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Feminist Voice in Meena Kandasamy's poem *Ms. Militancy*

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The term "South Asian literature" refers to the literary works of writers from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora. Countries to which South Asian literature's writers are linked include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. South Asian literature is written in English as well as the many national and regional languages of the region. South Asian literature is written in English as well as many national and regional languages. After the success of Booker Prize winning authors like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, many people got encouraged and started writing. South Asian literature has been produced in about forty major languages, including translations into Persian, Portuguese, French, and English.

Apart from the male writers there have been many great female writers who have made outstanding contributions to South Asian literary scene. Many female writers have written novels and poems on different topics but mainly their concern has been the ill treatment meted out to women in the society. They have also produced works on the taboo topics such as widow-marriages, child marriages, love stories, sexual content and certain family issues.

This attitude of the female writers towards their female characters is quite evident in their works. Rich in history, languages, literature and philosophy, the region has explored the signature of

humanity in man through religion, art, monuments, food, music, dance, and human conduct. So, what is the identity of a person belonging to South Asia but living far away from the native land? Meena Kandasamy and her poetry embody a long withstanding fight against the stringent subjugation and atrocities undergone by the non-dominant caste community. While her poetry revolves around issues of caste, sexuality, political agendas, violence, gender oppression and language, her work mainly urges her readers to act.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, novelist, fiction writer, activist and currently one of the India's boldest and most youngest and powerful voices. Most of her works are centered on feminism and the Caste Annihilation Movement of the contemporary Indian milieu. She holds a PhD in sociolinguistics and has published two anthologies of poems, "*Touch*" and "*Ms Militancy*", and a novel "*The Gypsy Goddess*". Her most recent work - "*When I Hit You or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*" is a dazzling and provocative novel of an abusive marriage.

Kandasamy's works revolve around the issues and concerns of feminism and anti-caste annihilation. She voices her opinion against corrupt political issues relating to caste, corruption, violence and women's rights. She began her literary career at the age of seventeen. Her first poem titled *Ms. Militancy* was published in 2010 and is based on the story of Kannagi the heroine of the Tamil classics *Silpathikaram*. She claims her identity as a Dalit woman and presents a critique of Hindu and Tamil myths by using a feminist perspective to retell them. Her works speak for the marginalised and women and she makes a trumpet call to all women to be revolutionary in their ideas and notions against any kind of injustice done to them. In the poem Kandasamy de-romanticises the world and de-mythifies religious and literary traditions by reanalysing the dominant language in a manner of love for the dispossessed and marginalised. She uses her poetry to deconstruct the stereo typed images and descriptions of women at the same time articulating the voice of the Dalits.

Kandasamy uses her poetry as a means of violent resistance against the nationally ingrained and prevalent system of caste which enables dominant caste people to subjugate the non-dominant caste persons. The title of her first anthology *Touch* reiterates the most inhuman of stigmas attached to Dalits – their very touch being considered polluting. 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)

Her second anthology *Ms. Militancy* (2010) is flavoured with an experienced wisdom of the gendered and caste-based issues prevalent in society. 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. In her introduction to *Ms. Militancy*, she writes, “*My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs onto a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me*” (Kandasamy 9).

The title poem of her anthology *Ms. Militancy* is named after the revolutionary female character of Kannaki in the classic Tamil text *Silapathikaram*. Kannaki, though initially portrayed as a subject of patriarchy in the play, towards the end symbolizes female revolution of such intensity

that Kandasamy places her as the epitome of the revolt she seeks to see in the female Dalit persona. She articulates: “*Vending vengeance, she made a bomb of her left breast and blew up the blasted city*” (Kandasamy, *Ms. Militancy* 21-22). Kannagi is a legendary Tamil woman who forms the central character of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaram* (100-300 AD). The story relates how Kannagi took revenge on the Pandyan King of Madurai, who had wrongfully put her husband Kovalan to death. She cursed the entire town of Madurai. *Silapathigaaram* tells the story of her revenge and is written by Ilango Adigal.

Kovalan was the son of a wealthy merchant of Vaishya community known as Nagarathar community in Puhar, who married Kannagi. Kovalan met a dancer Madhavi and had an affair with her, which prompted him to spend all his wealth on the dancer. At last, penniless, Kovalan realised his mistake and returned to his wife Kannagi. Kovalan hoped to recoup his fortunes by trade in Madurai, by selling the precious anklet of Kannagi. Madurai was ruled by Pandya king Nedunj Cheliyan I. When Kovalan tried to sell the anklet, it was mistaken for a stolen anklet of the queen. Kovalan was accused of having stolen the anklet and was immediately beheaded by the king without trial. When Kannagi was informed of this, she became furious, and set out to prove her husband's innocence to the king.

Kannagi came to the king's court, broke open the anklet seized from Kovalan and showed that it contained rubies, as opposed to the queen's anklets which contained pearls. Realizing the fault, the king committed suicide in shame, after having delivered such a huge miscarriage of justice. Kannagi uttered a curse that the entire city of Madurai be burnt. The capital city of Pandyas was set ablaze resulting in huge losses. However, at the request of Goddess Meenakshi, she calmed down and later, attained salvation.

The impact of the story of Kannagi is that it revived the matriarchal worship prevailed before the advent of the Aryans and Muslims. After the story of Kannagi, the Tamil ladies stopped wearing gold anklets. As a literary work, *Silappatikaram* is held in high regard by the Tamil people. It contains three chapters and a total of 5270 lines of poetry. The epic revolves around Kannagi, who having lost her husband to a miscarriage of justice at the court of the Pandyan Dynasty, wreaks her revenge on his kingdom.

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.

Meena Kandasamy, through her poems questioned all the atrocities and she reflects pain, agony, violence and restrictions of being Dalit. Meena Kandasamy indited the story of her own domesticity and the subordinated statues which she had experienced through their prevarication and she had written the story of her own seclusion within the abode and in the society. Her themes transcend the personal, because what she endeavours to poetise is the experience of women. Meena Kandasamy addresses the Dalit community and reflects how the Dalit subaltern women are in search for self identity or individuality in the world where sexist and racist definitions of women prevail. She handles her poems with all its precision of the emergence of new woman who has transcended the boundaries of the female gender. Meena Kandasamy is the polemical writer who utilizes her pen as a sword to fight the monster that is Caste.

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 strikes a parallel with the final phase of Gynocriticism. The very notion of the 'body' of the third world woman, especially the underprivileged woman bring it closer to the postulation of the "subaltern" in Spivak's essay *Can the subaltern speak?* (1985).

Spivak points out the threefold oppression faced by these women i.e. patriarchy, race and domination by first world feminists. Spivak asserts that the "subaltern" should favour to write their own body and stories. Kandasamy's attempts to dig out the inscribed voices from history and to reread them retrieves the diffusive traces of suffering and pain which are often overshadowed by the facade of empathy shown by the dominant existing socio-political discourse. Meena Kandasamy tries to problematize this camouflaged circulation of power through her intensely inquisitive poetry.

Kandasamy's poetry, in a way, 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. In the poem *Ms.Militancy*, Kannagi cuts one of her breasts to show that she is a rebel against injustice and uses it a bomb on the city of Madurai. 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.

Meena Kandasamy magically touched upon many such disputable issues as untouchability, casteism, disrespect of woman and apostasy the woman's face in the Indian society and sums up how her poems reveal the effects of patriarchal ascendance and social conditioning on women.

The powerful women characters powerful women characters pictured in the poetical works of Meena Kandasamy wage open wars to defend themselves against patriarchal rules to liberate women from their subservient position with the potency of cognizance to give them a transformative action. With prophetic vision she analysed the convivial and political structures of

society and fight against the rigid caste system of India. Meena Kandasamy's major concern in her poems is to enable women. Meena Kandasamy redefined their identity in the light of feminist theories.

Meena Kandasamy celebrated her womanhood by singing women's dreams and verbalising their bodies. Her writings arouse consciousness in women's mind and her poems helped other writers to bring out their poems in a socio-cultural milieu as it expedites their shift from a marginal position to a central one. In her dreams, new woman is not the suffering wife, weeping widow or sacrificing mother or caring sister. No other feminist poets in India could achieve the absolute rebellious dimensions like Meena Kandasamy because she became the mouth piece for exposing the right of every woman to protest and revolt against all those patriarchal forces in society which conspire to obstruct the development of their personality. Kandasamy's poems are well-versed by a wisdom of gender relations that suggest being a female in a largely patriarchal culture is another form of being a part of minor social group. "You don't have to be a Dalit—by being a woman the caste is in you,"

Conclusion

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. 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. Meena Kandasamy is in fact one of those fewer writers! She has talked about unique features of thorny destiny of being a female and Dalit in current Indian society through her observant expression.

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