as either masculine or feminine without the slightest reference to how women and men actually behave. Thus masculinity is associated a priori with traits implying autonomy and authority, and femininity is associated with those suggesting dependency and passivity (Kimmel qtd. in Eliman and Taggart). And Kandasamy’s “*Andal*” is profanely admiring herself in the garland meant for the deity, as retold by her,

*recklessness on speed-dial, she became*

*a rape romantic. He, a bodice ripper.*

Meena strongly believes women are the first people who should oppose the caste system, since they are the greatest victims of oppression. The problem of women is essentially a problem of caste. Lord Buddha who himself was born into the warrior caste was a severe critic of the caste system. His most famous saying on the subject was, “Birth does not make one a priest or an outcaste. Behavior makes one either a priest or an outcaste” (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke n. pag.). The related feeling may be noticed in Meena’s poetic lines in “*Monologue*” which have the pauses of loss and vacuity in her sociological repression,

*I have stopped*

*My frantic search*

*For the Buddhas*

*Only they came to know*

*In ones, twos, tens.*

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (Butler 10). Kandasamy’s anguish and temper against casteism is notably fired and reflected in many poems wherein she, very furiously, expresses the feminist approach and offers valuable thoughts on the question of social identity of downtrodden group of the society. Only some Indian women poets writing in English have been proficient to investigate so deep with passionate openness through their own aching personal history, to find out the profound essence and truths of Religion, Culture and Caste. Even fewer could convert this spiky anguish into brilliant poetry. Meena Kandasamy is in fact one of those fewer writers! She has talked about unique features of thorny destiny of being a female and Dalit in current Indian society through her observant expression.

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