

A Comprehensive Study of Dalit Women in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

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Abstract

The two most important terms in Dalit literature are gender and caste. Strangely enough, however, the bulk of Dalit spokespersons are still men, and their representation is still androcentric. As a result, Dalit women have never had much representation in the Dalit literary sphere. Meena Kandasamy is praised for being the first Indian poet to write Dalit poetry in English; however, she is also unique among Dalit writers in that she continues to focus on caste, particularly the suffering of Dalit women, in the majority of her works. She concisely describes in her poems the countless hardships and humiliations that oppressed women endure because of being "marginalized." This essay aims to clarify Meena Kandasamy's poetry and explain how it depicts the terrible circumstances and suffering of Dalit women.

Keywords: -Meena Kandasamy, Dalit poetry, women, gender, caste, suffering, and feminism.

Introduction: There is a tiny depiction of Dalit women in mainstream Indian literature. In the same manner that Dalit women's standing in their community and society continues to be neglected, so are their tales. Even though feminism has gained international recognition as an ideology, the Indian feminist movement was first focused mostly on concerns affecting upper-middle-class and high-caste women. Dalit women's fight against tyranny, untouchability, and atrocities committed by upper castes was never adequately taken into account. Male Dalit writers are also charged with failing to give Dalit women the respect they deserve. From such an epistemological stance, Dalit women's experiences were either entirely invisible or, at most, merely tokenized. Dalit femininity was traditionally excluded because of the masculinization of Dalit hood and the savarnization of womanhood (Rege 47–52). Oddly enough, Dalit women's stories are still unspoken in the canon of Dalit literature. The situation of Dalit women goes one step further, as their voice is only expressed by a woman who is a member of their community; if a woman in the mainstream literary canon must inevitably represent the expressions of a woman more properly. Accurately highlights the distinction between being a woman and being a Dalit woman. These academics never give Dalits, who are also women, a second thought. They draw the equivalency between "women" and "dalits" with ease, while being aware that women are separated along caste and social lines (Sharma 88).

Perhaps the first Indian woman writer to advocate for Dalit people in general and Dalit women in particular is Meena Kandasamy. She describes in detail the relentless experiences of Dalit women and expresses the pain and injustice that they endure. It is understandable why Dalit women are considered triple-polluted: first, since they belong to the lower castes; second, because of their defiling employment; and third, because they are the weaker sex. The lustful higher classes and castes are always thought to have access to their sexuality. Kalpana Kannibiran describes in her article "A Cartography of Resistance" how these higher caste men's sexual enslavement of lower caste women is covered up by the physical labor these slave women do (Kannibiran, K.).

When it comes to describing the agony and horrors inflicted upon Dalit women, Meena Kandasamy stands out. This essay aims to critically explain Kandasamy's poetry, which consistently highlights the suffering and terrible circumstances of Dalit women. My goal is to demonstrate how Kandasamy's poetry may be viewed as a collection of terrible descriptions of Dalit women. Meena Kandasamy's poetry uses a variety of narratives to illustrate how oppressed women are exploited by males from higher castes.

To satisfy the financial and sexual wants of the higher caste, the lines precisely reveal how the untouchables would become touchable. The poem's speaker, a Dalit woman, repeatedly states

that she is not regarded as an untouchable when she is sexually abused by upper-class men: "I was not an untouchable then." "I was not polluting at four feet," she says once more. The fact that her "own man" forces her to give in to those "lecherous eyes" exacerbates her suffering. As a result, the poem not only highlights how class, caste, and gender are positioned in society, but it also accurately depicts the abuses that Dalit women face. Meena explains in an interview with Sampsonia Way Magazine that she uses poetry as a way to express her opposition to societal injustices. Poetry is unadulterated. It's true. It has several sharp edges. My poetry shouts in rage, writes in agony, is naked, and weeps. My poetry honors sacrifice, and it reeks like blood.

Kandasamy describes the life and suffering of a Dalit girl following her rape by a bunch of men in another poem titled "Shame." Because she is a Dalit girl, she won't receive any pity. In a Dalit society, a lady is referred to as a "Dalit among the Dalits." Despite being marginalized as a Dalit woman, Meena Kandasamy speaks up for the voiceless. She tackles the complex issues that women in her community confront. She uses poetry as a way to express her rage. "Firewalkers" is a striking portrayal of the predicament of impoverished women who are taken advantage of by members of the higher classes. It is said that Goddess Maari is an exploiter who enjoys the suffering of her followers. The "dream-chasers, the firewalkers" are Maari's worshippers; she is a manic who needs blood to wet her hair. Another poem called "Moon-Gazers" tells the tale of a Dalit girl's humiliations. The poet depicts a classroom scenario where the instructor tells about a bird that spends the night watching the moon. The instructor in the classroom is questioned by the speaker, a Dalit girl, about what the bird does on days with a new moon. She is ridiculed and perceived as impolite.

All Dalits share this destiny; they are obliged to live passive lives and are compelled to comply without question. From the perspective of the upper class, Dalit women are constantly seen as "others," to the point that they are unable to even carry out their fundamental needs. The poet tells the story of a Dalit girl who touches the forbidden river and loses one of her eyes. In her article "Caste and Women," Leela Dube notes that "in Uttar Pradesh... It is stated that a chamar lady may enjoy whenever one pleases, much as a she-goat can be milked whenever one pleases. According to casteist ideology, lower caste women are frequently raped and sexually assaulted by upper caste males due to their unclean position as women (periodic contamination via menstruation) and low caste membership. The sixteen-year-old is tormented by humiliation; the gory scars on a destroyed body serve as continual reminders of shame and powerlessness. The various suffering that Dalit women endure is depicted in such a horrifying way in Kandasamy's poems. When it suits the lustful wants and self-centered actions of the higher caste, the untouchable becomes touchable. She makes references to temple prostitution. These females, known as devdasis, or "god's female servant," are mostly from low-income households and the untouchable class. They are sexually exploited in the pretext of religious service, or "holy duty." Since applying mascara is a reminder of the process of getting ready for a sexual encounter, the poem's title becomes ironic. It is easy to assume that the tradition of devdasi is only a hierarchical ploy to take advantage of women from lower castes and has nothing to do with religion.

Even the collection's title, "Touch," is sarcastic. It is full of many different kinds of importance. Although the "touch" of upper caste males on "untouchable" women might be both affectionate and sensuous, it is not affectionate. It is noteworthy that Kandasamy's collection focuses on the risks that women encounter both inside and outside of their homes. She sheds light on the struggles and psychological strain faced by oppressed, abandoned women in one of her poems, "Dead Woman Walking." Kandasamy illustrates how caste ideology functions in a "codified" manner and how women are essential to its destruction in another poem titled "Becoming a Brahmin":

Start the algorithm that transforms a Shudra into a Brahmin.

By classifying individuals into upper castes and untouchables, as well as wealthy and impoverished, even gods and sages create hatred among the populace. In her other

poem, "Eklaivan," she alludes to the Mahabharata tale in which the famous Guru Dronacharya had Ekalavya pay a high price for being a member of a supposedly inferior caste and prohibited him from practicing archery. He possessed the most noble spirit and the greatest character. To please a guru who had not taught him, he simply gave up his thumb; instead, he humiliated him by keeping him from mastering archery. His right thumb was amputated because, as a child from a higher caste, he would not become a better archer.

Another question posed by Kandaswamy is whether it is ethical to stifle the voices of oppressed people in making justifiable requests. Instead of making sincere and justifiable attempts to address their genuine grievances, they are subjected to severe punishment and suppression by force. In this poem, the poetess represents the wealthy's dominance and their long-standing disdain for the poor. It seems ridiculous that despite decades of independence, the objective of social equality is still unmet, and the poor are forced to lead nonexistent lives. Can you conceive that the buffaloes are bathed by the males of the higher caste and that the untouchables are made to drink the pond where the buffaloes urinate and excrete?

Madiga men were killed and women raped as a result of their lack of social and economic power. One need not be astonished to learn of this incident, given the frequency with which such incidents occur in our culture. The downtrodden become irrelevant and dehumanized as a result of ongoing oppression. It affects both the body and the mind. The poem, "Buffalo Baths," is written here. Urine. A courageous Dalit woman challenges injustice despite bullshit, Dalit drinking water, the same pond, and years of experience with her pot. She exacts retribution for her indignation. Anger broke out, and hostility. Murders, rapes, etc. (Kandaswamy, 1–9).

Unfortunately, manipulating and taking advantage of women from lower castes is a common practice in our culture. Even worse, those who commit these sexual acts get away with it because of their ties to higher castes. Kandaswamy describes how a group rapes a Dalit girl in the poem "Shame."

However, because the rapists are members of a wealthy caste, they go unpunished, and the poor girl suffers permanent psychological damage and humiliation before taking her own life to avoid the shame of gang rape. The attack is prolonged by the suggested use of two strong words in her presence. The victim is separated by the inquisitive gaze of the public. The perpetrators have previously claimed that their caste serves as a customary protection, according to Kandaswamy.

The helpless girl burns herself to atone for her transgression; fearlessly, she boldly goes through the fire test—the customary treatment for shame—in search of a final cure and unachievable purity (Kandaswamy, 22–26). She skillfully captures the anguish, humiliation, and brutality experienced by the oppressed in Touch. Her poetry criticizes the social evils that afflict our nation, including cultural hegemony, women's subjugation, the caste system, and untouchability. By loudly protesting against caste, racial, tribal, and gender inequalities, she puts people first and exemplifies the value of human liberty. She promotes the rights of the underprivileged to liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice so they can live with dignity and respect.

A woman was deprived of a number of rights, such as the benefit of training and complete autonomy over her own life. In the Indian caste system, women's subjugation is a major issue. The issue of gender correspondence is lessened by caste "contamination," which divides individuals from one another, and women's direct movement. The eradication of caste and the issue of women's equality with men are topics covered in Kandaswamy's poetry. Additionally, rather than being only survivors of the desires of males from higher castes, it depicts Dalit women as rebels battling against the bad stereotypes that have been propagated about them and working for women's equality. As a result, this part makes it possible for the marginalized individuals who uphold freedom, conformity, society, and justice to lead

respectable and dignified lives. Chennai-born Kandaswamy is a powerful radical, poet, and interpreter. As a contemporary Indian woman writer, Kandaswamy finds it challenging to analyze the deeply embedded caste-based social norms in Indian culture. She expresses her displeasure at caste-based foul play, which has humiliated and persecuted the underprivileged, dehumanizing them.

Touch and Ms. Militancy, her two poetry books, accurately depict the oppressed in Indian society. In the end, women's hardships, caste annihilation, neediness, humiliation, and persecution are at the center of her art. People's social conduct is influenced by cultural, social, political, and economic factors. The gender differentiation refers to the basic disparity that exists between men and women. The divide based on a person's gender is maintained by the social-cultural and mental instruments that are most common in society. The issue of societal undervaluation is closely related to the gender imbalance problem. Meena Kandaswamy, the leading Indian woman poet, is well-known due to her personal understanding and passionate commitment to the goal of advancing gender and caste equality, more than her reading and expertise.

Touch, her first collection of poems, is a fierce, militant critique of the pervasiveness of prejudice against Indian women in society. It talks about the issue of women behaving improperly. Meena Kandaswamy presents women, especially Dalit women, differently from the proponents of women's homogeneity, in contrast to other poets and academics who have written about this subject.

A woman is seen as a resource in the male-dominated culture. When all else is equal, males and social classes work together to set standards for behavior, dictate how a woman develops, and keep her inside the four walls of her home. One of Touch Kandaswamy's sonnets, "Melodies of Summer," challenges the male-dominated society for seeing women as its slaves and the ideal object. The poet also takes issue with society's refusal to acknowledge women as such. The male-dominated culture never views a woman as a woman; instead, it views her as a sister, a wife, a mother, or even a deity.

A woman's level of decency is determined by how much she tolerates and submits to her husband, father, siblings, children, and almost every other male in her family and community. She vehemently disagrees with the widespread, male-biased habit in Indian society of rehearsing a young woman before determining whether or not she is a fit lady of the hour for a guy. In her poetry, she details the lengthy history of harassment, mistreatment, torture, and eradication of the poor.

The poet expresses her hope that the moment has come for these oppressed people to escape the rigid caste system and start over. India is one example of a civilization where dominant habits drive others to the perimeter and establish a middle ground. With the lower caste of untouchables and the superior caste of Brahmins, the nation has seen the twin antagonism of caste and class social hierarchies. Because of the detrimental impacts of the Brahminical culture's authority, which is founded on strict rituals, traditions, and conventions, the lower caste Shudras and Ati-Shudras suffer immensely for religious reasons. It is reasonable to argue that the exploitation, maltreatment, and concealment of the Dalits—who were once regarded as untouchables—frame the history of human development in India. The hard concepts of the unparalleled greatness situated near the Aryans serve as the foundation for the decision-making process. The Varna, which disapproved of the characteristics of Shudras and people, was replaced by the caste. These standards functioned as social divides that affected people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Because they were not permitted to live as they desired, the Ati-Shudras were excluded. There was no space for flexibility or chance for change, and the social system was like an impenetrable box.

Due to the upper castes' domination, the last social classes, the women and untouchables, continued to live in continual warfare. The journey of the untouchables (Dalits) is one of hopelessness, unease, discrediting, corruption, and deterioration. They had to put up

with the abhorrence as a shame to society. Actually, there was no tenable theory or explanation for their exclusion from the main group, except for the ugly notion of virtue contamination. Negative preconceptions about Dalits, such as demonic, debased, horrifying, subhuman, and inferior, were reinforced by the notion of immaculateness.

Dalits were subjected to social, cultural, and mental limitations by the caste system, the Brahmanical belief system, and the controlled religion through thoughts, disguises, imaginations, and physical punishments. They were reluctant to make physical contact because their labor was subpar, terrible, and unwelcome; the upper classes even thought their shadows were disgusting and dirty. The Dalits were so ruthlessly treated, as history shows, that those who suffered were prepared to pay any penalty to be freed from this long-standing jail. The pervasive acceptance of man's self-centered worldview has turned the world. The caste system's social divisions are based on the "Dharmashastras," which were made by humans rather than by God, and are thought of as permanent tenants in Indian land. Dharma shastras are essentially legal books authored by conceited, upper-class Brahmins who wish to uphold their superior social status by imposing caste laws on lower-class individuals such as Dalits and Shudras. Under the pretense of caste, the Dharmashastras, Manusmriti, and the Vedas, egocentric people permanently gained higher status in order to save their generation and offspring. The Varna system divides people into four groups according to their personalities, behaviors, and social situations.

Subalterns in India are known as Untouchables, Dalits, Shudras, and oppressed Harijans. Throughout their lifetimes, they experience ongoing social, economic, and political abuse, marginalization, and subjection. Even after caste discrimination was declared unlawful under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, they continue to face social marginalization, economic hardship, political oppression, and the furnace of untouchability. Throughout these tragic grief times, many authors who contextualized their subaltern surroundings, aestheticism, and their empowerment in social, economic, and political positions known as "other" emerged among the subalterns like a spring. At first, subaltern authors wrote about the terrible, dangerous, and agonizing torments, oppressions, and pain they had endured. Over time, their autobiographies evolved to reflect their subaltern awareness of oppression. Later, they explored their boldness and act of revolution dramatically via their literary works. They started speaking out against the inequities and injustices that the wealthy neighborhoods were perpetrating.

Conclusion: -As a final point, it is only appropriate to note that Kandasamy's poetry serves as a testament to Dalit literature, particularly that of women. Her dissatisfaction with the suffering of third-world women is reflected in her writings. The situation of Dalit women is significantly worse than that of upper caste women, even though both lower and upper caste women suffer from gender discrimination. Even among women from all castes, a Dalit woman is viewed as "other." Meena Anand states in her groundbreaking book, *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination*: The vivid and true tales of Dalit women's daily situations, including their exploitation, problems, misery, humiliation, and oppression, astound even those with a modicum of human compassion. In addition to experiencing her fair share of global pain as a woman, she also suffers from many forms of social, religious, economic, and cultural exploitation as a Dalit woman. Kandasamy's poetry conveys the same idea. Meena Kandasamy's poetry effectively conveys the vile details of the many hardships and humiliations experienced by the oppressed groups.

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