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Meena Kandasamy: The Dalit Woman Poet and Rebel

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Every culture gives rise to varied literary traditions. Based on the principles that govern the social, religious and cultural orientations of a society, there are voices which continuously emerge as the forerunners of changes, transformations, revolutions and rebellions and women are no exception on the scene. The literary world has witnessed the arrival of emancipated women in the form of prose, poetry, fiction and non-fiction writers. Indian women have had to suffer at multiple levels and casteism is one of the predominant factors that continue to haunt the Indian society even today and here also women have been the worst hit. The present paper aims at exploring the concerns of the minority, low caste Dalit women as voiced through the poetry of Meena Kandasamy. Kandasamy, herself a Dalit, through her poetry exposes the so-called refined and just face of the society. She not only highlights the unjust treatment given to women but also discusses how women are the always worst sufferers whether at the hands of gender, culture or caste. An attempt will be made to study the contemporary Dalit feminist mode of her writing and how Dalit women at large who are multiply marginalized use literature as their weapon for empowerment.

The Dalit Literature that now occupies a seminal space in the contemporary literary domain actually took its birth from the odious system of untouchability and casteism prevalent in the Indian society since ages. It emerged on the scene as a realistic reflection of the conditions of the oppressed classes in India. The literature was essentially against exploitation and formally began as a movement in 1960's. It was not an ordinary literary movement but a byproduct of identity as well as a constituent of that identity.

In the Indian society, the class war has always been a dominating force and has always lead to continuous clashes between the oppressed and the oppressors. These conflicts, however, received a considerable attention in the literary domain from various writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Bama who portrayed the plight of the underprivileged masses. The main features which marked the writings were a new level of pride, sophisticated creativity, revolt and above all the use of writing in itself as a weapon. While the dalit literature at large addressed the community issues, the atrocities faced by the women of dalit community also found a voice through the dalit feminist literature.

Dalit women are victimized by double patriarchal structures. They are the victims at the hands of their own caste generated patriarchy called discreet patriarchy and another overlapping patriarchy of the upper class (Online). The discreet patriarchy rests power with men within the community and in the institutions that they lead and the Overlapping patriarchy exists as a threat of exploitation at the hands of upper class community. In both cases, women are the victims. Dalit Feminism, therefore, arrives to celebrate the Selfhood of dalit women. It celebrates the difference of dalit women from the privileged upper caste women and celebrates their own strength in their identity, labour and resilience. The Dalit feminism is basically a discourse of

discontent and it differs in many regards from the mainstream feminism. It not only questions the hegemony of Indian feminism in claiming to speak for all women but also questions the hegemony of dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. It reacts against the main stream feminist movement and its Brahminical and Patriarchal counterparts. Professor Gopal Guru opines that “the exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream women’s movement is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency” (qtd in Basu, 142). One of the pioneer and powerful voices of the dalit feminist medium of thought is Meena Kandasamy, the young contemporary female dalit poet and activist.

Meena Kandasamy is recognized as the first woman Dalit poet to write in English. She not only highlights the atrocities faced by the Dalit community at large but also articulates the need for retaliation and resistance. In her collection of poems, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), she questions the supposedly perfect national culture, tradition and the history. Kandasamy is powerfully scathing and direct in her attack at the social order. Her poems are a critique of the casteist ideologies and at large a protest against the so called elitist sections of the society which in the name of honour and dignity exploit the poorer sections. In her volume of poetry, *Touch*, Kandasamy discusses the most elementary of all bodily sensations. The elementary feeling of touch, however, becomes a taboo when it tries to move beyond the set barriers of caste, gender and traditions. Whenever any person belonging to the high caste division of the society by choice or by chance touches an untouchable the questions of impurity raise their heads very high. The touch of a low caste disturbs the very world order of the Brahmins. In her poems, Meena highlights all the day to day experiences faced by her community as a consequence of being a Dalit. The orthodoxy that makes touch a matter of life and death receives a biting attack by Kandasamy. Kamla Das opines in the foreword to *Touch*, “dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow, the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive” (7).

Her journey starts with the very basic effort that she makes by writing in the language-English, thereby, challenging the general trend that sees Dalits as incapable of using this language and hence, denies them the access. Meena creates an idiom of her own and speaks up saying:

I dream of an English/ full of the words of my language...

An english that shall tie a white man’s tongue.

(Kandasamy, 2006)

It is through her language that she registers an open challenge to the dominant class bias saying:

My language is dark and dangerous and desperate

In its eagerness to slaughter your myths

(Kandasamy, 2010)

She further says:

That now upon a future time/ there will be a revolution

*It will begin in our red hot dreams that scourge/ that scorch/ that scald
That sizzle like lava but never settle down
Never poignantly solidify
It will begin when the oppressors will wince
Every time they hear our voices*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

Meena Kandasamy exposes every face of hypocrisy, the double standards and the orthodoxy that operates within the social structure. She is very blunt in her attack at the so called privileged. She says:

*We will singe the many skins you wear to the world
The skins you change at work
The skins called castes and the skins called race
The skins you mend once a week
The filthy skin you thought you could retain at bed...*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

The faces worn by upper castes are unveiled by Kandasamy when she challenges their very concept of the Non-dualist belief. The very high claims that are made like that of God being One, residing in everyone, that all humans being are equal, all these pretensions are challenged by Meena when she raises the question regarding her own state of being:

*Non dualism/atman/ Self/Brahmaan/God
Are equal and same
So I untouchable outcast am God. Will you ever agree?
Can my untouchable atman and your Brahmin Atman ever be One?*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

There is a realistic touch in every verse of Kandasamy and every verse challenges, questions and exposes the social facades placed into practise. She writes from multiple perspectives starting from being a woman, a dalit and then a dalit woman in particular. Therefore, her poems aren't only outpourings of a woman's heart but of a person who is thrice removed from the society.

One important aspect in the poetry of Kandasamy is the discussion and resentment directed at the sexual exploitation of women. Women in general are already viewed as the "other" and the dalit women exist as "others within others". The exploitation that these women are subjected to deprive them of the very basic right to survive with dignity. They are a constant subject for torture and maltreatment both within as well as outside the domestic sphere. They are always seen as silent sufferers lacking the power to resist, to assert and to live by choice. She, therefore, rebukes the patriarchal society for mistreating woman and considering woman a slave and a mere object of desire. She says:

*To make her yours and yours alone
You pushed her deeper into harems
Domesticated into drudgery....she was just a slave*

Who maintained numbers.

(Kandasamy, 2006)

Meena, however, emerges as an open rebel refusing to surrender to the dictates and constructed norms. She speaks as a lover:

*When you called me to light up your life I could never refuse...
Love I can't be a candle for I know it's an ancient lie
The candle is for the solemn...for those who yearn a slow and
Tenderness/Not for us...*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

Turning the tables, she further says:

*Love, I will promise you a substitute
I could be that piece of holy camphor
So safely locked from your prying hands...
Our blending shall be so sublime, so intense, so total.
Come consummate me
Devastate me love, if you ever will
But with a force that I will forever remember.*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

The way female body is used as an object by naming it, fixing it and locating it within a discourse receives a critical and considerable attention from her. She recites the sex tinged verses with verve. Meena undoubtedly stands in a category that has had a history of being subjugated and suppressed the most. She is both a Dalit and a female. Her poems, therefore, are packed with the wisdom of gender dynamics which implies that being a female in a typically patriarchal culture is actually another form of being a part of minor social group. The anguish, the disgust in her against the society gets voiced through her verses very furiously and with a feminist line of thought. For her, writing means tracing out her identity- her “womanliness”, her “Tamilness” and “low/outcasteness” that she wears with pride (Sarangi, par1). In order to be a dependable voice of dissent and resistance, Meena knew that she had to be transparent to herself and most of her poems take up the search for the real ‘I’.

A girl is always seen as an object and the rigid conventions that are brought into practise with regard to the execution of the decisions of her life are targeted by Meena. Meena had very minutely scrutinized the gaze that a girl is within. At a place, she talks about the unjustified examination that a girl has to pass through when she is seen as a possible bride. She says:

*Look at the floor/ the fading carpet and the unshapely toes/ Of the visitors who
will inspect the weight/ Of your gold/ the paleness of your complexion/ the length
of your hair and ask questions about/ the degree you hold and the transparency of
your past...*

(Kandasamy 2006)

Meena, however, refuses to budge or bow down before this set standard of selection. She retaliates by saying:

*There will be no blood on our bridal beds
We are not the ones you will choose for wives*

(Kandasamy, 2010)

Another important aspect touched by Meena is the very concept of motherhood. Patriarchy idealizes motherhood and thereby, forces women to be mothers and stay as mothers only. The society recognizes women as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives and even goddesses but women are never seen as women in themselves. She targets the society saying that it makes a woman:

*The spoon-feeding the man
The pot and pan- banging
The sweeping-the floor
The masochist slave*

(Kandasamy, 2006)

Meena believes that women themselves should be the first ones to oppose these constructed notions of thoughts for change always starts with the self. Every verse of Meena Kandasamy encapsulates the dynamics of pain and protest. Her blunt and outspoken way of writing makes her one of a kind. She possesses a fiercely feminine sensibility that cries out from the man made and insensitive world order. Gender and sexuality take a front and centre stage in her poems. She draws upon the feminist resources of thought by bringing in themes present in the poems of many woman saints like Ammaiyar, Akka and Meera. She unveils all the bold ways in which women revealed or expressed themselves from time to time. In her another collection of poems, *Ms. Militancy* Meena directly starts with the attack at archetypal patriarchal structures. She begins her attack by targeting gods seeing them and labeling them as the primary sources for the propagation of patriarchal ideology. She says in the beginning to her book *Ms Militancy*:

You are the repressed Ram from whom I run away repeatedly/ You are Indra causing bloodshed...you are all men for whom I would never moan, never mourn.
You are the conscience of Hindu society. Your myths put me in my place.
Therefore, I take perverse pleasure in such deliberate paraphrase.

(Kandasamy, 2010)

Meena out of an utter disgust and disdain blurts out at gods themselves for she sees them as being completely incapable of offering any refuge or salvation. That is why she turns upside down the so called highly held beliefs of society. She says at a place:

My Mahabharata moves to Las Vegas; my Ramayana is retold in three different ways. I am unconventional but when I choose to, I can carry tradition. That is why I am Mira, Andal and Akka all at once. Spreading myself out like a feast inviting the gods to enter my womb...like each of these women I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to stay alive.

(Kandasamy, 2010)

Not only this, Meena made women emerge as assertive forces not mere submitting folks. She fought for herself and associated with women extreme power. She says:

I work to not only get back at you. I actually fight to get back to myself. I don't write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs onto a stranger's lap. All women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings.

(Kandasamy, 2010)

Meena chose for herself the path of revolt against all social odds. She refused to be a mere passive woman caught up in the dynamics of culture and tradition. She very openly comes up with the statement:

I strive to be a shrew in a society that believes in suffering in silence. I strive to be a sphinx: part woman, part lioness armed with lethal riddles. Come, unriddle me. But be warned I never falter in a fight.

(Kandasamy, 2010)

Meena Kandasamy is one among those few Indian poets who have managed to convert their deepest anguish into brilliant poetry. She has talked about the various unique features of the prickly destiny of being a dalit and a female in the contemporary Indian society. Though the status of dalits has risen considerably in the recent past but the impact of the inhuman treatment remains upon the psyche and within the self. The discrimination that operates within the society also remains to be done away with. Meena takes up all these issues and deconstructs every myth whether gendered, religious or casteist. She takes up the cause of the gender equality in her poetic discourse. She dissects on the social, melancholic and systematic domination of the female sex. Her witty arguments and the blunt style of writing make her champion the cause of gender discrimination and strike an era of liberation for women.

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