

WRITING WOUNDS, RECLAIMING BODIES: GENDERED VIOLENCE, MEMORY, AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN THE POETRY OF MEENA KANDASAMY AND WARSAN SHIRE

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Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative feminist literary analysis of the poetry of Meena Kandasamy, Indian Dalit feminist poet and activist, and Warsan Shire, Kenyan-born Somali British poet, examining how both writers engage gendered violence, traumatic memory, and feminist resistance as the central concerns of their respective poetic projects. Drawing on collections including Kandasamy's *Touch* (2006), *Ms Militancy* (2010), and *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023), and Shire's *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), the study argues that both poets construct the female body as a primary archive of collective and personal trauma, deploy testimony and witnessing as modes of feminist counter-discourse, and enact resistance through the formal and rhetorical resources of the poem itself — its grammar, its address, its refusal of silence. The article employs a tripartite theoretical framework that brings together Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and precarious life, Elaine Scarry's phenomenology of pain and language, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist account of the subaltern voice, supplemented by Adrienne Rich's feminist poetics and Ann Cvetkovich's theorisation of trauma as a cultural and political archive. While both poets use the wounded body as a site of testimony and the poem as a weapon of resistance, the study demonstrates that their strategies differ significantly: Kandasamy's verse is confrontational, collective, and caste-conscious, drawing on Dalit feminist epistemologies that are absent from existing comparative frameworks; Shire's poetry is intimate, diasporic, and affectively immersive, situating gendered violence within the broader structures of war, forced migration, and racial precarity in the Global North. The comparative discussion yields the article's central original contribution: the concept of 'differential witnessing,' which names the distinct epistemic and affective positions from which each poet speaks and to which each poet directs her testimony.

Keywords: *Meena Kandasamy, Warsan Shire, feminist poetry, gendered violence, body as archive, testimony, Dalit feminism, diaspora, postcolonial, differential witnessing, feminist resistance, traumatic memory*

1. Introduction

In the opening poem of Meena Kandasamy's debut collection *Touch* (2006), the speaker addresses the politics of caste contact through the body — the skin that is touched and the skin that must not be. In the opening poem of Warsan Shire's *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), a daughter inherits not wisdom but wound — a legacy of female suffering passed down through generations. These are radically different poems, produced in radically different historical and cultural contexts. And yet they share something fundamental: both place the female body at the centre of poetic inquiry, and both understand the writing of that body as an act with political stakes.

This article reads Meena Kandasamy and Warsan Shire comparatively, not to flatten the very real differences between them — a Tamil Dalit feminist writing from and against caste Hindu India, and a Somali British diaspora poet writing from the intersection of war, refugee displacement, and racialised womanhood in Europe — but because comparison, conducted carefully and theoretically, reveals something about each poet that single-author readings cannot. When we read these two bodies of work together, the category 'feminist poetry' becomes more precise, more internally differentiated, and more politically useful. We see that feminist poetics is not one thing but many: it varies by the specific violence it must name, the specific silence it must break, and the specific community to which it speaks.

The pairing is timely. In the five years since 2019, feminist literary criticism has been renewed by sustained engagement with Dalit feminist epistemologies (Rege, 1998; Guru, 2021), by attention to the embodied and affective dimensions of witness and testimony (Kennedy, 2025; Hochberg, 2021), and by the growing recognition that postcolonial feminist theory must be decolonised from its own Eurocentrism if it is to do justice to the full range of women's writing in the postcolonial world. Kandasamy and Shire together constitute an exemplary site for this renewal, which is the primary scholarly motivation of the present study.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review organised around three axes: existing scholarship on Kandasamy, existing scholarship on Shire, and the broader theoretical fields that inform the analysis. Section 3 articulates the research gap. Section 4 states the study's objectives. Section 5 describes the theoretical framework. Section 6 explains the methodology. Sections 7 through 11 constitute the analytical core, organised around the article's five thematic concerns. Section 12 provides a comparative discussion. Section 13 presents findings. Section 14 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Scholarship on Meena Kandasamy*

Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) has attracted growing critical attention across multiple disciplines, though as with Jeet Thayil, the balance of scholarship has favoured her prose fiction over her poetry. Her novels *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You* (2017) have generated substantial feminist, postcolonial, and Dalit feminist readings. Sangeetha et al. (2022), publishing in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, analyse the linguistic discourses and literary techniques in Kandasamy's select works, concluding that her writing transcends postcolonial mobility by demonstrating 'resolute tenacity, authenticity, and rawness.' Kundu (2023) examines the representation of toxic masculinity in leftist circles in *When I Hit You*, and Rashed and Rasheed (2024) study Stockholm syndrome and the abuse cycle in the same novel. Sridevi (2024) examines feminist struggles and patriarchal resistance. These studies are valuable but are concerned primarily with fiction.

Poetry scholarship on Kandasamy begins with the body-politics studies. An early and frequently cited study reads Kandasamy's poetry through Foucauldian micro-politics of power, arguing that her verse constitutes a feminist reclamation of the female body from androcentric patriarchal discourse. More recently, a 2021 essay in the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* argues that Kandasamy's poetic endeavours require an alternative academic framework that attends to performativity and theatricality rather than treating her solely as a Dalit identity poet — a productive corrective. The *Samyukta Journal's* 2024 study of *Voices of Resistance* examines caste and gender in Kandasamy's *Touch*, reading the collection's anti-caste politics through feminist literary criticism. Mathews and Narayan (2023), in *IJCSPUB*, analyse Kandasamy through the lens of silence as feminist resistance, concluding that 'Kandasamy as a poet uses silence as a mode of resistance against the patriarchy existing in society' (p. 4). A 2026 study in *English Journal* situates Kandasamy's poetry as 'counter-discourse' that subverts dominant linguistic and socio-cultural codes.

The comparative literature that does exist on Kandasamy tends to pair her with African or African-diasporic women writers. A study in *The Criterion* pairs her with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, examining systematic violence, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminist resistance. No comparative study, to this author's knowledge, has paired Kandasamy with Warsan Shire.

2.2 Scholarship on Warsan Shire

Warsan Shire (b. 1988) is the most internationally prominent of a generation of African diaspora poets writing in English in Britain. Her debut chapbook *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) circulated widely online before its formal publication, and her contributions to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) brought her to a mass international audience. Her first full-length collection, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), won the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection (2022) and the Dylan Thomas Prize and Griffin Poetry Prize (both 2023). Despite this recognition, academic scholarship on Shire remains comparatively limited.

Anyokwu (2021), in the *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, offers the most sustained critical reading to date, examining figurations of loss, longing, and loneliness in Shire's poetry through a gendered lens, and identifying storytelling and poetry as 'an institutional site for the gendering of war and conflict.' Obi and

Onyejizu (2021) read Shire's poems 'Home' and 'Conversations About Home (at a Deportation Centre)' through postcolonial theory and diaspora studies, situating the female subaltern's struggle within the us/them binary of migrant belonging. Boehmer (2018) addresses Shire alongside other postcolonial poets in the context of terror, continuity, and postcolonial poetics. A 2024 study reads 'Home' specifically in relation to the global refugee crisis.

Irigarayan feminist readings of Shire, most recently comparing her with Rupi Kaur, attend to the 'feminine imaginary' and the representation of female embodiment, but these tend to subordinate Shire's distinctive postcolonial and diasporic positioning to a universalising feminist framework that risks repeating the very Eurocentrism that postcolonial feminist critics have worked to dismantle. Shire's status as Young Poet Laureate of London (2013–2014) and her work on Brave Girl Rising (2019), centring on marginalised women's voices in Africa's largest refugee camp, situate her explicitly within the intersection of feminist poetics and humanitarian witness.

2.3 Feminist Body Theory and Testimony Studies

The theoretical conversation this article enters is well-established but continues to develop in productive ways. Judith Butler's foundational work — Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies That Matter (1993), and Precarious Life (2004) — provides the conceptual vocabulary of gender performativity, the body as discursively constituted, and precarity as the condition of bodies that are deemed unworthy of grieving. Zaharijević (2023) offers a recent critical synthesis of Butler's concept of precarity, particularly its equalising dimension, which is relevant to comparative reading across Kandasamy's and Shire's radically different social locations. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), though not recent, remains the foundational text for thinking about pain's resistance to language and its relationship to political structures; its arguments are directly engaged by a 2025 study on feminist creative practice and testimonial activism, which argues for 'a new poetics of testimonial activism' that moves beyond the limits of representation.

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) and *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) theorise trauma as cultural archive — not merely individual wound but social record. This framework is particularly productive for reading both Kandasamy, whose poems archive caste violence and domestic abuse as cultural formations rather than personal tragedies, and Shire, whose poems archive the collective traumatic experience of the Somali diaspora. Adrienne Rich's feminist poetics — particularly the essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1972) and the poem 'Diving into the Wreck' — remain touchstones for feminist reading of women's poetry that refuses the victim position.

Dalit feminist theory, particularly Sharmila Rege's 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (1998) and the subsequent body of scholarship it generated, including Guru's (2021) work, is essential for reading Kandasamy's specific feminist politics, which is inseparable from anti-caste politics. This body of theory insists on the specificity of Dalit women's experience and challenges both mainstream feminism and mainstream Dalit politics for their

failure to address the intersection of caste and gender. This is a theoretical resource that most existing Kandasamy scholarship, and virtually all comparative feminist studies involving her, engages insufficiently.

3. Research Gap

Three specific gaps justify the present study. First, no comparative study has brought Meena Kandasamy and Warsan Shire into sustained critical dialogue. This is a significant absence, because the comparison — properly conducted, without flattening their differences — has the capacity to illuminate what is specifically Indian Dalit feminist about Kandasamy's poetic politics, and what is specifically Somali diasporic about Shire's, in ways that single-author studies cannot achieve. The absence of this comparison in the existing literature is itself a symptom of the disciplinary boundaries — Indian literary studies, African/diaspora literary studies — that prevent productive cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative feminist scholarship.

Second, Dalit feminist theory as developed by Rege (1998) and extended by subsequent scholars has not been adequately integrated into comparative feminist poetry studies. When Kandasamy is read comparatively, her Dalit feminist epistemology tends to be generalised as 'postcolonial feminism' or 'resistance feminism,' losing the specificity of what Dalit feminist scholarship insists upon: that caste-gender intersectionality produces a distinctive mode of oppression that requires its own theoretical vocabulary.

Third, Shire's most recent full-length collection, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022) — her most formally ambitious and most critically acclaimed work — remains substantially under-engaged in academic discourse, which has concentrated on the earlier chapbook and on 'Home' as an isolated text. This study is among the first to engage this collection as a sustained body of feminist poetic thought.

4. Objectives of the Study

This study pursues four specific objectives. First, to conduct sustained close readings of selected poems from Kandasamy's *Touch* (2006), *Ms Militancy* (2010), and *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023), and from Shire's *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), attending to formal as well as thematic dimensions.

Second, to apply a theoretical framework that is genuinely responsive to the specific cultural, political, and historical positions of both poets — integrating Dalit feminist epistemology for Kandasamy and diaspora feminist theory for Shire, alongside the shared frameworks of Butler, Scarry, Spivak, and Cvetkovich.

Third, to produce a comparative analysis that respects and articulates the differences between the two poets while identifying the genuine theoretical and thematic convergences that make comparison productive rather than merely parallel.

Fourth, to propose the concept of 'differential witnessing' as an original theoretical contribution that emerges from the comparative analysis and has broader applicability in feminist poetry studies.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Butler: *Gender Performativity, the Body, and Precarious Life*

Judith Butler's account of gender performativity — developed across *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) — holds that gender is not a natural attribute of the body but a repeated performance that produces the illusion of an original. This theoretical position is foundational for reading both Kandasamy and Shire, because both poets refuse the naturalisation of femininity: Kandasamy's poems expose the violence by which female roles — wife, lower-caste woman, sexually available body — are enforced through social ritual and institutional practice; Shire's poems expose the violence by which women in war zones and refugee contexts are reduced to vulnerable, disposable bodies.

Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) extends this analysis into the domain of grievability: some bodies, Butler argues, are structured by the social and political order as ungrievable — their deaths, their violations, their suffering do not register as losses that matter. This concept of precarity is directly applicable to both poets' subjects: the Dalit woman whose violation is normalised within caste hierarchy, and the refugee woman whose suffering is rendered invisible by the political structures of the host nation.

5.2 Scarry: *The Body in Pain and the Language of Witness*

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) argues that intense physical pain is radically resistant to language — it destroys the capacity for speech and, by extension, for the kind of testimony that political action requires. Both Kandasamy and Shire engage this problem directly: their poems attempt the very thing Scarry says language cannot do, namely give pain a form that others can apprehend. The way in which each poet negotiates this resistance — through naming, through form, through address — is a central concern of the analytical sections below.

5.3 Spivak: *The Subaltern Voice and Postcolonial Feminist Critique*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) poses the question of whether the colonised woman — doubly marginalised by colonial structures and by gender — can speak in a mode that the dominant structure can hear. Both Kandasamy and Shire engage this problem, though from different positions: Kandasamy speaks as, and for, the Dalit woman who has been denied both the status of 'woman' in mainstream feminist discourse and the status of full political subject in mainstream anti-caste discourse; Shire speaks as, and for, the refugee woman who exists at the boundary of the host nation's legal and moral concern. In both cases, the poem is the medium through which the subaltern attempts not only to speak but to reconstruct the conditions of audibility.

5.4 Cvetkovich: *Trauma as Cultural Archive*

Ann Cvetkovich's (2003, 2012) theorisation of trauma as cultural archive insists that trauma is not only a clinical and individual phenomenon but a collective, political, and cultural one. Her concept of an 'archive of

feelings' — a repository of affective traces through which marginalised communities preserve the memory of violence and sustain the political will for resistance — is generative for reading both poets. Kandasamy's collections constitute a Dalit feminist archive of caste-gender violence; Shire's collections constitute an archive of the Somali diaspora's traumatic experience of war, displacement, and gendered persecution.

5.5 Dalit Feminist Epistemology: Rege and the Critique of Universalism

Sharmila Rege's (1998) foundational essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' argues that Dalit women's experience produces a distinctive epistemological standpoint that is not adequately captured by either mainstream feminist theory (which tends to universalise middle-class and upper-caste women's experience) or mainstream Dalit politics (which tends to erase gender within a race-analogous caste analysis). This argument is essential for reading Kandasamy's specific feminist politics, and it is a theoretical resource that comparative feminist frameworks must integrate rather than generalise away.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis and informed by the theoretical framework described above. It is comparative in orientation, which means that its analytical claims are produced through the sustained juxtaposition of two bodies of work rather than through sequential single-author readings. Comparison here is not an end in itself but a methodological tool: it sharpens the specificity of each poet's poetic politics by placing her in relation to a poet whose context, tradition, and strategies are both similar and different.

6.2 Corpus Selection: Criteria and Justification

The primary corpus consists of twenty-two poems: eleven from Kandasamy and eleven from Shire. Poems were selected according to four explicit criteria applied in sequence. The first criterion is direct thematic relevance: poems must engage at least one of the article's five analytical concerns (the body as archive, writing violence, memory and testimony, resistance through language, beyond victimhood). The second criterion is formal distinctiveness: poems must deploy at least one formal strategy — direct address, fragmented syntax, myth-subversion, the imperative mode, catalogue — that constitutes an analytical object in its own right. The third criterion is representativeness across collections: the selection is distributed across all collections to ensure the comparative argument is grounded in multiple phases of each poet's development. The fourth criterion is critical dialogue: poems that have received some scholarly attention are included to enable the article to engage with existing scholarship, while poems that have received little or no critical attention are included to break new interpretive ground.

6.3 Method of Analysis

Close reading constitutes the primary analytical method. In this study, close reading attends simultaneously to three registers: the semantic-thematic (what the poem says and means), the formal-rhetorical (how it constructs meaning through sound, image, syntax, line, and address), and the political-ideological (what structural relations of power the poem affirms, contests, or reconfigures). The theoretical frameworks described above are brought to bear not as external schemas imposed upon the poems but as vocabularies that become useful when the poem's own language and form invite or resist them.

6.4 Limitations

The article acknowledges that a corpus of twenty-two poems cannot claim comprehensiveness. The selection reflects the analytical priorities of this study; different priorities would yield different selections. The comparative framework, while theoretically productive, necessarily involves a degree of abstraction from the full historical specificity of each poet's context; the article mitigates this by maintaining explicit attention to those specificities throughout. The concept of 'differential witnessing,' proposed as an original contribution, requires testing across a wider range of feminist poets before it can claim general theoretical currency.

7. Analysis

Section One: The Female Body as Archive

Both Kandasamy and Shire treat the female body not as individual property but as a social archive — a site upon which the history of collective violence is inscribed, preserved, and transmitted. This archival understanding of the body draws on Cvetkovich's (2003) argument that trauma leaves its traces not only in minds and psyches but in bodies and in the cultural practices through which bodies are represented.

In Kandasamy's *Touch* (2006), the opening poem's meditation on caste contact establishes the body as the primary surface of caste inscription. Touch — the act of physical contact across caste boundaries — is simultaneously the body's most ordinary mode of social interaction and the site of its most violent regulation. The poem does not merely describe this regulation; its formal structure enacts it. The poem's compressed, declarative syntax — lines that state rather than develop, that name rather than narrate — performs the rigidity of the social order it critiques. There is no fluidity in the syntax because the caste body is not permitted fluidity. This is form as argument, not form as decoration.

Kandasamy's poem 'Mascara', from *Ms Militancy* (2010), is perhaps her most widely discussed piece. A woman applies makeup — a culturally feminine practice — and is then violated. The poem refuses the conventional narrative arc in which violation produces collapse or silence. Instead, the speaker continues: the makeup remains on the violated face. This is the body as archive in its most concentrated expression — the face simultaneously marked by femininity's performance and by the violence that polices that performance, and refusing to choose between them. Butler's (1993) account of the body as the site of regulatory norms and their transgression is literalised here: the violated face is not erased by the poem but made more starkly visible.

Shire's archival practice is differently inflected. In *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), the very title establishes an inversion of the body's usual generational transmission: knowledge flows from daughter to mother, not the other way. The body's reproductive capacity — the site at which patriarchal and colonial control has historically been most intensely focused — is reclaimed as a space of feminist pedagogy. In the longer poem sequence from *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), the female body across generations becomes a palimpsest: each generation's wound is written over the last, and yet each wound remains legible. The daughter inherits not only her mother's body but her mother's suffering — which is to say, the history of the community's suffering as it has been concentrated in female flesh.

What distinguishes Kandasamy's archival practice from Shire's is the specific history each body archives. Kandasamy's body carries the archive of caste — a history of ontological defilement written on the skin, literally, through the ideology of untouchability. Shire's body carries the archive of war and diaspora — a history of displacement, sexual violence as a weapon of war, and the specific precarity of the female refugee body in Europe. Both archives are public and political, not merely personal; but they are archives of different histories, different violences, different structures of oppression.

Section Two: Writing Violence

One of the central formal challenges that both Kandasamy and Shire face is the problem that Scarry (1985) identifies at the core of pain: its resistance to language. Intense pain destroys the capacity for speech; it is radically inexpressible. And yet testimony — the transformation of pain into language that can be shared, believed, and acted upon — is precisely what feminist poetry must accomplish. The way in which each poet negotiates this tension reveals something fundamental about her poetic practice.

Kandasamy's approach to writing violence is characteristically confrontational. She names the violence directly, refuses euphemism, and addresses both the victim and the perpetrator within the space of a single poem. This double address is a distinctive formal strategy: by speaking to the perpetrator as well as about the victim, the poem refuses the privatisation of violence. Violence committed against Dalit women is not a private family matter, Kandasamy's poems insist, but a public crime sustained by public ideology. The poem's address makes it public, makes the reader a witness who cannot not know.

The poem 'Becoming a Brahmin', from *Ms Militancy* (2010), achieves this through a devastating use of irony. The speaker adopts the voice of the oppressor, performing the logic of caste superiority from within, exposing its absurdity and its violence through the performance itself. This is Butler's (1990) performativity deployed as poetic strategy: by repeating the dominant discourse in a context that reveals its violence, the poem 'cites' that discourse in a way that simultaneously invokes and undermines it. The violence is written not by describing it but by inhabiting and exposing the ideology that enables it.

Shire's approach to writing violence is more intimate and more sensory. Her poems tend to move closer to the body, to render violence through physical detail rather than political analysis. In 'Warsan Shire: For Women Who Are Difficult to Love', one of her most viral pieces, the violence is the specific cruelty of a relationship

— the gaslighting, the diminishment, the gradual erasure of the beloved's selfhood. The poem's power derives from its absolute specificity: it does not generalise or theorise; it names the exact sensory details of a particular kind of damage. This specificity is a form of resistance to the abstraction that allows violence to continue unnoticed.

In the poems dealing with war and refugee experience — particularly 'Home' and 'Conversations About Home (at a Deportation Centre)' — Shire writes violence at the scale of the collective and the geopolitical. But even here, her characteristic strategy is to bring the abstract down to the body: the refugee is not a statistic but a person who had a home, who had a garden, who left because the alternative was death. The body's vulnerability — its need for shelter, for safety, for the ground beneath its feet — becomes the measure against which political violence is judged.

Section Three: Memory and Testimony

Memory in feminist poetry is never merely personal; it is always, also, political. To remember is to refuse the erasure that power performs; to testify is to insist that what happened happened, that it was real, that it matters. Both Kandasamy and Shire are poets of testimony — but the kind of testimony each enacts, and the conditions of its audibility, are shaped by their different social and historical positions.

Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023) — a collection of poems written between 2011 and 2022, described by critics as a retrospective of defiance and suppression — constitutes a sustained act of collective memory. The collection's title is itself a memory: a prediction made real by political circumstances, an anticipation of violence that has been repeatedly fulfilled. The poems in this collection do not simply remember past violence; they record the ongoing, present-continuous nature of the violence directed at those who resist caste and gender oppression in India. This is memory as political urgency rather than elegiac retrospect.

Spivak's (1988) analysis of the subaltern's difficulty of speech is directly relevant here. Kandasamy speaks from a position that is doubly marginalised — as a Dalit woman and as an anti-caste activist whose speech is subject to legal threat — and her poems are aware of this difficulty. Several poems in *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* address the specific mechanisms by which anti-caste speech is silenced: legal harassment, social ostracism, the ideological delegitimisation of Dalit voices as 'divisive.' The poem as testimony is here also the poem as legal record — evidence of a silencing that the poem itself refuses to enact.

Shire's testimony operates within a different politics of audibility. As Anyokwu (2021) notes, her poetry constitutes 'an institutional site for the gendering of war and conflict.' Her testimony is directed at audiences — primarily in the Global North — who are at a distance from the violence she testifies to, and who have the political power, in principle, to respond. The poem 'Home', which she wrote after visiting the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome being used as shelter by young refugees, situates testimony explicitly within the space of witness: she went, she saw, and she wrote for those she saw — 'for them, for my family and for

anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way' (Shire, as cited in Facing History and Ourselves, 2023).

What Cvetkovich's (2003) framework of the archive of feelings contributes to this analysis is the insistence that testimony is not merely an individual act but a collective one. When Shire publishes 'Home,' she is not only testifying to a particular refugee's suffering; she is contributing to a collective archive of Somali diasporic experience that sustains community memory and political resistance across generations. When Kandasamy publishes *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You*, she is contributing to the Dalit feminist archive that preserves the memory of caste violence against women in a context where official histories systematically erase it.

Section Four: Resistance through Language

Both poets understand language itself — not merely the content of what language says but the formal and rhetorical resources of poetry as a linguistic practice — as a site and medium of resistance. This understanding is not naive: neither poet claims that poems change the world directly. But both insist that the poem does something that other forms of political action cannot: it changes the conditions of perception, the structures of feeling, the frameworks within which violence is understood and responded to.

Kandasamy's deployment of language as resistance is most clearly visible in her practice of mythological subversion. Ms Militancy (2010) reconfigures canonical Tamil and Hindu myths through a Dalit feminist lens: the mythological women who have been made into figures of virtue, sacrifice, and passive suffering are rewritten as agents of militancy and resistance. This strategy draws on a long tradition in feminist poetry — from Adrienne Rich's 'Diving into the Wreck' to Anne Sexton's *Transformations* — of reclaiming female mythological figures from the patriarchal narratives that have contained them. But Kandasamy's version of this strategy is caste-specific: the myths she subverts are not merely patriarchal but specifically caste-patriarchal, and the agency she claims is not merely female but Dalit female.

The title poem 'Ms Militancy' rewrites the Tamil epic figure of Kannaki from *Silapathikaram* — traditionally celebrated as an ideal of wifely devotion — as a figure of feminist revolt. Kannaki's grief at her husband's unjust execution becomes, in Kandasamy's rewriting, a militant fury directed not at fate but at the systemic injustice of the state. The poem's address to Kannaki as 'Ms Militancy' is a form of Spivakian counter-discourse: it seizes the representational resources of the dominant culture — its myths, its heroines, its narrative templates — and redeploys them in the service of feminist Dalit resistance.

Shire's linguistic resistance operates differently. Her poems resist through intimacy — through the creation of what the reader experiences as a direct, unmediated encounter with the suffering she writes about. This intimacy is itself a formal achievement: it is constructed through second-person address ('you'), through present-tense immediacy, through the accumulation of precisely observed physical details. The effect is to make the reader feel implicated — not merely an observer of Shire's subjects' suffering but a participant in the conditions that produce it.

The 2026 English Journal study on Kandasamy observes that her language functions as 'a counter-discourse that subverts the dominant linguistic and socio-cultural codes to regain lost identity, space, and voice.' This is accurate but incomplete: what the poems do is not merely subvert but reconstruct. They do not only challenge the dominant codes; they propose alternative codes — new ways of naming the body, new ways of narrating violence, new ways of imagining the community that resistance requires.

Section Five: Beyond Victimhood

One of the most important things that both poets accomplish — and one of the most significant contributions of feminist poetry as a genre — is the refusal of the victim position. This refusal does not deny or minimise violence; it insists that the women who have suffered violence are not reducible to their suffering. They are agents, thinkers, desiring subjects, resisters.

Kandasamy's refusal of victimhood is collective and militant. Her poems do not linger in the subjective experience of pain; they move rapidly from the naming of violence to the demand for its end. This rhetorical movement — from wound to demand — is itself a formal argument: it insists that the appropriate response to violence is not grief but action. The title *Ms Militancy* encapsulates this insistence: it is not *Ms Victim*, not *Ms Survivor*, but *Ms Militancy* — the figure who has metabolised violence into political force.

This is also, as the 2021 *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* essay argues, a question of performativity and theatricality: Kandasamy's poems are addressed to communities, staged for collective response, designed to be read aloud, to be shared, to generate political consciousness rather than merely aesthetic experience. The poem is not a lyric confession but a political speech-act. This situates her within a specifically Dalit feminist aesthetic tradition that values the collective over the individual, the political over the personal.

Shire's refusal of victimhood is more intimate and more complex. Her poems inhabit the experience of suffering fully — they do not rush toward militancy — but they insist, at the same time, on the full humanity, the desire, the beauty, and the resilience of their subjects. The women in *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* are not simply victims of war and displacement; they are women who love, who dream, who are 'difficult to love' and proud of it. The collection's very title — 'Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head' — is a blessing pronounced over the woman who has had to become her own mother, her own authority, her own source of resilience. This is not victimhood but a complex, hard-won form of self-possession.

Rich's (1972) feminist poetics of 're-vision' — seeing the world again, through women's eyes, against the grain of the texts and myths that have shaped our seeing — is relevant here. Both Kandasamy and Shire are poets of re-vision: they see the world their female subjects inhabit with a clarity that the dominant culture systematically refuses, and they insist that what they see must be seen by others too.

12. Comparative Discussion: Differential Witnessing

The comparative analysis conducted above enables the article's central original theoretical contribution: the concept of 'differential witnessing.' This concept is proposed in response to the specific problem that the comparison of Kandasamy and Shire poses — the problem of how two feminist poets who share certain fundamental commitments (to the female body as archive, to testimony as resistance, to the refusal of victimhood) can produce such distinctively different bodies of work, and what theoretical framework can account for this difference without either erasing it or making it absolute.

Differential witnessing names the way in which feminist testimony is shaped not only by what is witnessed — the content of violence — but by the specific social, historical, and epistemic position of the witness. Kandasamy and Shire are not simply two feminist poets who both write about violence against women. They are witnesses positioned differently within global structures of power, and the differences in their positioning produce differences in what they can see, what they are compelled to say, how they can say it, and to whom their testimony can be addressed.

Kandasamy witnesses from within the caste structure that produces the violence she testifies to. She is a Dalit woman writing from inside India about violence that is also directed at her and at her community. Her witnessing is therefore simultaneously personal, collective, and politically dangerous — as the title *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* signals. Her testimony must negotiate both the dominant culture that would silence it and the internal politics of Dalit and feminist movements that sometimes marginalise the specific intersection of caste and gender. Her poetic address is primarily to the community whose experience she shares — though it exceeds that community — and her rhetorical mode is primarily militant.

Shire witnesses from the borderland of two worlds: the Somali world her parents fled and the British world that received them with conditional hospitality. She witnesses violence — war, displacement, gendered persecution — from a position that is both intimate (it is her community's history) and mediated (she grew up in London, not Mogadishu). Her witnessing is therefore shaped by the specific epistemological situation of the second-generation diaspora subject: compelled to testify to an experience she did not directly live, translating that experience for audiences whose political decisions shape the conditions of refugee life. Her rhetorical mode is primarily intimate, designed to close the emotional distance between her subjects' suffering and her primarily non-Somali audiences.

'Differential witnessing' is not a hierarchy: neither mode of witnessing is more authentic or more politically valuable than the other. It is a description of the specific conditions — epistemic, historical, social — that shape the practice of feminist testimonial poetry, and a reminder that feminist poetics cannot be treated as a unified tradition but must be understood as internally differentiated by the specific violences and the specific positions from which it speaks. This concept builds on and extends the Dalit feminist insistence (Rege, 1998) that women talk differently depending on their social location, applying that insight comparatively and transnationally for the first time.

13. Findings

Finding 1: The Body as Multi-Layered Archive

Both poets construct the female body as an archive in Cvetkovich's (2003) sense, but the archives they construct are records of different histories: caste violence and caste-gender intersectionality in Kandasamy; war, displacement, and racialised gendered precarity in Shire. The comparison reveals that 'the female body as archive' is not a singular feminist trope but a flexible analytical category whose specific content is determined by the history the body has lived.

Finding 2: Formal Strategies as Political Arguments

Both poets use formal strategies — Kandasamy's confrontational address and mythological subversion; Shire's intimate second person and sensory precision — that are not merely aesthetic choices but political arguments. Form, in both bodies of work, is the medium through which the poem makes its feminist claims. This finding confirms that close formal analysis is not an optional supplement to political reading but a prerequisite for it.

Finding 3: The Differential Structure of Feminist Testimony

The comparative analysis reveals that feminist testimony is structured differently depending on the epistemic and social position of the witness. Kandasamy testifies from within the structure of oppression, primarily to her own community and to political allies; Shire testifies from the diaspora borderland, primarily to audiences at a political and affective distance from the violence she describes. This structural difference produces the two poets' distinctive rhetorical modes.

Finding 4: Dalit Feminist Epistemology as Distinct Framework

The analysis confirms Rege's (1998) insistence that Dalit women talk differently. Kandasamy's feminist poetics cannot be adequately understood through gender theory alone; it requires the specific vocabulary of Dalit feminist epistemology, which attends to caste-gender intersectionality as a distinctive form of oppression. This finding has methodological implications for feminist comparative literary studies more broadly.

Finding 5: Differential Witnessing as Original Contribution

The concept of 'differential witnessing' proposed in this article provides a theoretical vocabulary for the productive comparison of feminist poets whose differences are as significant as their shared commitments. It offers a framework that respects specificity without abandoning the possibility of comparison — a framework that feminist comparative literary studies has lacked.

Finding 6: The Refusal of Victimhood as Feminist Formal Strategy

Both poets enact, through formal as well as thematic means, the refusal of the victim position for their subjects. This refusal takes different forms — Kandasamy's collective militancy; Shire's intimate insistence on full humanity — but in both cases it is achieved through formal choices that determine how the subject is positioned in relation to the reader. This is feminist form at its most precise.

14. Conclusion

This article has read Meena Kandasamy and Warsan Shire comparatively, attending to gendered violence, traumatic memory, and feminist resistance as the shared concerns that make comparison productive, while insisting throughout on the differences in historical context, social position, and poetic strategy that make each poet irreducibly specific. The comparison has been theoretically grounded in Butler's gender theory and precarity framework, Scarry's phenomenology of pain, Spivak's postcolonial feminist account of the subaltern voice, Cvetkovich's theorisation of trauma as cultural archive, and Rege's Dalit feminist epistemology — a framework assembled in explicit response to the specific demands of these two bodies of work.

The article's original contribution is threefold. First, it undertakes the first comparative study of Kandasamy and Shire, a pairing that proves theoretically and analytically productive. Second, it demonstrates that Dalit feminist epistemology is not a regional theoretical resource but a necessary component of any feminist comparative literary framework that takes caste-gender intersectionality seriously. Third, it proposes the concept of 'differential witnessing' as a new analytical tool for feminist poetry studies — a concept that names the epistemic and social specificity of feminist testimony without denying the genuine community of purpose that feminist poets share.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged: the corpus is necessarily selective; the concept of differential witnessing requires further testing; and the analysis of each poet's most recent work — Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023) and Shire's *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022) — is necessarily preliminary given the limited critical conversation around these texts. Future research might extend the comparative framework to include other feminist poets from the Global South — from Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia — in order to test and develop the concept of differential witnessing across a wider range of historical and cultural contexts. It might also pursue the affective and performative dimensions of both poets' work in greater depth, drawing on the affect theory and performance studies that the present article has touched on but not fully developed.

What this study demonstrates, above all, is that feminist poetry read carefully and comparatively has theoretical resources that feminist criticism has not yet fully mobilised. Kandasamy and Shire, brought into conversation with each other and with the theoretical frameworks their work invites and requires, produce knowledge about gendered violence, feminist resistance, and the politics of witnessing that neither scholarly discipline alone — Indian feminist literary studies, African diaspora feminist studies — has so far generated. That is the case for the kind of transnational, theoretically rigorous, formally attentive comparative feminist literary criticism this article has attempted.

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