

# Dissentions and Deconstructions in Meena Kandasamy's Poems

Prof.(Dr.)Sakunthala M.Phil, Ph.D., D.Litt.
Professor in English(Rtd.)
S.N.College, Shoranur, Kerala

#### **Abstract**

The works of Dalit women writers present a different world of varying shades and concerns compared to their male counter parts. Writers from the marginalized section of society have put forward a subversive pattern, which knocks the consciousness of the hegemonic cultures concomitantly, thereby generating confidence and pride in them. This enables them to deconstruct the traditional mindset which had made them oppressed and to persuade the upper caste to view them as equals rather than as pitiful victims. In a way their writings actualise their claim to rejuvenate the third world women and to urge them to express their own dreams, aspirations, self-reliant outlooks and speak for themselves, instead of spoken of by their male counterparts. They not only protest against the traditional hegemony, but also deconstruct them to bring about revolutionary changes in the society.

Key Words: Subversive pattern, Patriarchal hegemony, Scathing attack, Clarion call

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Feminism is both a political position as well as a theory on gender discrimination and social inequality and injustice towards female by the male-dominated society. It is a platform for women to demand equality, rights and justice against the pre-determined gender roles for women. In every stratum of this society social, economic, political or cultural, women are not given the opportunity to enjoy equality with men. Women seem to have no individuality and freedom. Women activists and feminists for years have been raising their voice against this unequal patriarchal system that prevails even after decades of independence. Dalit movements dominated mostly by men had a tendency to sideline issues concerning Dalit women. This gave rise to Dalit Feminism and Dalit feminist discourse not only questions Indian feminism's hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women.

The writings of Dalit women writers chiefly focus on the resurrection of the identity of Dalit women in Indian society. Dalit feminist writings inserted a new passion in the lives of Dalit women so that they can live an independent and candid life without any external or internal coerce. Dalit male writers have explored the atrocities of Dalits in general but could not expose the miseries of Dalit women. The works of Dalit women writers present a different world of varying shades and concerns compared to their male counter parts. Writers from the marginalized section of society have put forward a subversive pattern, which knocks the consciousness of the hegemonic cultures concomitantly, thereby generating confidence and pride in them. This enables them to deconstruct the traditional mindset which had made them oppressed and to persuade the upper caste to view them as equals rather than as pitiful victims.

Dalit women writers have demonstrated through their activist lives the means of social empowerment. Their writings are addressed to Dalits and non-dalits alike as a means of affirming the need of self-empowerment and for a dignified living for Dalit women. Newer forms of casteism are alarmingly cropping up in a complex manner in India. Perhaps the only way of combating them is to form stronger modes of

counter-publics and to continually engage with them, so that gradually and invisibly changes are wrought in the Indian psyche. Dalit women's voices were unheard or have been lost in the Indian literary scenario. It is as recent as the 1990s that Dalit women began to write back retrospectively, with unflinching rawness, about a self that never existed within the mainstream discourses.

Meena Kandasamy (1984-), the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English, raises her voice against the gender inequality and systematic subjugation of Indian Dalit women. Her poetry arises not out of her reading and knowledge, but out of her own experience and active engagement with the cause of championing caste and gender equality. *Touch* (2006), her first published collection of poetry with a foreword by Kamala Das, is a clear sighted and a scathing attack on the perpetuation of the social patriarchal oppression of women in general and the Dalit women in particular. In her well renowned work *Ms. Militancy* (2010), she adopts an anti- caste and feminist lens to retell Hindu and Tamil myths. An emerging poet, fiction writer, translator, journalist and social activist, Meena Kandasamy delineates subjects like 'gender inequality' and 'caste discrimination' with candid precision. She dissects, very deftly, the complex mechanism of perpetual subjugation of the Indian women in her writing.

Though, she was barred from the social paradigm for being a Dalit woman in the Tamil region, she is gifted and can present her skill of poetry and better usage of the English language. She is very fluent in writing English language which she uses as a powerful weapon to attack critics and to defend herself. The writer strongly believes that crafting the poems in English has more power to reach the audience in every nook and corner of the world. As a woman, she has forced her way to the forefront to represent her community through her powerful language and rebellious writing.

She uses the symbol of the vindictive female body as a means of defiance and confrontation against the patriarchal subjugation of women. She proves that Dalit woman can absolutely speak and when she does, her writing proves to be so scathingly powerful that it comes to formulate itself as an elaborate yet blatant tool of political dissent. This emboldened writing of Meena Kandasamy topples the world of Indian women's writing by setting a distinctly defiant standard in the world of feminist poetics. Ms. Kandasamy is one among those few Indian poets who have managed to convert their deepest anguish into brilliant poetry. The poet herself has a militant spirit and she takes up myths and characters from Tamil Classics and demythifies them by providing them with an identity entirely different from their original one. Her soul is endlessly in search of an oasis. Most of her themes and her choice of diction are taboos in the cultural context of India. This can be justified because crude realities cannot be explained in sophisticated forms and language.

One important aspect in the poetry of Kandaswamy 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. Meena Kandasamy, unlike other poets and writers dealing with this subject, portrays women, particularly Dalit women, not just as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men but as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and as champions for the cause of equality of women. Active resistance or revolutionary activism, the discourse which seeks to analyze what needs to change and set it right, is the core theme of Kandasamy's raw and outrightly unbridled poetry. The poet, however, emerges as an open rebel refusing to surrender to the dictates and constructed norms of society.

Kandasamy and her poetry embody a long withstanding fight against the stringent subjugation and atrocities undergone by the non-dominant caste community. While her poetry revolves around issues of caste, sexuality, political agendas, violence, gender oppression and language, her work mainly urges her readers to act. She attempts to empower women by granting them with a 'new identity' in a society that continues to segregate woman and thwart all her endeavors. And she addresses the multi-faceted problems in her community and advocates women's rights through her multilayered poems and essays. According to her, poetry heals her and helps in channelising her anger. Her poems are revolutionary and there is fire in her words. She is bold and assertive and expresses her ideas without fear or favour..

Her first collection of poetry, *Touch* (2006) is a scathing, militant attack on the perpetuation of the social oppression of the Indian women. It discusses the issue of the sexual harassment of the women. A woman is considered a chattel by the male dominated society. Men unite each other in making certain codes of conduct and circumscribe the trajectory of female growth and confine her to the four walls of her house. In one of her poems in *Touch* (2006), entitled "Songs of Summer," Meena Kandasamy rebukes the patriarchal society for treating the woman as its slave and a desired object:

To make her yours and yours alone,

You pushed her deeper into harems

Where she could see the sunlight

Only from the lattice windows.

Domesticated into drudgery she was just

Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave

Who maintained your numbers. (32-39)

The Poet also criticizes the society for not treating a woman as a woman. The male-dominated society recognizes a woman as a sister, a wife, a mother and a goddess, but never as a woman herself. "A woman's goodness is graded upon her degree of submission and servitude to her father, husband, brothers, sons and almost every other man in her family and society" (Sharma, 20).

Seen from her subject position, Kandasamy's poetry seems to experience the prevalent ideologies from a radically different standpoint and endeavours to challenge them. She reconstructs the images of women inherited from male literature. The dichotomy between the literary and the social context diminishes in her works. Kandasamy offers an alternative image of women - the Dalit women and the female personas from the Indian mythology. Her poetry is a clarion call to all women irrespective of caste, class and religion to fight unitedly against the atrocities till last breath. Dalit feministic writing explores that time has come when these deprived people will no longer live in the mercy of the socially superior caste and that they will build their fortune by their own. We heard this fervent zeal in the voice of Ms. Kandasamy when she utters these words in the Preface to Ms. Militancy: "I work to not only get back at you, I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me" (Kandasamy, Preface 8).

Meena Kandasamy belongs to a long tradition of militant Dalit Literature that not only focuses on the multi faceted atrocities faced by Dalits along with their material and ideological paradigms, but also articulates the need for active resistance. Her polemical disagreement with the established myths, tradition and history are evident in her words when she begins her attack by targeting gods, seeing and labeling them as the primary sources for the propagation of patriarchal ideology. She says:

You are the repressed Ram from whom I run away repeatedly. You are Indra busy causing bloodshed. You are Brahma fucking up my fates. You are Manu robbing me of my right to live and learn and choose. You are Sage Gautama turning your wife to stone. You are Adi Sankara driving me to death. You are all men for whom I would never moan, never mourn. You are the conscience of this Hindu society. Your myths put me in my place. Therefore, I take perverse pleasure in such deliberate paraphrase. (8)

Ms. Kandasamy, 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:

So, 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. (8)

Kandasamy emerges as the dynamic young Dalit woman poet in pursuit of the reality of her Dalit feminine self. She has chosen 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 all the lethal riddles. Come, unriddle me. But be warned: I never falter in a fight. And, far worse, I seduce shamelessly" (9).

In the poem "Random Access Man," Ms. Kandasamy deconstructs the idea of the 'pure' Sita by portraying her as always physically and emotionally deprived by her husband. Her dissatisfied Sita sent her husband on a wild goose chase:

She sent her dick head husband on a wild goose chase-Get me

the testicle of a golden deer, she said, get me its musk so we can rouse your manhood. (11-15)

Here, Sita isn't the subservient wife obliged to be servile to her husband. And, unlike in the epic, nor is her husband rendered an ideal persona. The poet shows an easy confidence in asserting women's claim for pleasure. Sita 'picked herself a random man', a stranger, as her 'dickhead husband' was unable to satisfy her desire, or her lust, as it were. The poem concludes by giving the reader an insight into her perception of masculinity.

By the time she left this stranger's lap She had learnt all about love. First to last. Mamasita. (28-33)

In many of her poems, time and again, we see her offering the written word or rather poetry as a source of deliverance to Dalit women. She empowers through words, bringing out the strength of language. The platform that her writing bestowed her with is curative. In her famous line in the poem "Nailed", "Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous / portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she / will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her (1-3), we see her trying to propagate feminism through words and the act of writing. Kandasamy's attempt to bring out an alternate version of feminist poetry and to give independence to the voices of non-dominant caste women strikes a parallel with the final phase of Gynocriticism. Meena Kandasamy tries to problematize this camouflaged circulation of power through her intensely inquisitive poetry. Her poetry, in a way, materializes her urge to fight for non-dominant caste women; their desires, dreams, independent views and speak for themselves rather than always be spoken of by the existing patriarchal social order and their male counterparts. A pen in a woman's hand can rattle up patriarchy, for this gives her immense power to educate, agitate and organize. It gives them the power to militate.

The way female writers can express themselves, male writers can never do so. And it is only the female writer, who must work hard to overcome her ruptures and reach the moment of liberation by her writings. Critics claim to read tinges of 'hysteria' in Meena Kandasamy's poetry. "Society will not let angry young women exist; we will be labeled hysterics. Women are not allowed to rebel or rage. If you do, they are tagged as hysterical" (Duarte 22). This fiercely biased view of patriarchy which has hitherto silenced women from expressing their stark resentment towards prevalent ideologies is challenged by each of her female protagonists in the collection *Ms. Militancy*.

Meena Kandasamy materializes the advent of these unprecedented women in "Celestial celebrities," by displacing them from their celestial and mythological positions.

She articulates almost smugly how the rivers here bear the names of fallen women exiled to earth when the heavens found them too bloody hot to handle. (25-28)

This remains another revolutionary use of mythology by the poet. Positively, women in her poetry are in a constant pursuit to assert their subjectivity.

The title poem "Ms. Militancy" of her anthology *Ms. Militancy* is named after the revolutionary female character Kannaki in the classic Tamil text *Silapathikaram*. Kannaki, though initially portrayed as a subject of patriarchy in the play, towards the end symbolizes female revolution of such intensity that Kandasamy places her as the epitome of the revolt she seeks to see in the female Dalit persona. There is a complete contrast of the character of Kannaki in the first stanza of Kandasamy's poem and the last few lines. That is, a submissive and typical Indian wife at first, due to the norms of the patriarchal domination changes when there is injustice done to her. The very first stanza of the poem has a pathetic tone:

She thought she was dying- ants crawled under her flaking skin, migraines visited her at mealtimes, her tender-as-tomato breasts bruised to touch, her heart forgot its steady beat. (1-4)

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Though Kannaki is deeply affected by her husband's betrayal, she readily accepts him when he returns from his dancer mistress's lap. She supports him by giving him one of her anklets to start a fresh life. The Kannaki in the first part of this poem is very devoted and loyal when judged by the standards of Tamil culture which advocates patriarchal dominance.

But the rage she displays at the death of her husband shows that she is not a passive, submissive Kannaki, but a bold, assertive, revolutionist, and she reinstalls justice which both the Pandiyan King and Kovalan failed to hold on to. Her anger is subsided only when she burns down the city of Madurai:

On the edge, Ms. Militancy bayed for more blood. Vending vengeance, she made a bomb of her left breast and blew up the blasted city. Long after that land had turned to ashes, the rest of her plucked breast bled. (21-22)

Truly she makes herself a role model for the downtrodden, subjugated women. The title of the poem perfectly suits the characteristics of the person, who has overwhelming, unmitigated courage to annihilate all the pejorative customs in the society. She is destructive, full-blooded and highly energetic in her appearance so she can soundly tackle multi-layered oppression through confrontational lines, directly accusing the derogatory system and their holders, stripping them down from their so-called reverence and revealing their hypocrisy. This poem is a clarion call to all women to be revolutionary and courageous like the heroine herself. By being a female, this is a huge success for her against the male dominant society thus creating an identity for her.

She portrays women from mythology as self-determined and making decisions on their own terms. Kandasamy's poem "Princess-in-exile" reflects the very extremes of feminine existence hitherto portrayed. For example, Sita from *Ramayana* is shown refusing to succumb to her husband's flickering attitude towards her. Sita was abandoned when her husband questioned her chastity, but he came back to claim her after some time. But she rejects his call and decides never to go back with the person who doubted her in the first place. Here Sita has perfected the art of vanishing from the day she was kidnapped. Her constant walkout is her way of taking revenge on her husband who was not concerned enough to protect her or even to rescue her within a short time span: "Years later, her husband won her back / but by then, she was adept at walkouts, / she had perfected the vanishing act" (4-6). Kandaswamy fearlessly, with her trashing words, attack the superstitious and the age-old orthodox beliefs forced upon women by the patriarchal society.

The brutal gang rape and death of a 20-year-old Dalit girl in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, has left the country shocked. The girl was raped by four upper caste men when she went to a farm to collect cattle fodder. After fighting for her life for two weeks, she died in a Delhi hospital. In a shocking turn of events, which has led to a nationwide outrage, the victim's body was forcefully cremated by the police and district administration, against the wishes of the family. The victim's brother alleged that during cremation, they were locked up in their house and that petrol was used for cremation. Amid the thousands of posts of outrage, despair and condolences and cries for justice, the voice of Meena Kandasamy stands out. In her latest powerful poem based on this incident, entitled "Rape Nation", Kandasamy narrates the gruesome details of the Hathras rape and talks about how this was not the first time such an incident has happened, and it won't be the last:

In Hathras, cops barricade a raped woman's home, hijack her corpse, set it afire on a murderous night, deaf to her mother's howling pain. In a land where dalits cannot rule, they cannot rage, or even mourn. This has happened before, this will happen again. (1-5)

The Hathras rape is not just an instance of gender-based violence- it is also a case of caste-based gender violence inflicted by the upper caste against women. That is why the anti-caste and Dalit activists have been urging people to use the victim's name while protesting, to highlight her caste identity. Kandasamy's statement that this has happened before is no exaggeration. We can quote any number of instances where poor Dalit girls are molested and brutally murdered by the caste people like the Unnao rape case occurred on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in Uttar Pradesh in which a former political leader was convicted and sentenced for life. All these show that even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, our girls are not safe in independent India.

"Backstreet Girls" is a poem addressed to the moral police. This poem breaks all shackles and grants independence to women. They don't have to play by the rules anymore. Like men, they too can act according to their will. They can choose their own roles-sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews. No longer can they

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be kept within the iron bars of culture and tradition and no Manu can limit or contain them. Men can no longer choose them for wives, but they are the ones who pick up and 'strip random men' The poem ends with an aggressive note: "There will be no blood on our bridal beds. / We are not the ones you will choose for wives. / We are not the ones you can sentence for life" (12-14). This is the freedom Meena Kandasamy wants to achieve for her women.

No one is spared of their weaknesses, not even Brahma of the Holy Trinity of Hinduism, as she speaks to that 'villain' in "Prayers to the Red Slayer." She calls Brahma out on his self-proclamation as the creator, despite the existing narrative of him raping his own daughter:

hey, you. Villain who willed our deaths son-of-a-guest who scribbled it on our foreheads maniac who birthed this chaotic universe and the castes (you who, according to reliable sources, raped your own daughter) four-faced dour-faced father figure who fucked up our lives. (1-7)

She ends the poem with a powerful and aggressive note by which she snatches away his entitlement over people's lives, of deciding their future:

...and if you are ever called to pose for the camera, or give interviews, drop that pen and stop writing our story as if it were your own. (14-17)

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 Kandasamy when she raises the question regarding her own state of being in the poem "Advaita the Ultimate Question":

Non dualism atman Self Brahman God Are equal

and same.

So I

Untouchable Outcast

am God.

Will you

ever agree? (1-10)

She continues in the same vein expressing her rage at the inhuman practice of discrimination of Dalits even in the spiritual concept of Atman and question the caste hegemony whether a Dalit atman and a Brahmin atman can ever be one and the same:

One more

**Final Question** 

Can My

Untouchable Atman

And Your

Brahmin Atman

Ever Be

One

? (16-24)

In the very first poem in *Ms. Militancy*, "A Cunning Stunt" she speaks of the brunt of family and community honour a women's sexuality has to bear, and that her choices should benefit everyone in the society but herself:

cunt now becomes seat, abode, home, lair, nest, stable, and he opens my legs wider and shoves more and shoves harder and I am torn apart to contain the meanings of family, race, stock, and caste and form of existence and station fixed by birth and I can take it no more. (21-30)

The poem ends with the emergence of the woman's 'cunningness' as she starts pretending not to displease the man. "I am frightened. / I turn frigid. / I turn faker" (33-35). There is a violent seduction in her words, aiming to make the reader uncomfortable, and rattling them towards an ugly reality. She uses themes in contexts often conflicting with the original, which might sound blasphemous to some.

It is through her language that she registers an open challenge to the dominant class bias as she herself proclaims in the Preface to *Ms. Militancy* thus:

My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths. My lines are feverish with the heat of the bodies you banish in your Manusmriti and Kamasutra. Tamil woman that I am, I do not spare the ageist, classist, sexist *Tholkappium* either. The criticism that I embark on, like your codification and like my cunt, is beyond all culture. (9)

Kandasamy makes it evident that she expected criticism, and she clearly answers them:

Call me names if it comforts you. I no longer care. The scarlet letter is my monogram. I sew it on everything I wear; I tattoo it into permanence. I strive to be a slut in a world where all sex is sinful. I strive to be a shrew in a society that believes in suffering in silence. I strive to be sphinx; part woman part lioness, armed with all the lethal riddles. (Kandasamy, Preface 9)

These words do not suffice her as a response to the futile, heartless words of the critics and the institutions which pretend to un-heed her cry for a change. So, she continues: "Come, unriddle me. But be warned: I never falter in a fight. And, for worse, I seduce shamelessly" (9). She cannot bear the silence of the authorities. So, she daringly challenges them to react. "This tongue allows me to resist rape, to recue my dreams" (9). Her bold poems are a challenge to enter the battlefield for she is confident that once the war begins, she can coax them into senses. She adds further emphasis: "My language is not man-made; it is beyond the white-hot rules of your seminal texts" (9).

The strong women characters portrayed in the poems of Kandasamy wage open wars to fight against patriarchal sovereignty to free women from their inferior position with a vigour of cognizance to provide them a transformative action. Her principal consideration in her poetry is to empower women mainly the marginalised women to acquire a comprehensive vigilance and knowledge about their miserable situation. Her poems are born out from her own experiences and her commitment to the espousing caste and gender equivalence. Her poems provide a visual effect; she has a way of roping her readers in a forceful manner. She breaks the long silence that has misled traditional Indian women, their feminine experience and their female world.

In a way Meena Kandasamy's poetry actualises her claim to rejuvenate the third world women and to urge them to express their own dreams, aspirations, self-reliant outlooks and speak for themselves, instead of spoken of by their male counterparts. Her focal point on woman's body as the main motif of her poetry and her inclination to resolve the diversified spatial and temporal proportions of suppression and how they become the subject to the various forms of social brutality are an experiment from her part to restore the self-consciousness of the women so that they can oppose the prevailing beliefs of this inegalitarian male-dominated society which tries to persuade them and legalise the prevalent enslavement of women and their repression.

Hers is an acerbic attack on the social malaise of the systematic domination over the female sex. Through her witty arguments and polemical style of writing she attempts to champion the cause of gender equality. Her poems incite consciousness of women's psyche and her poetry bolstered other writers to emphasis their poetry in a socio-cultural scenario as it accelerates their transformation from a marginal status to a central one. In her dreams, the modern woman is not the suffering wife, crying widow or sacrificing mother or loving sister. No other feminist poet in India can attain the outright rebellious dimensions of Ms. Kandasamy because she became the mouthpiece for revealing the rights of every woman to fight and revolt against all those patriarchal forces in society which connive to impede the evolution of their personality. She not only protests against the traditional hegemony, but also deconstructs them to bring about revolutionary changes in the society.

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