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Dalit Consciousness in Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*

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Meena Kandasamy fights against the atrocities done to the Dalits. Her works focus on issues of caste and gender oppression. Her poems and writings are predominantly centred around feminism and caste reform in the modern-day India. Hailing from a caste-conscious background, her poems reflect a society that grants inhuman sanction to caste discrimination and violence on Dalits. Kandasamy uses her poetry as a weapon of resistance against the system of caste which makes superior people to subjugate the non-dominant castes. This is exemplified in the title of her first collection *Touch*, which reiterates the inhuman stigmas attached to Dalits especially their very 'touch' being considered as contaminating. Kandasamy's poem *Touch* expresses her feelings towards the predicament of Dalits by the biased and hypocritical Hindu customs and laughs at the ancient Brahmanical caste hierarchies that points out the binaries of the Dalits. Through the poem, Meena Kandasamy overthrows the world of Indian women's writing by setting a confrontational standard in the world of Dalit literature.

The poem *Touch* is known for power of honesty, tinged with the Indianness of thought. Kandasamy writes and fights for Dalits and focuses on the sufferings, frustration, humiliation, suppression, anguish and revolt of the ill-fated marginalized sections of our society in *Touch*. *Touch* is a collection of 84 poems divided into irregular sections. The volume explores the duality of desire which shifts into oppression as it strains through caste identities. The language use by Kandasamy is dexterous with beautification of brutality. All her works deals with Dalit literature and her writing stands out from her predecessors for whom the writing was just an act of rebellion. In this aspect, Kandasamy can be compared to African writers particularly female authors who were revolutionary in their attitudes and ideas because of hegemony and other forms of oppression meted out to them. Similarly, Kandasamy reclaims the place in literature both as a woman and as a Dalit.

The Poems of Meena Kandasamy are a review about the abuse and rape by upper caste men. Dalit Women had to tolerate and bear many forms of suppression and treatment as untouchables. In her works, Kandasamy peels like the layers of onion the misogyny that exists in name of love, lust and marriage. There is a movement from personal anecdotes to community experience as a woman. The use of versatile language in the poems is exquisite. Everything is measured and rearranged to be a coherent whole.

Kandasamy's poem *Touch* voices her sentiments towards the predicament of her community set by the starkly biased and hypocritical Hindu Brahmanical system:



But you will never have known

that touch — the taboo

to your transcendence,

when crystallized in caste

was a paraphernalia of

undeserving hate. (36–41)

Kandasamy ridicules the ancient encoded Brahmanical caste hierarchies that go against the Hinduism by pointing out the binaries of the “untouchable”.

She states: “*You don’t need your right thumb, /*

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb” (Kandasamy, *Touch* 7–8).

Her poetry voices out her resentment against the very core of the caste system which according to Gandhi, was the “*genius of the Hindu society*”.

The poem *Touch* is an aesthetics of pain, and a prolonged longing; a powerful aesthetics of resistance. *Touch* amplifies, illustrates, and carries on this struggle for power and autonomy by women poets. The poem contains sincerity of feeling and an honesty of experience rarely encountered.

Her poetry is at best of private sensibility. Her poetic self-gasps in darkness to search for her emotional root proclaiming it as her heritage. Her confessional mode is not as radical as we come across in Kamala Das’ poems. She explores a wide range of subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulation. Her poetry arises not out of reading and knowledge, but out of active engagement. *Touch* is rich with varied dexterity that explore the states of mind and genuine feminine sentiments.

Writing becomes a means of creating an identity in the world. The use of the personal voice is a means of self-assertion. Meena’s self-expressive poems permit ignored emotions to be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling. The woman writer, particularly the woman poet, is engaged in an ongoing dialectic with the dominant cultural hegemonies to negotiate a space for the creative woman. Meena’s



poems record the age-old class hierarchy in Indian society. Meena's poetic mode ranges from the meditative to sensuous. Her poems pose a tension that reaches out to the reader, arousing in one a sense of need that will not be satisfied:

“What will you say of your feeling

Living with a sister who terrorizes

Even manic depressions out of your mind?

(‘Sage in the Cubicle’)

Meena's poetic lines seem to echo from life itself, from the pauses of loss and vacuity in her sociological repression in a class-stratified Tamil society. Meena deeply penetrates the inner pores of the feminine psyche and brings out the strength and power of life. Sanjukta Dasguta, a Bengali poetess, writes

I am *sangam* and *shakti*

Power of fire, water, air and earth(.)

(‘Identity’, Sanjukta Dasgupta)

Like all confessional poets, Meena gives literary form a new sense of personality, attaching value to the image of man. She raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal. Her quest for identity is not the spiritual Odyssey; it is a human journey, a sociological journey that dignifies the reader:

Caste, yet again authored a tragedy

He, disease wrecked, downtrodden.

(‘Prayers’)

In the poem ‘Take This for an Answering’ Meena records her voice of protest;

You press me into answering

When and why and where and how



I could start to dislike you.

The poems in *Touch* represent the indigenous lifestyle. They resist colonial acts of authority and oppression through their textual transmission. These poems portray the “twice Dalit” state of Dalit women. They speak against the prevalent structures, ancient conventions and customs which have been and still are used for repeated subjugation. Kandasamy attempts to deconstruct the idea of Western Feminism which tries to universalize the female experience. Apart from asserting her varied cultural and social identities, Kandasamy works at subverting them through poetry. She takes images of female characters from existing male literature and reconstructs them to portray an alternative image of them.

Critics claim to read tinges of ‘hysteria’ in Kandasamy’s poetry. Kandasamy states,

Society will not let angry young women exist,

we will be labelled hysterics (22).

Women aren’t allowed to rebel or rage. If they do, they are tagged as hysterical. This fiercely biased view of patriarchy which has hitherto silenced women from expressing their stark resentment towards prevalent ideologies is challenged by each of Kandasamy’s female protagonists in the poems of *Ms. Militancy*.

In many of her poems, time and again, we see her offering the written word or rather poetry as a source of deliverance to Dalit women. In *Nailed*, her famous line: “*Men are afraid of any woman who make poetry / and dangerous Portents*” (1–2), we see her trying to propagate feminism through words and the act of writing. Writing comes across as a means of deliverance and protest for her.

Unlike mainstream literature, Dalit literature is dedicated to developing a consciousness among the non-dominant caste people and instigating them to act against their oppressors. Her discontent with the essentialization of culture and the very project of nationalism ruptures the texture of her poetry. Kandasamy uses her poetry as a means of violent resistance against the nationally ingrained and prevalent system of caste. Kandasamy’s attempt to bring out an alternate version of feminist poetry to give independence to the voices of non-dominant caste women.

Kandasamy’s poetry, materializes her urge to express and fight for non-dominant caste women: their desires, dreams, independent views and speak for themselves rather than always be spoken for or of by the existing



patriarchal social order and their male counterparts. Her poem *Aggression* envisions a possibility of resistance and an ensuing rebellion against the prevalent injustices in society. This spirit of rebellion resonates through the poem:

Ours is a silence

that waits. Endlessly waits

... But sometimes,

the outward signals

of inward struggles takes colossal forms

And the revolution happens because our dreams explode (1–2,7–10)

She uses the symbol of the vindictive female body as a means of defiance and confrontation against the patriarchal subjugation of women. She proves that the Dalit woman can absolutely speak and when she does, her writing proves to be so scathingly powerful that it comes to formulate itself as an elaborate yet blatant tool of political dissent. This emboldened writing of Meena Kandasamy topples the world of Indian women's writing by setting a distinctly defiant standard in the world of feminist poetics.



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