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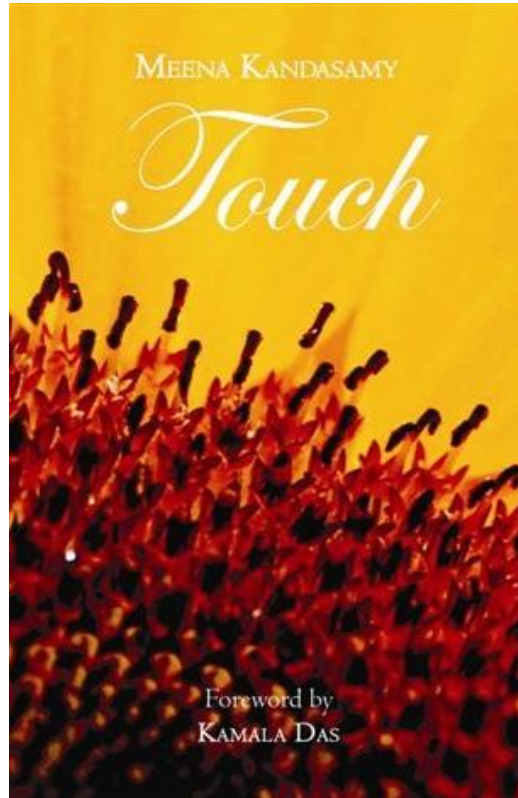
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Meena Kandasamy and Her Works

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Meena Kandasamy hails from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A creative writer, poet, translator and activist, she is the angry voice of the oppressed. She says in an interview in iDiva of her lineage: “I come from a very mixed background—almost four different backward castes including a Dalit” (Kandasamy iDiva).

Born in 1984, Kandasamy published her debut poetry collection *Touch* in August 2006. Her second collection of poetry *Ms Militancy* was published in December 2010, and her collection of short stories *Black Magic* is awaiting publication. She is working on her debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess*.

Apart from creative writing, Kandasamy has translated the essays of the political leader of the Dalit Panthers: Thol. Thirumavalavan in *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003) and his speeches in *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of Liberation Panthers* (2004). She has translated works of Kasi Anandan, a poet Laureate of Tamil Eelam and Essays of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.

Kandasamy has written many essays on the drudgery of casteism and its consequences. Of all her works, her poetry speaks the loudest and is filled with fire as it brings out the anger in the hearts of the downtrodden communities.

On Defining Dalit Literature

‘Dalit literature’ is uniquely Indian as it is a byproduct of an evil caste system that existed for many years in this country. Although the constitution of India has abolished the caste system, it still lingers in many walk of life with its grasps as firm as ever on the minds of its people. It may be compared with the slavery in America and apartheid in Africa. The literature that arises as an outburst against casteism is Dalit literature. Meena Kandasamy’s writing comes from these margins of the caste code dictated for many centuries. She uses her voice not only to expose the atrocities faced by the dalits, but also to represent the anger that boils within them as a reaction to these prejudices.

Greater Reach of Meena’s Poems

Although Kandasamy advocates for the Dalits, her poetry does not stop there but includes love poems, poems championing the social rights of women and even those that depict daily occurrences with a power to evoke the emotions the poet demands. She depicts both the subjugation by caste and gender - a double bondage that the dalit women are forced to face. In an interview with Ujjwal Jana of the West Bengal State University, Kandasamy talks about her poetry and the autobiographical elements in it:

Yes, my writing is very, very autobiographical. It stems out of who I am, and what happened to me. I am extremely conscious of the fact that I am a woman and that I am a feminist. I hate the fact that I am made of four or more castes clamouring to be claimed; but I know I am casteless... (Jana)

***Touch* – A Collection of Eighty Poems**

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Touch is a collection of eighty four poems divided into seven categories: *Bring him up to worship you*, *Touch*, *Add some spice*, *To that more congenial spot*, *Lines of control*, *Slander in a slaughterhouse*, and *Their daughters*. Kamala Das has written the foreword to *Touch*, in which she has high praise for Kandasamy:

Older by nearly half a century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision and wish her access to the magical brew of bliss and tears each true poet is forced to partake of, day after day, month after month, year after year . . . (Kandasamy *Touch*7)

Kamala Das acknowledges “the power of honest poetry” in Kandasamy’s work, also saying that “Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips” (Kandasamy *Touch* 7). It is high praise for a poet to be acknowledged so by a legend.

Anger in Words

On reading Kandasamy’s poetry, the anger that flashes in her words is very evident. The second part of her poetry collection *Touch* is of the same name, as is the first poem. She dedicates this part of *Touch* to address dalit issues. Other themes of her poetry include discrimination against women, religious beliefs, superstition and political intrusions among others. Each poem in her collection tells us a new tale of woe and worry of dalits and women. This paper intends to bring out the themes of Dalit suffering and the reactions that it evokes in them as portrayed in Meena Kandasamy’s poems.

The poet unleashes her words to harness the power of language and boils it down to the bare facts that tell aloud the tales of many silences. In her poem *Touch*, she addresses the basic sense of touch and the pleasures that it is associated with. To any person who has not been subjugated by discrimination, the sense of touch only brings pleasure. Kandasamy contrasts these pleasant feelings to the harsh reality faced by dalits, purely from the very same sense organ, the skin- “Amidst all that pervading emptiness, / touch retained its sensuality. / *You will have known this.*”(19-21).

Race prejudices and the colour of the skin are juxtaposed with pleasant association of the skin in *Touch*:

... Or, you may recollect how
a gentle touch, a caress changed your life
multifold, and you were never the person
you should have been. Feeling with your skin,
was perhaps the first of the senses,
its reality always remained with you—
You never got rid of it.

You will have known this.
You will have known almost
every knowledgeable thing about
the charms and the temptations
that touch could hold.

But, you will never have known

that touch—the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate. (24-41)

Contrasting Emotions

The poet uses the contrasting emotions of love and hatred repeatedly to bring out the differences in life experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed. Through such differentiation the writer highlights the chasm that exists between the perceptions of the dalit and that of the caste-Hindu. In the poem *Last love letter*, the poet brings out the paradox of love in death rather than love in life. She writes:

. . . Our passionate love,
Once transcended caste.
Let it now
Transcend mortality . . .
Fear not beloved,
In Love—
Life is not compulsory.
Let us leave it to cold Death,
Cruelly, He shall
Perfect our Love.
Preserve it for Eternity. . . (1-11)

Caste and Death

The difference of perspective is highlighted once more, where it is only in death that love can be perfected. The comparison is drawn between Caste and Death. It appears as if love transcends caste is a mightier deed than that love that transcends death. Sarcasm is her weapon here. The poem brings to mind the various honour killings that have tried to catch the attention of the country. In an interview with Times of India, Kandasamy asserts that not allowing a woman to choose her partner is a kind of suppression. “If the system does not allow a woman to marry a man because he is from another caste, like honour killings for instance, is it not a direct oppression of her sexuality?” (Kandasamy). In *We will rebuild worlds* she asks of the upper castes:

but the crimes of passion/
our passion/ your crimes
poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/
or hanged them in public/ because a man and a woman
dared to love
and you wanted/ to teach/ other boys and other girls/ the
lessons of/ how to/ whom to/ when to/ where to/ continue
their caste lines (16-23)

In one of her love poems, *Love and War*, Kandasamy establishes the permanence of love

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against the end that awaits every war. It also pushes the reader to think about the end of the war on casteism.

Remembering Ekalaivan (Ekalavya)

The oppression of the dalits from time immemorial is brought out in Kandasamy's poetry. She touches upon Hindu mythology in *Ekalaivan*, where she draws the readers' attention to the discrimination meted out to Ekalavya in the Mahabharata where Dhronacharya refuses to train the man since he belonged to the lower caste rather than the Kshatrias :

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. (2-8)

Strength of Spirit and Rage

Her portrayal of the oppressed caste is one of strength of spirit and rage. Unlike that of many dalit writings where the protagonists are helpless victims, Kandasamy uses anger as her vehicle to portray the feeling of the dalit. The opening lines of her essay *We can only look forward...* reads "I write about the future of caste with the determination and the desperation of a suicide bomber who has been handpicked to assassinate that monster."

To Meena, caste is the villain and the writer who advocates against this crime is the hero of her poems. Her poetry is counter terrorism, against the atrocities of the caste system. Her poems often rise from true episodes of caste struggle. *Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* is a poem that recapitulates the Karamchedu event of 17th July 1985, where a Madiga (lower caste) woman protested against bathing buffaloes in their drinking water pond. The kammias (upper caste) were angered by the audacity of the Madiga woman to raise questions and led to the killing of six Madiga men and the rape of three Madiga women. In his book *Class, Caste, Gender*, Manoranjan Mohanty gives a detailed description of the incident. He says that "... the Madigas of the village, who were known to be normally unimaginative, unassertive and resigned to their fate and karma, exhibited a collective consciousness and en masse left the village ..." (239) *Liquid tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* is a hieroglyphic poem shaped like a pot:

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit
Drinking Water for the Dalits
The very same Pond.
Practice for eons.
A bold Dalit lady
dares to question injustice.
Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation
is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.
Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly

consult History—"If there was a way out then,
there shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with
Esteemed Father of our Nation. His Samaadhi speaks:
If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them
set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example
is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories
Dalits exit—weary of the persecution
And wander all over the nation.
Again, a Dalit Exodus.
Total Surrender.

Visual Poetry

The shape of the poem is symbolic of the pot that held the drinking water for the dalits, which the woman used to hit, this poem is like the same pot that hits forth at the world for its discrimination. Poetry is the writer's tool to bring to light many such incidents as the Karamchedu event to break the 'Brahminical idiom'.

In Resonance with Other Fighter-Poets

The poem *Fire* resonates with the poem by Boyi Bheemanna, *Gudiselu Kalipothunai (The Huts are Burning)* (1973) He writes:

The huts are burning
Oh! Burning!
Whose huts are they; it is a pity,
Perhaps, they are of Malas and Madigas
Who else have the huts? (Bharathi 70)

Kandasamy's *Fire* rings with similar words "Our huts are burning-" (*Touch 7*)... "Fire engines arrive / deliberately late." (5-16). It is once more the reflection of the injustices, which are a daily occurrence in society. Incidents as recent as the Ankhalli village incident, where upper caste people burned two huts belonging to dalits on the 3rd September 2010 (Hindu) are represented in *Fire*. It is notable that crimes against dalits in the 1970s are not so different from that of those in 2010. This serves to question the progress of India and its constitution.

On Brahmin Supremacy

Kandasamy's poetry wrecks havoc on the idea of Brahmin supremacy. Not only does she dismiss any such notion but digs into the roots of religion to uproot such belief by questioning the Hindu persuasion and ideology.

In *Advaita: the ultimate question*, she begins by bringing out the binaries in religion and draws out an equation, which contradicts itself:

Advaita: The ultimate question

Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
Will	You
Ever	Agree?
No	Matter
What	You
Preach,	Answer
Me.	Through
Your	Saints.
One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be

One
?

(Touch 37)

The poem is simply one sentence, but it is the spatial treatment that adds the effect to it. The poet questions the idea of advaita or non-dualism where the Atman and self are one. The equation extended to a dalit shows that God and dalit are one. The poem brings out that this seems to be a more acceptable equation than one that states that Brahmin and untouchable are one according to a caste-Hindu; such is the oppression of caste.

Serpent in the Paradise

In *Another paradise lost: The Hindu way* she brings out the questions of caste once more in the words of a serpent:

...I wanted to know why

caste was there, why people suffered because of their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned sages there. I asked them what would happen if an high-born did manual work just like the low-born.

I worried about the division of labor, this disparity in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. I had a riotous history of revolution. The Gods plotted against me,

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decided that I was trouble...(56-65).

Attack on Binaries

Kandasamy uses powerful words that may be provocative to many. Her poetry is her hand grenade that targets binaries such as oppressor and the oppressed; god and man; privileged and the deprived; man and woman; strong and weak. It is also her tool to deconstruct these binaries in her own terms. Her fearlessness in opposing established ideology is realized in *Maariamamma*. Maariamamma is considered a non-vedic goddess who is worshipped by all castes. Kandasamy refers to gods of caste-hindus as “upper caste Gods / and their 'good-girl' much-married, father-fucked, / virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses” while she entreats “Maari” saying “Maari, our girl, / when did you join their gang?”(14-15). The cynicism and sarcasm of the poem bring out the division of caste even in heaven. She points out that caste is a very stubborn stain on humanity that will never be erased.

Casteism in Heaven

Many of her poems bring out the spill of casteism in heaven as well. She points at the Gods in heaven to indicate that they are no less to blame for these atrocities. The last few lines of *Fire* bear evidence to her accusations. She says in her poem, that the burning huts cause its inhabitants (dalits) to wail, and the echo of this wail reaches heaven, only to sound like “as snail shells crackling under nailed boots”(23) to which the Gods turn a deaf ear. This is a “double tragedy” to which she says “No response. / Those above are (mostly): / indifferent bastards.”(27-29). She talks about the commercial elements in religion in *For sale* “Priest with ash and holy smoke /come to him, give extra blesses for / a cool crisp fifty my bud gives.” (12-14).

Ultimately questioning the price of religion “Say, ya, how much da "Luxmee" cost?”(19). She raises the questions regarding the role of faith and gods in casteism in the poem *Prayer* “Where did this poor man's sixty-five-year-old soul go? / To Heaven—to join noble martyrs who died for a cause? / Or to Hell—where the Gods reside, making Caste Laws?”(27-29).

Gender Issues on the Earth

Apart from banging on the door of heaven, Kandasamy also addresses gender issues. Double marginalization of the dalit women is a recurrent theme in her poems. In her essay *Menstruating Goddess* she pushes for equal treatment of women in temples. The physical and sexual abuse they are subjected to are brought to light in *Narration*:

I'll weep to you about
My landlord, and with
My mature gestures—
You will understand:
The torn sari, disheveled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then. (1-7)

It was believed for many years that dalit women “had weak sexual morals” (Ilaiyah 241) and this was used to cover up many cases of rape and abuse. The banner of untouchability was temporarily discarded for the convenience of the caste-Hindus. *Narration* brings out these atrocities “The priest, his lecherous eyes, / Glances that disrobed, defiled. / *I was not polluting at your feet.*”(12-14) Not only is the dalit women subjected to atrocities from caste-hindus but also from her own dalit men. She thus falls in the lowest strata of the social order: “How can I say / Anything, anything / Against my own man? / *How?*”(15-18). The plight of such abused women is portrayed once more in *Shame*, “Dalit Girl Raped” / is much too commonplace./ Humiliation gnaws / the sixteen year old.”(10-13).

As Ilaiyah acknowledges, the perpetrators rarely get penalized, as they deserve to be. “In no single case was the punishment for such an offence death” (241), the offence mentioned was the rape of three women and the brutal murder of six men in the village of Karamchedu in 1985. Kandasamy depicts these atrocities against dalits in *Shame* “But, the criminals have / already mainstreamed— / Their Caste is a classic shield.”(7-9). In an interview in the Hindu, Kandasamy gives her view on man-woman relationship, “...the man-woman relationship is not something that is easily negotiated.” (Jeyan). In the poem *We will rebuild worlds* she questions “*India, what is the caste of sperm? / India, what is the cost of life?*”(74).

The numerous incidents of witch-hunts in India, where mostly dalit and Adivasi women are accused of practicing sorcery and brutally murdered are addressed in her poems. When women find it in them to stand up against the patriarchal domination in the society and demand their fair share of property or demand the respect they rightfully deserve, they are branded as witches. In an essay *Dangerous Dalit Women and Witch-Hunters*, published in Ultra violet, Kandasamy gives a detailed view on the alleged ‘witches’ and the reason for terming them so:

The helpless ‘witches’ are hounded and punished by being stripped naked, paraded around the villages, their hair is burnt off or their heads tonsured, their faces blackened, their noses cut off, their teeth pulled out (they are supposedly defanged) so that they can no longer curse, they are whipped, they are branded, sometimes, they are forced to eat human faeces and finally, they are put to death (here again the Indian imagination takes over: the victim is hanged, impaled, hacked, lynched or buried alive). And you have got it all wrong if you assumed that such stomach-churning, toe-curling torture is done in dingy, shadowy places: vast, open village lands come in particularly handy as favoured locations, and the cheering crowd can fill a modest stadium. (Kandasamy).

Fancy Yourself Being a Witch

Meena gives many names and dates to substantiate her statements. The poem *Hymns of a Hag* gives a depiction of what these women were accused of with sarcasm and a daring attitude that is typical of Kandasamy, professing to right the wrongs done to the dalits. “I fancy myself being a witch./ Broomstick borne and black as pitch.”(1-2). In the form of couplets, it is a satire on the suppressive nature of casteism and the longing to break free of it. “Haunting oppressors to shave their heads. / Cutting all their holy threads.”(11-12).

A Balanced Use of Poetic Language

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The poetry of Meena Kandasamy is loud, and although it seems to read like prose in many instances, there is a definite rhythm with which it moves. The provocative style that she uses may not please all her readers but it will surely get them to pay attention to her. She acknowledges that she is often called “extremely polemic” (Jana) and that she uses her pen as her sword to fight the monster that is Caste. She is brave enough to speak her mind. In her poem *Mohandas Karamchand*, she gives her take on Mahatma Gandhi “You knew, you bloody well knew, / Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.”(21-22).

Angry Young Poet

Meena Kandasamy is called the angry young woman; her anger is evident in her poem like a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that ebbs out of the injustice that she witnesses all around her in the name of caste. In *Their daughter*, she writes:

Young wife near my father's home, with a drunken husband
Who never changed; she bore his daily beatings until on one
Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seedbags. . .
We: their daughters.
We: the daughters of their soil.
We, mostly, write. (14-19)

Her poetry is her weapon on the ills of society. Apart from her purpose of writing, *Touch* brings out clearly that Kandasamy is a poet, who has a way with words that pounce on the reader and affects them with raw emotions. The form of her poems are varied to include spatial poetry, hieroglyphic poetry, free verse, couplets, commentary and many other literary techniques that enhance the flavour of her poetry. The genre she has chosen for her messages allows her to transfer the content without diluting it. The imagery in her poetry is vivid. One need not agree with all that Kandasamy says to enjoy her poetry, but it is notable that she has a way of roping in her readers in a convincing way. *Touch* is a sharp and clear reflection on society.

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