

**RE-INTERROGATING CASTE INTO MEENA KANDASAMY'S LITERARY
ACTIVISM**

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's writing serves as a powerful testament to the lived realities of caste-based discrimination in contemporary India. This paper argues that Kandasamy's work transcends mere representation, actively re-interrogating the very structures and narratives that perpetuate caste. Through a close reading of her poetry, novels, and essays, this analysis explores how she dismantles dominant narratives, reclaims marginalized voices, and constructs a counter-narrative centering the experiences of Dalit women. This study delves into her strategic use of language, form, and personal testimony to expose the insidious nature of caste, its intersectionality with gender, and the urgent need for social transformation.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, caste, Dalit literature, feminism, activism, resistance

1. Introduction

Meena Kandasamy is a poet, novelist, translator, and anti-caste campaigner. Deconstructing violence, comprehending the suffering brought on by caste, gender, and ethnic oppressions, and highlighting the militant struggle against these strong systems have always been areas of interest for her. She addresses these issues in both her prose and poetry, particularly in her three novels, *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019), *When I Hit You* (2017), and *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), as well as in her collections of poems, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Her writing is rooted in activism; she has translated a number of political literatures from Tamil to English and was previously an editor at *The Dalit*, an alternative journal that chronicled caste-related violence and the Indian anti-caste movement. The International Dylan Thomas Prize, the Jhalak Prize, the Hindu Lit Prize, and the Women's Prize for Fiction have all shortlisted her books. She recently served as Gallatin Global Faculty in Residence at New York University (NYU), where she co-taught a course on feminist writers from the neo-colonial globe. She has a PhD in sociolinguistics. Her essays and op-eds have been published in *Guernica*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The White Review*.

Caste, a deeply entrenched system of social hierarchy, continues to plague Indian society despite legal reforms. Meena Kandasamy's literary activism confronts this reality head-on, refusing to shy away from the brutal truths of caste-based violence and discrimination. Her work is not simply a reflection of lived experience; it is a conscious intervention, a deliberate act of challenging hegemonic narratives that normalize caste oppression. This paper examines how Kandasamy re-interrogates caste through her writing, focusing on her strategies of resistance, her articulation of Dalit feminist perspectives, and

her contribution to the ongoing struggle for social justice. As Bama asserts, “Writing is my weapon” (Bama, Karukku, 2000, p. xi), a sentiment echoed powerfully in Kandasamy’s work.

2. Literature review

Several scholars have analyzed Dalit literature as a form of social resistance (Omvedt, 2006; Limbale, 2004). Feminist scholars (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1991) have explored the intersection of caste and gender, emphasizing the double marginalization of Dalit women. Kandasamy’s work exists at this crucial intersection, demanding attention from both literary and socio-political perspectives. Previous research highlights the significance of Dalit feminist voices but has not fully explored Kandasamy’s contribution in this context. Hence the researcher has undertaken present study.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative analysis of Kandasamy’s major works, using close textual reading and thematic analysis. A multidisciplinary approach integrating Dalit studies, feminist critique, and postcolonial theory provides a comprehensive lens to examine the impact of her literary activism.

4. Discussion

4.1 Deconstructing Dominant Narratives:

Kandasamy’s writing actively deconstructs dominant narratives surrounding caste. She challenges sanitized versions of history often presented in mainstream discourse, exposing the historical and ongoing violence inflicted upon Dalits. In *Touch* (Kandasamy, 2006), she explores the deeply ingrained nature of caste prejudice, revealing how it permeates even seemingly mundane interactions. Her work disrupts the comfortable narratives that allow the privileged to remain complicit in the perpetuation of caste.

Kandasamy employs her poetry as a form of fierce opposition to the deeply rooted and widespread caste system that allows dominant caste individuals to oppress those from non-dominant castes. The title of her initial anthology, *Touch*, emphasizes one of the most dehumanizing stigmas associated with Dalits-their mere touch being viewed as contaminating. Kandasamy’s poem *Touch* expresses her feelings regarding the plight of her community shaped by the overtly prejudiced 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)

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”. Her scathing

rebutal of Gandhi and his ideals is well reflected in her poem Mohandas Karamchand. She employs a strategy of “truth-telling,” forcing readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of caste-based discrimination, including the everyday humiliations and systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities. As Omvedt argues, “The struggle against caste must be a struggle against the very basis of Indian civilization.” (Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 2004, p. 2). Her poetry collections, *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*, re-imagine history and mythology to challenge Brahmanical patriarchy. Through her re-interpretation of Hindu epics and myths, she subverts dominant narratives and reclaims agency for oppressed communities.

4.2 Centering Dalit Women's Experiences

A crucial aspect of Kandasamy's re-interrogation of caste is her focus on the experiences of Dalit women. She highlights the intersectional nature of oppression, demonstrating how caste and gender intersect to create unique forms of marginalization. Her poetry, particularly in *Ms. Militancy* (Kandasamy, 2010), provides powerful expressions of Dalit women's resistance, their resilience, and their struggles against both caste and patriarchal forces. Kandasamy gives voice to the often-silenced narratives of Dalit women, reclaiming their stories and challenging their erasure from mainstream feminist discourse. She brutally assault gender, caste, and violence in “When I Hit You.” This semi-autobiographical novel exposes domestic violence within an intellectual marriage, revealing the intersections of caste, patriarchy, and intimate partner violence. The protagonist's struggle for autonomy mirrors broader caste-based social constraints on Dalit women. She exposes the specific forms of violence and discrimination faced by Dalit women, including sexual violence, economic exploitation, and social ostracization. This resonates with the work of other Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege, who emphasizes the need to understand the “specificity of Dalit women's experiences” (Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu*, 2013, p. 4).

4.3 Language as a Weapon of Resistance

Kandasamy's use of language is itself a powerful tool of resistance. She subverts traditional literary forms, experimenting with language and narrative structures to create a distinct voice that reflects the experiences of marginalized communities. Her writing is often characterized by its directness, its unflinching portrayal of violence, and its use of vernacular language. This deliberate choice of language challenges the dominance of standard literary forms and allows her to connect with a wider audience, particularly those whose voices are often excluded from mainstream literature. She reclaims and redefines language, using it to expose the power dynamics embedded within it and to create a space for marginalized voices to be heard.

4.4 Personal Testimony and the Politics of Witness:

Kandasamy often draws on her own personal experiences and the experiences of others within the Dalit community. This use of personal testimony is not simply a recounting of events; it is a deliberate act of witnessing, a way of bearing witness to the systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities. By sharing these stories, Kandasamy challenges the narratives that seek to erase or minimize the impact of caste. She uses her own

body as a site of resistance, refusing to be silenced and demanding recognition for the experiences of those who have been historically marginalized. "The Gypsy Goddess" is a fictionalized account of the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968, where Dalit laborers were brutally murdered by upper-caste landlords. The novel's fragmented experimental structure disrupts traditional storytelling, reflecting the fractured reality of caste oppression. This aligns with the concept of "testimonial literature" as discussed by Beverley, where personal narratives become powerful tools for social and political change (Beverley, *Against a Theory of Conversation*, 2004).

5. Conclusion: Towards Social Transformation

Meena Kandasamy's writing is more than just a critique of caste; it is a call to action. Her effort to present an alternative form of feminist poetry that empowers the voices of women from non-dominant castes parallels the concluding stage of Gynocriticism. The concept of the 'body' of the third world woman, particularly the marginalized woman, aligns it with the idea of the "subaltern" discussed in Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1985).

Her work compels readers to confront their own complicity in the perpetuation of caste and to actively engage in the struggle for social justice. By re-interrogating caste through her powerful and evocative writing, Kandasamy contributes to the ongoing movement for social transformation in India. Her work serves as a reminder that the fight against caste is far from over and that literature can play a vital role in challenging oppressive structures and creating a more just and equitable society. Further research could explore the reception of Kandasamy's work within India and globally, examining its impact on contemporary discourse surrounding caste and social justice. Additionally, a comparative analysis of Kandasamy's writing with other Dalit writers like Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, and Ajay Navare could provide further insights into the diverse ways in which caste is being challenged and re-imagined through literature and literary criticism.

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