

Feminism and Social Disparity in the Poems of Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy - A Study

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Abstract

The research paper aims at drawing the similarities and differences between the works on Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy, with the themes of feminism and social disparity at the core interest. Gender discrimination is highly influenced by disparity in the society based on colour, caste, and race. Angelou is a Black American and Kandasamy is a Dalit Indian - two lines that run parallel to each other. Their poems exhibit and portray the issue in an intellectual manner, bringing forth the pain of underprivileged women in the society.

“My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes my sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people”
- Meena Kandasamy (2016)

The writers of today have shown and are showing us the variety of ways in which feminist thought, writing and action can manifest itself. Feminism has manifested itself in class, education and opportunities as discussed on *BBC Radio and Woman's Hour* (1999). Feminism has evolved over the time and has become an organised feminist movement as an extension of the history of Women's struggle against oppression. The period 1550-1700 saw minor change in the status of women - from the educational to the political and economic. Slowly women gained rights to education, formal rights in the local and national government, and economic independence holding rights to own property. The passing of ages brought about new aspects of Feminism and the realization that the struggle could not be defined as similar amongst women, and various factors played a heavy role in their fight against fabricated rules of the society. (Wright, 3)

In 1963, the American Feminist Betty Friedan published a book entitled *The Feminine Mystique* in which she argued that women were trapped in a system which defined proper femininity as little more than domestic fulfillment. Coerced by seductive media images, many women absorb themselves in home, being trapped in what Friedan drastically termed “a comfortable concentration camp”. Naomi Wolf has argued in *The Beauty Myth* (1990), “The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, but the more strictly, heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us.”

For the Black, Asian and women of colour, the feminist issue is also a race issue. Feminists alert to the ethnocentricity which informs feminist work. Racism haunts sexism and their inter relations should not be ignored. Black feminists argue that race, class, and gender are interlocking systems of oppression and not additive systems. From this perspective there are continuities between the Asian and Black British and Black American writing and the writings of women of colour. Feminism involves a recognition of “multiple identities”. A poetics of Asian and Black Feminism searches for racial meanings as historically constituted in the tradition, history, and culture of mothers, for example, in the spiritual energy of oral history, of songs, cooking and gardens. Asian and Black feminists intensively explore the emotion and material bonds between women and sharing a responsibility far beyond their immediate historical moment or national face. (Humm, 123)

Black women did not have the same dependence on men or submission to male authority like the white women had. Women were more like the heads of slave households though this labour intensive role was defined by responsibilities and not power. White female activists were more concerned with the right of a married woman to own property, whereas black women were concerned with the basic human rights; not to be literally owned as chattel. As white lobbied to change divorce laws, black women lobbied to change the laws that prohibited slaves from marrying. While white women sought definitions outside the roles of wife and mother, black women sought the freedom to live within traditional gender roles, to claim the luxury of loving their own men and mothering their own children : “To get to a place where you could love anything you chose,” Toni Morrison wrote in *Beloved* (1987), “not to need permission for desire”. (Ducille, 65)

Western feminism was insufficiently radical; it failed to consider the axes of colonialism, cultural imperialism and religious pluralism, internalized colonialism, and displayed racist or ethnocentric orientations that essentialized Asian women. This paper aims at bringing forth the similarities and differences by comparing the poems of two prominent poets - Maya Angelou, an American poet, and Meena Kandasamy, an Indian poet.

Analysis of the Poems of Maya Angelou

Gary Younge, Writer of *The Guardian* says about Angelou, “To know her life story is to simultaneously wonder what on earth you have been doing with your own life and feel glad that you didn’t have to go through half the things she has.”

It is believed that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. It is difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because they are most often experienced simultaneously. There is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual. (Humm, 62)

In the poem *Still I Rise*, Angelou talks of the terror and pain that is a reflection of the times passed by and her attempt to rise against these odds and establish her individuality.

*Out of huts of history's shame
I rise*

From a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave
I rise (Still I Rise)

Focusing upon one's own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics, it is believed that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of one's own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else's oppression. Over the years, various versions of history have come to light, 'distorted' and at times presenting a totally different angle to events, incidents and problems. People are judged based on the history of their race, of their kind and how they faced things. But no one can define and elucidate one's existence by the judgement derived from the opinionated view of others; biased and most likely untrue. Angelou speaks of this in her poem *Still I Rise* where she says,

You may write me down in history
With your bitter twisted lies
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still like dust. I'll rise. (Still I Rise)

History might highlight women in various ways, but it is up to an individual to decide what will define them, in spite of the harsh treatment meted out to them. Rape was an institutionalized ingredient of the aggression, designed to intimidate and terrorize the women in order to put them in their place. If black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults would remind the women of their essential and unalterable femaleness. Under slavery black women were bred like chattel to increase the master's labor force. Rape, concubinage and forced impregnation were part of what made the institution thrive. (Davis, 131)

Angelou talks of forgetting the history of their race, the pain inflicted upon them and to embark on a journey of self-discovery rising to the challenges.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from the past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

(Still I Rise)

In the poem *I know why the caged bird sings*, Angelou reflects on the social disparity, and ideals of freedom and justice. She highlights the issues of racism, sexism, insecurity, poverty, and abuse. She feels that her words are not heard because of her skin colour, thereby putting forth the fact that she is free but restricted in some way, long after the age of slavery where she feels she is experiencing elements of slavery. It is absolutely necessary to voice out what one feels or what one is going through; only then will one's plea for help will be heard.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage

Can seldom see through his bars of rage

His wings are clipped and his feet are tied

So he opens his mouth to sing

(Caged Bird)

Here the poet brings out the stark comparison between a caged bird and the black woman. Though they are bound and cannot escape from the confines of racial discrimination, their freedom forcibly taken away, they would sing of their joy, hopes and dreams inspiring others to not give up and look forward to freedom without restraints.

Feminist thinkers who argue that the act of theorizing the body is especially pertinent to women, as the gender is conventionally aligned with the body. The work of Julia Kristeva, for example, is crucially concerned with analyzing the materialistic aspect of the female body; its drives, pulsations, and emanation, which she argues are regarded with revulsion within a culture which wishes to divorce the pure subject of Cartesian rationalism from its fleshy corporeality.

The poem *Phenomenal Woman* talks about one's self-perception about beauty. Beauty is not skin deep and needn't conform to the stereotypical images of women portrayed by popular culture but rather it is the confidence with which you carry yourself, your behaviour, and self-awareness that appeals to others which makes you beautiful.

It's in the fire in my eyes

And the flash of my teeth

The swing in my waist

And the joy in my feet

I'm a woman

Phenomenally

Phenomenal woman,

That's me

(Phenomenal Woman)

In the present world where people gnaw at each other like vultures to reach the peak of achievement, they forget that they cannot live alone in this world. In the poem *Alone*, the poet brings

out the fact that we have to stand up for each other and that companionship is very important for every individual and that the materialistic attitude would not help one.

*Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan
Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone* (Alone)

This poem is a little reminder for women, and in a feminist view women need to stand together and face their fears rather than succumb to the societal pressures and heap accusations on others, or make a place in the world by pushing our fellow women down.

Maya Angelou's poems also talk of the traditional 'binary opposites' of gender role, highlighting the inferiority of women and the dominance of men. In the poem *Men* she says

*Men are always
Going somewhere
They knew I was there, Fifteen
Years old and starving for them* (Men)

Men enjoy going out and meeting different people while women stay at home desiring for that kind of freedom and an urge to exercise control like men. She talks of the sexual urges of a woman, natural and normal, but the passivity with which she tries to control her feelings. Even when she is satisfied, without having the space to express freely she is troubled by the lack of control, inferiority and powerlessness she feels in the arms of a man.

*One day they hold you in the
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then
They tighten up. Just a little. The
First squeeze is nice. A quick hug
Soft into your defenselessness. A little
More. The hurt begins. Wrench out a
Smile that slides around the fear* (Men)

The analysis of a few poems shows the status of women in the society with special reference to the Black women who despite the progression in times and the proclamation of freedom are still forced to be subservient to the male - dominated society. The male dominated society leads to the development of inhibitions and inferiority in the minds of the women, breaking their self -

confidence. Her poems are a glimpse into the minds of the woman, her push for the acceptance of self-discovery of self-identity.

Analysis of Poems of Meena Kandasamy

Meena Kandasamy voices out her feelings in a blatant manner and is often critiqued for not adhering to the standardised form of poetry. She defends herself by saying that the bluntness and sharpness, deviating from the normal aesthetics exhibits the intensity of her pain and struggle that she undergoes being a Dalit woman. Class and gender play important roles in her work, making it subjective in nature. It brings out the anguish and desires of an already oppressed woman further dominated by class issues.

Women's texts seem to elicit not reading resistance, but fantasies of recognition and sympathetic identification that threatened to turn a feminist reader back into a cooperative recipient of a text's meaning - the textual erotics of receiving another woman's words did not so much revive an older aesthetics, postulated on passive or submissive readers, as demand, instead, new aesthetic formulations that challenged readers. (Heng, 56)

Meena Kandasamy subverts and challenges the age old traditions entrenched in caste and gender hierarchy. She asserts her identity by de-romanticising the "divine" identity created by high class Hindus for themselves. Hindu scriptures are replete with a number of commands one of which is that the touch, shadow, and speech of a Dalit will pollute the upper caste people. The poem *Touch* exemplifies this trauma. The poet talks of subjugation of women by means of sexual abuse, and the fall of dignity of a woman, who is forced to endure this in shame with no help from the others. Touch 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. Meena Kandasamy portrays women as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and champions the cause of women equality.

The poet criticises the society for not treating woman as a woman. A woman's goodness is graded upon her degree of servitude to her father, husband, brothers, son and almost every other man in her family and society. She targets the society thus (Athwale, 97).

*Your society always makes
the spoon feeding-the-man
the pot-and-pan banging
the-sweeping-the-floor
the masochist slave
And other submissive women
As goddesses (Touch)*

Kandasamy brings out how women and men are stereotyped and how work is classified based on gender, where the man looks after the external affairs of the house and the woman stays at home, looking after the internal affairs.

She vehemently condemns the practice of the Indian society where the bride is assessed on accounts of her beauty, physical fitness, submissiveness, moral character, and femininity. The poet enunciates her view in the following words:

*But, when they come to see you
for a possible bride, look at the flow
the fading carpet and the unshapely toes
of the visitors who will inspect the weight
of your gold, the paleness of your complexion
the length of your hair and ask questions about
the degrees you hold and the transparency of your past (Touch)*

Through these lines, Kandasamy brings out the expectations of the society while choosing a bride or a daughter-in-law.

Endogamy acts as a social barrier which circumscribes the upliftment of the lower caste people. Exogamy, if practised among all people can help transcend the barriers of caste, creed, and race. If a woman marries outside her caste and delivers children, she may act as a gateway to other castes. She mocks this idea in her poem *Becoming a Brahmin* where she gives steps for the conversion of a Shudra to a Brahmin, putting a point across that these steps though applicable for a Shudra, cannot be applied to a Pariah as the Dalit women who dare to love the upper caste men are brutally assaulted and murdered as part of retribution for their immoral acts

*Step 1 : Take a beautiful Shudra girl
Step 2 : Make her marry a Brahmin
Step 3 : Let her give birth to this female child
Step 4 : Let this child marry a Brahmin
Step 5 : Repeat steps 3-4 times
Step 6 : Display the end product. Its a Brahmin (Becoming a Brahmin)*

Meena Kandasamy believes in voicing out rather than staying silent and facing the consequences hoping that something would change. Rather than wait for a savior she feels that a woman should stand up for herself and defend herself. The feeling of being restricted burns a fire within her which demands to be heard and felt. She espouses this idea in her poem *Aggression*:

*Sometimes,
The outward signals
of inward struggles take colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode
Most of the time :
Aggression is the best kind of trouble shooting (Aggression)*

Meena Kandasamy redefines the identity in the light of feminist theories. *Apologies for Living On* is one of her poems which reflects the helplessness of women who want to be free like birds but remain prevaricated to restrictions. In her lines:

*I was a helpless girl
Against a brutal world of
Bottom patting and breast pinching
I was craving for security
The kind had only known a while
Aimlessly- a float and speculating a womb. (Apologies for Living On)*

Meena Kandasamy's poem *Ms. Militancy* is based on Kannaki the heroine of the Tamil classic *Silappatikaram*. This is a call for women to be courageous and revolutionary. Though affected by her husband's betrayal, she readily accepts him when he returns and supports him by giving an anklet to start a fresh life. This part of Kannaki shows her loyalty and devotion by the standards of Tamil culture which in turn advocates patriarchal dominance. But her fury displayed at the death of her husband shows her not as a passive and subservient woman but a bold and assertive revolutionist. She comes out of her cocoon as when her situation demands it. Such a militant woman is the woman Meena Kandasamy dreams of. Such is her faith in herself and in women (Sudha, 2017)

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's voice is like the voice of her African-American counterparts. It is powerful enough to break the boundaries and shatter the walls of the norms that have been long followed intentionally and unintentionally. Their poems hold a ring of pain and suffering, making the readers empathise with women. Their poems are hard core relatable to women suffering from external elements thereby resulting in internally conflicted emotions. The poets, though hailing from two polar opposites - the east and the west, display the plight of women due to gender discrimination which is further exemplified due to their position in the society based on their birth and caste.

Maya Angelou and Meena Kandasamy both believe in speaking out and voicing their misery. Instead of hiding them they try to take a definite action trying to quell the atrocities women face. Their personal background - Maya Angelou, a black woman feminist and Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit woman feminist is reflected in their works. The disparity of their sect in comparison to other sects is brought out, and the ideals of freedom and justice are sung in favour of the oppressed women. Maya Angelou represents women as people who have crossed the path of struggles and obstacles and finally taken a hold over their life, reveling in their self-found identity with pride. Meena Kandasamy brings out the bold side of women, telling that a woman can stand up for herself when it deems necessary, and encourages women to take a stand for themselves. Though the ideas projected in their poems are similar, their poems vary on the basis of aesthetic appeal and value.

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