

Handcuffing the Taboos Through Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*

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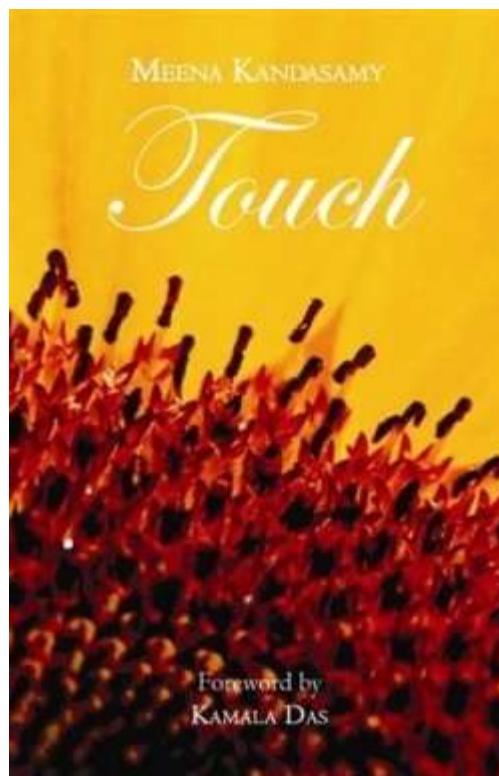
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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy, the youngest and the rebellious poet of contemporary literary world, always proves that poetry is not just a form to express the aesthetics of a language; it is also a form which substantiates the power of a language in a society. Our society is tightly constructed with caste, religion, customs and superstitions and some deep rooted taboos which act as parasites. These taboos strongly tangle around the legs of the society and the necks of women. Our society is suffocating through such taboos which are intertwined with our caste system and especially with our women.

Hence the paper intends to discuss Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*, which is her first anthology of poems, used as a weapon to dissect and destroy the taboos which make the women of the marginalized to grieve. Such an exploration is important to understand the fractions in the sufferings of a woman. This paper further celebrates *Touch* as a master who teaches the victims to violate the taboos and it also gazes Meena Kandasamy as a voice giver for marginalized women, against their social oppression.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, *Touch*, taboo, suffocating society, marginalized women, weapon, violation of the taboos.

Poetry is an inimitable form in literature through which one can pour down their emotions with the sense of aesthetics and with the mind of quest for strong societal changes. It can be used as a weapon to attack and annihilate the abusers of humankind. Meena Kandasamy, an Indian and a Tamil poet, wisely arranges the words in her poems to bring out the taboos that are tightly bonded with our society. In her first poetry collection *Touch*, she has penned eighty-four revolutionary poems which stands and stares at the human by expressing the basic taboos of our society. The meaning of the word *taboo* is intricately connected with forbidden acts. Our society possesses some forbidden acts and speaking of such things is a taboo. The taboo is a result from social customs. In Meena Kandasamy's *Touch* she has raised her voice about the prevailing taboos around the most sensational and sensitive part of our society, i.e., caste, religion, and women.

Our society is not enriched but it is cursed with taboos and hence the paper tries to bring out the magical power of Meena Kandasamy to handcuff the taboos through her poems in *Touch*. A few poems have been selected from the collection and these are examined through their meaning. The paper explains the role of cutting the stems of the taboos and it also insists on some ideas to cut the root too.

The first taboo to be discussed in the multidimensional society is the taboo which is intertwined with the lives of women and especially with the lives of a marginalized woman. In the poem *Mascara* the title stands as a metaphor to represent the darker life of the prostitutes. In our society prostitutes are not humans who deserve respect and love; they are just fleshy and colourful female materials created to fulfil the devilish lusts of men. Speaking of prostitution is a tabooed topic in our society. But the poet has mashed that taboo by portraying the virgin soul of a prostitute. She declares,

Mascara...
It serves to tell her
that long buried
hazy dreams
of a virgin soul
have dark outlines. (web)

A woman who is getting ready to die because of the violation applies mascara, a cosmetic to beautify her call-girl eyes. The eye is full of makeup, but it lacks life, and the poet calls that mascara as a dark outline of her virgin soul which is made of her hazy buried dreams. The poet marks the soul of the call-girl as a virgin soul because a human can be valued only through the soul but not through the body. In this poem a prostitute is getting ready to meet her customer and such act is compared to her suicide. Violating the body of a hesitating heart is a sin and most of the so-called humans are doing that sin to the prostitutes. These women find solace in fixing themselves in the family tree of temple prostitutes and for centuries their destroyed bodies are smoothened by empty consolations given by the society. The poet attacks the society by attacking the beliefs of the society. The poet worries that even the God fails to understand the depth of the dream of that prostitute with mascara. The immortal taboo in the life of the prostitutes is the existing social stigma around them. They are not accepted as equal humans in the society because of their unethical loss of virginity to various men.

Meena Kandasamy through the poem *Mascara* defines their life as a dark one where they suffocate due to violation. The society exploits these women and, on the other hand, laying some brutal taboos in their life. The society says that a prostitute is not a woman who can get married, give birth to children, and live a normal life in a family. Marriage is a forbidden act in their life. The poet tries to break this taboo by witnessing a prostitute as a virgin soul. The poem closes with a magnificent comparison of the prostitute with Kali. When she tries to cover her dejected eyes with dark mascara, she whispers to Kali that “Kali, you wear this too.”

Goddess Kali and prostitute both come under the same roof when they are categorized as women. A prostitute is a victim in our society out of the male domination. This truth is to be realized and it is necessary to break the social stigma around them. Meena Kandasamy has chosen her words to attack the social stigma.

The other poem in the collection *Touch* which deals with the oppression and violation of women is *Narration*. This poem throws light on the subjugation of Dalit women by the higher class/caste men. The society marks Dalit as untouchables, but their untouchability vanishes when a higher community man makes them to work in his farm, cook in his house and to perform all deeds for him. The higher caste society extracts the work from the Dalit and it refuses to give a social status to them. The higher community needs a Dalit to perform his works, but that community is not ready to permit him inside his house. This cruelty in the caste system is explicitly discussed in this poem. A Dalit raising his voice against the higher caste man is not an encouraging act; a taboo is attached to it. If a woman of a higher community is seduced by a man, then it is a punishable act. But if a Dalit woman is seduced it is not a matter of concern. Even the body of Dalit woman is not valued in the society.

Meena Kandasamy powerfully attacks the higher caste man who brutally subjugates the Dalit women by knowing that they are voiceless. She quotes a Dalit woman,

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

The Dalit woman in the poem is no more an untouchable; it is vividly proved through her torn sari, dishevelled hair, suffocation and meek submission. She was raped by her landlord and it can be exactly termed as exploitation. A high caste man, a landlord had exploited her, used her with her meek submission. The Dalit woman in this poem says that she is not an untouchable woman because she has been touched brutally. This content makes the readers to think about the wise attack of Meena Kandasamy on the higher caste people. A landlord does not need Dalit woman to marry, and he does not want her to be in his equal status, but he needs her to fulfil his lustful needs. The voiceless Dalit woman cannot speak about this exploitation because it is a matter of survival for her. She defines herself as touchable woman due to the act of rape. She, the muted being, continues to suffocate in her own silence. Meena Kandasamy boldly attacks the inhuman practices of the higher caste people and tries to break the taboo which was disturbing the lives of Dalit women.

Taboos in our society are closely tied with caste, religion, and women. A Dalit human is mostly treated as a servant, a person below him in all terms by the higher caste people. Even though the higher social class society is equipped with education and money, most of them are showing dark discriminations toward the Dalit people. The Dalit community faces many taboos in their life, they are not treated equally in a crowd, they are restricted to marry a higher caste person and are termed as untouchables.

In order to break all the taboo and blast it over like an explosive, Meena Kandasamy has spilled a poem named *Becoming a Brahmin*, in which she has given six steps to convert a *shudra* woman into a Brahmin. Her six steps clearly convey the painful urgency of change in the caste system. She states that,

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.

Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.

Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.

Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin. (web)

The poet insists on the humans to choose a beautiful *shudra* girl. According to the four *varnas*, *shudra* is the lowest of all and make her to marry a Brahmin. After few generations the end product of the marriages will be a Brahmin. She uses the word beautiful to highlight the attraction of a *shudra* girl to the Brahmin. Based on the six steps, it is not possible for a Dalit man to convert into a Brahmin, only Dalit women can convert into a Brahmin. She is not simply mocking the Brahmins; she is mocking the whole caste system which segregates some people as low caste. The low caste people try hard to hide their identity in the society in order to escape from the discrimination.

Meena Kandasamy, being Dalit woman, struggled hard to hide her identity and so she chose to speak in English to escape from the discrimination. It is not necessary to be a Brahmin to survive in the world, but it is necessary to be a Brahmin to live a respectful life in the world of caste. The society has changed the quality of existence on the basis of caste and so the poet is mocking at it. Meena Kandasamy is breaking the taboo around our caste system through this poem.

The next threatening taboo which prevails in our society is the one which is intricately connected with our religion. Meena Kandasamy is throwing light on that taboo through her poem *For Sale*, being a Hindu, she has brought out the taboo in her own religion.

Religion and money can be termed as siblings. In this modern world it is impossible to do something without money. Even if a man wants to worship God in the temple, he needs to do some offerings like buying flowers, coconut, and so on. The man with the money is rested more in the temples by the priest. The lower class society faces a taboo even to worship God in the temple. They are not treated in the way in which the high social and economic classes are treated. It is believed that God is the one who created this world but unfortunately there is no equality for the people even in front of God. Society has created the religion with discrimination, the poet highlights it by sarcastically attacking the practices in a Hindu temple. She is not personally attacking the religion she is just pointing out the mistakes in the structure of the religion. In the poem *For Sale* she states,

He go to da temple, where
His po'ol' folks ain't allowed (web)

The narrator of the poem speaks about his school friend who is rich. His friend enters into a temple where his fellow friends are not allowed. This makes the reader to understand that the rich man belongs to a high caste and his fellow friends to a low caste. There is no value for the humans; the priest values the caste and money a lot. This kind of discrimination is a shame to the humankind.

Possessing a prejudice and throwing hate on people in the name of caste is an illegal behaviour. The poet has written this poem to reveal the expression of hatred among the high community who is even ready to buy God with money. The rich man in the poem buys incense, flowers, and coconut, and also a ticket for special darshan, which is not possible for a man without money. He is trying to soothe God with all his offerings and finally the priest gives him some extra blessing for his offering of fifty rupees. This extra blessing for fifty rupees raises a question among the untouchables and other socially and economically disadvantaged groups. The question is, “Say, ya, how much da “Luxmee” cost?” (web). This question is like giving a heavy slap to the society which shows indifference to people based on their caste.

To Conclude

Meena Kandasamy's *Touch* is a collection of eighty-four poems. Among these poems, the paper has analysed the poems, *Mascara*, *Becoming a Brahmin*, *Narration* and *For Sale*. The aim of the paper is to point out the disability created by the taboos by caste, and religion around women. The poet has pointed out the taboos in a vigorous way and she has pointed out the mistakes of the humankind clearly. Being a Dalit poet, she possesses some responsibilities to bring out the social and economic injustice towards her community. In the poem *Narration* she has dug out the silent oppression of Dalit women by high caste men. In *Becoming a Brahmin*, she has attacked the caste system, in *Mascara* she has brought out the helpless condition of a prostitute, and finally in *For Sale* she has blasted the discriminative practices in religion. The selected poems from the collection are an eye opener to the society. Taboo is just an obstacle; it cannot become a rule or practice to be followed and hence Meena Kandasamy stands as a warrior to handcuff the taboos and she also stands as a voice giver for the silent marginalized women.

Primary source:

Kandasamy, Meena. *TOUCH*. Peacock Books, 2006. web