

Reimagining Gender and Casteism: Adaptations in Meena Kandasamy's Selected Poems

Noor Zaid Farajullah

Department of Translation, University of Al-Iraqia, Baghdad, Iraq

Abstract: This paper explores how Meena Kandasamy reclaims space for marginalized voices—particularly Dalit women—through selected poems from her collections *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*. Drawing on both personal and collective histories, Kandasamy rewrites myth, history, and language to challenge dominant narratives of caste and gender in Indian society. Her poetry speaks from a place of defiance, using irony, anger, and tenderness to confront deeply rooted systems of oppression. The study also reflects on how Kandasamy manipulates language itself—as both a tool of exclusion and a potential means of liberation. By reshaping English to reflect her cultural and political reality, Kandasamy transforms poetry into a form of resistance, making space for identities often erased or silenced in mainstream discourse.

Key words: Reimagining, Caste, Dalit, Marginalized, Myths, Feminism, Indian-society.

Introduction

Meena Kandasamy (1984) is a prolific Dalit-Indian poet, novelist, translator and activist. She holds a doctoral degree in sociolinguistics from Anna University in India. She is well-known for her out loud opinions and daring writings mostly about social and political issues (Alwar, 2016; Aorora, 2020). Her main concerns out of these issues are to shed light on the gender, caste, and class discrimination, to give voices for the voiceless marginalized people, to ask for their rights, to bring them justice and most importantly to teach them how to practice their existence, to be proud of it and to demand for equality. Kandasamy is a feminist writer who advocates for the women, particularly Dalit women as being one of the most oppressed groups of people not only from a gender point of view but also as a part from a neglected caste. Kandasamy has different writings like her novels “When I Hit You”, “The Gypsy Goddess”, “Exquisite Cadavers”, “The Orders were to Rape You”, and “Tomorrow Someone will arrest you”, however the focus of this paper will be on selected poems from her two famous collections “Touch” and “Ms. Militancy”

Kandasamy’s powerful work style and her bold language stem from a rage that is kept within her as a woman and Dalit who writes to expose the injustice encountered by a double marginalized person, once by gender and twice by caste. She writes directly addressing all those whom should concern for this reason her main writings are poetry as she herself states

... I choose poetry very consciously. First, because poetry is intricately connected with language, and since language is the site of all subjugation and oppression, I think poetry alone has the power of being extremely subversive. Because, on several levels, it can challenge a language, its patterns of thought, its prejudices and its enshrined, encapsulated inequalities. We can announce our revolution through poetry. Second, because it offers me point-blank range. I would have to be far more subtle if I were to convey the same through fiction. And thirdly, a real poet can never escape her politics. (Jana, 2008, p. 4)

Her poems are meant to expose all misdeeds, offenses and crimes that her Dalit people face and still facing. Her diction is a scream in the face of the suppressors, high society and the aristocratic people. Dalit people are constantly subjugated to the higher order and subjected to different types of degradation through which they were physically psychologically and emotionally abused. Above all, Dalit women have to be silent while being harassed and raped too or else they would get excluded and killed by their own families (Brueck, 2011).

Dalit people are also known as “untouchable”, which is a term used to describe the low caste people. They were seen as impure creatures that their touch would daub people of the higher class. The term itself suggests the worst types of extreme discrimination and societal exclusion that they have faced for a long time. Dalits are one of the most marginalized groups of people in India. Hindu caste system that consists out of four varnas divided according to their birth. Each group has fixed set of duties, rights, and constraints (Festino, 2015). The four divisions are arranged as

- Brahmins which are the priests.
- Kshatriyas which are the ruling class and the warriors.
- Vaishyas which are the merchants and the agricultures.
- Shudras which are the laborers.

Dalits are even lower than the Shudras; they are outside the entire caste system and are undergone rigid discrimination.

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Kandasamy took her education in a Kendriya Vidyalaya, where she had an elevated teaching with the two national languages: Hindi and English. Most of the kids there were from north India, thus they did not converse in Tamil. Tamil was considered as a vulgar language. She was ashamed of her first tongue language for the first twelve years of her life as she said to her interviewer Ujjwal Jana. She had faced the inferior complex about her language before acknowledging the fact that her culture, her identity and as consequence her being come from her own language and that is what she declared once:

I didn't want my Tamil origins to wreak havoc over what I wanted to say. But then, when I started saying things, I realized that Tamil, my language, my identity, my culture, it was all over me. It was the only point where I could start. Until I reclaimed my roots there would only have been silence or drivel (Jana, 2008, p.6)

Thus in the epigraph of her poem “Mulligatawny Dreams” Kandasamy challenges the English language by listing English words that are taken from Tamil language origins: “anaconda. candy. cash. Catamaran/ cheroot. coolie. corundum. curry./ ginger. mango. mulligatawny./ patchouli. poppadom. rice./ tatty. teak. Vetiver.”

English language in particular is seen as a mean of freedom for Dalits. Although English is the colonial language by which indigenous people had lost their mother tongue, it is undeniable that it is the dominant language. Meena Kandasamy has a dream of enabling all her people to get access to this language so that to use it as a tool for their liberation. As she said in the first two lines of her poem “I dream of an english/ full of the words of my language”(1-2). For her, if the English language would be the tool language used by her nation, then it needs so many changes and amendments. It needs to adapt their socio-cultural contexts and their geography(Herrero, 2017). English language was a source of disempowerment and threat for a long time to the Indian people in general and the Tamil language users in particular. Thus she said “I dream of ...” :

an english in small letters

an english that shall tire a white man's tongue

an english where small children practice with smooth

round pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha

an english where a pregnant woman is a 'stomach-child-lady' (3-7)

Furthermore, English language is spoken by those whom are considered as the elite in the Indian society. The speakers of the English language have better social and economic advancements. Thus, the English speakers have easier access to different fields in the Indian society that are seen as far-catch-dreams for other Indians. Language is a direct way of creating caste distinguishing. Above all, Kandasamy believes languages are: "biased, f***ed-up structures, clearly reflecting a lot of the status quo, reflecting the inequalities and very often reinforcing them". She also thinks that "Language can be used to mask grave crimes, or to send across stereotypes, or even sometimes to denude us of all feeling, all outrage. Capitalism does this successfully—using happiness and beauty to sell—and to extend its interests without worrying about the imbalance and inequality"(Kandasamy, 2006). This is highlighted in her following lines from the same poem:

an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades and

the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins

an english where love means only the strange frenzy between

a man and his beloved, not between him and his car

an english without the privacy of its many rooms

an english with suffixes for respect

an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea

an english that does not belittle brown or black men and women

an english of tasting with five fingers

an english of talking love with eyes alone (9-19).

Moreover, Kandasamy tries to soften the words and make them seem less harsh. She breaks down the argument that provides the idea of the patriarchy of the language that controls the society and as though the literary field by creating a feminine language. She proves to women in general and Dalit women in particular that women can express themselves in male dominant space especially in her poem "Once My Silence Held You Spellbound", where she asserts her ability to command, manipulate and even discard the so-called prestige of high language:

I have learnt all these big big words.

I can use them with abandon.

I can misuse them. I can refuse them.

I can throw them about and one day,

I can throw them out.

I am the renegade who can drop

these multi-syllable monsters

for studied, stylistic effect.

I am the rebel who can drop them altogether.

I invent new ones every passing day.

FYI, OED consults me. Roget's Thesaurus

finds it tough to stay updated. (5-16)

In the lines above-quoted the poet reflects the ambition of the eminent French feminist philosopher Helene Cixous where the later discussed the significance of the concept of the "écriture féminine" that emphasizes the importance of the females' voices and their distinguished modes of expressions

as a way to challenge the patriarchal narratives and to delve in the inner work of femininity. The powerful female voice of Kandasamy to “use”, “misuse” and even “throw” the “big big words” shows the image of the modern woman she and other females can be (Bhadra, 2018).

In her poem, she does not only talk about caste discrimination but she gives affirmation to all waves of feminism. This gives her a special place where she can preserve herself as a woman and as a dalit. An identity she is conscious and proud of. Thus, her sarcastic and ironical style in her writings is part and parcel from her character that revolts against a double faced hypocrite society. This is clearly incarnated in her poem “Ekalaivan” which is a striking reimagining of the mythical character of Ekalavya from the Indian epic Mahabharata. She uses this story to criticize the caste-based discrimination of her society. Kandasamy creates a symbol of resilience out of the tribal price Ekalavya. She projected him as a systemic oppression victim with a highlight on the injustice the character faced for being a member of marginalized communities. The original story of Ekalavya begins when he wanted to craft archery from a revered tutor Dronacharya. However, Dronacharya refused to teach him because he belongs to a lower-caste. Ekalavya creates an idol out of clay for Dronacharya to express his respect, love and true desire to learn archery. Finally he taught himself until he becomes better than Arjuna, the best student of Dronacharya. Dronacharya knew about Ekalavya’s skill, he asked for his right thumb as a guru dakshina (teacher’s fee) (Gajarawala, 2011). That was his way to ensure the excellency of his student Arjuna and to punish Ekalavya.

Kandasamy uses allusion to expose the cruelty of the caste system that privileges hierarchy over merits. This can be seen throughout the entire story but mainly in the teacher’s fee. The tone she used in this part was that of ironical one while the dominant tone of the poem was defiance and anger to express her rejection to the passive acceptance to this societal injustice. Kandasamy implement some hope by creating a contemporary resilient character out of the historical victimized one. She starts her poem with consolation :

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things

With your left hand.

Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant

Left-handed treatment.

Also,

You don’t need your right thumb

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb. (1-8)

With the same tone Kandasamy wrote her most famous poem “Touch”:

But, you will never have known

that touch – the taboo

to your transcendence,

when crystallized in caste

was a paraphernalia of

undeserving hate.

The irony of this poem unfolds with a deep grieve clarity, showing the paradox of a society that depends on ritual purity however continue to practice the meanest forms of dehumanization and segregation. The ache of being rendered untouchable has been lived through several levels first of all physically by avoiding the avarna as an impure and polluted species. Secondly, on a systemic level where they are dehumanized, ignored, prevented from all of their rights and needs, and relegated to shameful tasks only. As a consequence these levels lead to the next one which is the psychological level.

In the first stanza of the same poem, the poet expresses even more irony where the upper class people try to meditate as a spiritual practice. The irony is highlighted in the very meditation as a symbol of those privileged people who want to purify and clear their minds from any thoughts and to be associated with their higher form. This practice cannot be done unless they close their eyes, listen to no noise and breathe in a special way. They aspire to shut their body out but the failure of this practice comes from their skin, the very touch of their body (Kandasamy, 2006). This is marked as a betrayal:

Have you ever tried meditation?

Struggling hard to concentrate,
and keeping your mind as blank
as a whitewashed wall by closing
your eyes, nose, ears; and shutting out
every possible thought. Everything.
And, the only failure, that ever came,
the only gross betrayal—
was from your own skin.
You will have known this.

The satirical tone of this stanza is obvious to criticize the hypocrisy of whom to call the elite. Their superficial spiritual practice that supposed to purify them cannot be done with all the filthy system they apply on the lower and out-caste people. The detachment they seek is never fulfilled because of the fifth sense they can never ignore; the touch. This is a message if not a threat that Indian society will never reach any higher form with the continuous practice of shunning the Dalits. Also it is always the touch they cannot control will brings them back to ground, to reality. Four senses can be mastered but never the fifth, which can symbolize the four Varna of the Indian society and the fifth sense of touch symbolizes the outsiders Dalit (Alwar, 2016).

However, they are untouched when it comes to their demands, needs and rights, but they are touched when the upper class people need to. The reality is that their touch situational, depending on the other Varna's demand. In the poem "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985", Kandasamy explores the hidden massacre of Karamchedu which took place in Andhra Pradesh on July 17 in 1985, where six Madigas men were killed and three Madigas women were raped by the Kammas.

This is a retell story in the accordance of refusing to forget injustice. The remembrance of this shameful massacre is a highlight on the fact that this is a continuous daily story that the Dalits live. It is an act of resistance to ensure that such accounts remain part of the public consciousness emplacing the caste-system violence in the mind of the Indian society. The poem starts with a stark opening lines:

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit

Drinking Water for the Dalits

The very same Pond.

Practice for eons.

Kandasamy exposes the cruel systemic discrimination that the Dalits encounter by applying a blend of harsh and total images bitter irony, and historical allusion. This time she uses a real story with a very rhetorical symbol, which is water that should be a fundamental right to access to. The inhumane act that was done by the Kammas is that they let their Buffalos bath and piss in the water that the Dalits drink from. This reflects the eons of and old practice where Dalits are prevented from having a pure water to drink because they are seen as impure. The very use of the word "eons" suggests that this is not a historical act only but it is an ongoing act that was normalized over generations(Jacob, 2018).

It is the revolting act of the “Bold Dalit lady” who dares to “question injustice’ what made the turning point of the story and the poem itself. She does not only question the despicable act of the Kammus, but she also crushes her water pot as a sign of rage, defiance, and ability to oppose physically. However, her courageous action is met with barbarian backlash: “Her indignation/ is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes. Killings.” The use of fragmented lines with an acute punctuation reflects the damage and the chaos that follows. Dalit women are often used as oppression tools in which they are subjected to sexual abuse beside the cast and gender discrimination.

In her lines “Self-seeking politicians shamelessly/ consult History-‘If there was a way out then,/ there shall be a way out now.’”, Kandasamy focuses on the role of the political system where they fail to address the root of such atrocities and violence and instead they shift their attention to history looking for justification. Leaders often manipulate history to keep their right in the throne rather than giving justice solutions (Benjamin, 1999).

The poet also criticizes Gandhi for his philosophy of non-violence by referring to him as the “Esteemed Father of our nation.” The term that was coined by Gandhi as “Harijan” for the Dalit people was considered offensive by many for this cannot be the only way to fight back the oppression the low caste people face. “If Hajirians don’t get water in the village, let them/ set on a sojourn elsewhere.” These lines reflect high intense of irony and sarcasm because it suggest that Dalit people should passively accept oppression rather that a demand for justice (Hassan, 2007).

Kandasamy retells history from a different forgotten angle; a deliberately ignored one and not the opposed part the Indian society uses to justify their wrong doings:

Casting behind cruel memories

Dalit exit- weary of the persecution

And wander all over the nation.

Again, a Dalit Exodus.

Total Surrender. (16-19)

In the above quoted lines, the poet refers to the historical mass displacements declaring that caste oppression makes Dalits into a constant moving from an exile into another within their own country. The systemic nature of the Dalits marginalization is reinforced by the end note of “total surrender.” That implies the meaning of having no choice but to endure the upper class abusive treatment and to be in a perpetual exile.

To conclude, the effect of the power of reimagining myths and stories and retelling religion and history from an opposing angle is a radical tool for challenging the status quo of caste and gender discrimination in the Indian society. In her poetry, Meena Kandasamy exemplifies this converting power by breaking down dominant narratives, rewriting historical injustice and reclaiming the unvoiced voices. She disrupts the planted structures of persecution and forces a confrontation with uneasy truths. Kandasamy has achieved this by her bold re-imagination of mythical figures like Ekalavya and her poetic indictment that are left to the public court; her readers(Festino, 2015).

Moreover her poetry instills a sense of defiance and agency in the oppressed by rewriting history using the marginalized perspectives to expose the hypocrisy of the upper classes. She uses language as a mean of self-assertion and as a weapon of resistance to demonstrate how language can play a crucial role in shaping social consciousness. She unclothes the caste and the patriarchal biases established in language itself, showing that storytelling is not just a tool of remembrance but an act of revolution (Jacob, 2018).

Eventually, retelling and reimagining mythologies and history through marginalized lens enable Kandasamy to create a form of resistance and a vision for a just society. These powers are a scream in the face of normalizing the abuse and oppression done by upper classes. Her writings are means for keeping the wounds of injustice visible in order not to be ignored.

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