



GENDER AND CASTE IN MEENA KANDASWAMY'S POETRY

Ms. Anshu Choudhary¹, Prof. Leena Chandani²

¹Research scholar, Department of English, Rashtra Sant Tukdoji Maharaj University, Nagpur, Maharashtra. ²Research Supervisor, Head of the Department of Languages, DRB Sindhu Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur, Maharashtra.

Abstract: The examination of gender problems and caste differences in a selection of Meena Kandaswamy's poetry is the focus of this research report. It examines several important challenges that women deal with daily as they fight for their identity and psychological autonomy. Gender inequality and socioeconomic marginalization are intertwined issues. It highlights societal injustices and calls for social change by giving voice to the experiences of oppressed women. Their poetry encourages political activity, builds camaraderie among Dalit women, and increases knowledge of social concerns. The anthology is a moving examination of gender, identity, and caste. Kandasamy addresses the socio-political problems that afflict Indian society through her incisive literary voice, paying special attention to the sufferings of women and Dalits. This essay explores Touch's topics, stylistic components, and critical reception, emphasizing its influence on contemporary poetry and social conversation.

Keywords: Dalit women, discrimination, caste, untouchability, gender inequity, patriarchy, and male dominance.

Introduction: Meena Kandasamy believes that writing is a way for her to absorb who she is. She proudly displays the moniker "womanises and outcastness" that has been bestowed upon her. Just two years after she began penning her "angry, militant" poetry, she composed her first love poem. This edition's poetry shows more than just militant fury. One looks forward to more of Kandasamy's work in the years to come because of the strong and enthusiastic wit and wordplay in her rhymes. Numerous additional social reforms, including the abolition of the caste system, child marriage, infanticide, widow remarriage, and—above all—the liberation and education of women for enlightenment and social advancement, were made possible by this monumental change.

Social reformers are regular people who wish to do remarkable things for mankind. Depending on cultural, social, political, and economic factors, men and women react differently in social situations. Indian authors have often tackled the problem of gender inequality in their artistic works. In her paintings, Meena Kandasamy has defied expectations and shown the "New Woman." Women are no longer just seen as shy, obedient, or domestic assistants.

Due to the impact of education, women have also realized the benefits that education can bring to their lives. The argument is that she has come to understand that her economic dependence

is the reason behind the man's control over her and his infliction of unbearable mental and bodily suffering. A modern or new woman is conscious of her own existence and understands that no one, not even her family, society, religion, or nation, has the authority to govern her and regard her only as a wife, mother, or daughter. The modern woman wants to break free from traditional authority and the stigma of being a dependent person in order to take on the role of an autonomous, self-constituting subject. The stereotypically male-biased Indian custom of "girl viewing," which evaluates a girl's eligibility for marriage, is something she vehemently opposes. However, not all these criteria are considered while evaluating the young guy who wishes to marry her. Hers is a scathing indictment of the societal issues caused by women's systematic sex supremacy. Through her forthright words and astute thoughts, she promotes gender equity. There are several social structures, agreements, traditions, and organizations in Indian society that serve as clandestine means of creating and maintaining women's enslavement. India's patriarchal, male-dominated society denied women their fundamental human rights.

Even with today's constitutional protections, women's status in contemporary India has remained largely unchanged, if not completely unchanged; discrimination, domestic abuse, mistreatment, subjugation, and other issues still exist; men continue to be the head of the household; dowries are still secretly taken from the bride's family; cases of sexual assault on women are frequently reported; and women are still not granted full decision-making authority over matters such as their careers, marriages, and many other aspects of their lives. The unequal position of women is also related to the Indian caste system.

The caste system's characteristics, such as "endogamy," serve as a means of maintaining control over women's labor and sexuality, and ideas like pollution and purity, which divide people from one another and restrict women's movement, further diminish the problem of gender equality. The systemic denial of educational resources to women and the lower segments of society was the most powerful tool used to maintain women's unequal position and "untouchability." Indian authors have frequently addressed gender inequity in their creative works.

However, the topic of Dalit women's marginalization and oppression was mostly ignored. Until recently, neither political leaders nor academics have given Dalit women's concerns any thought. The socio-political and economic circumstances of Dalit women, who are still mute today, may be the cause (Raj Kumar, 211).

In their works, certain modern Indian writers, such as Meena Kandasamy, express their worries about gender inequity and sexual politics. Throughout her writing, Meena Kandasamy stays focused on the issues of caste eradication and women's equality with men. In a culture where men predominate, women are viewed as property. Men from all castes and social classes get together to establish standards of conduct that limit a woman's development and keep her inside the four walls of her home. Meena Kandasamy criticizes patriarchal society for seeing women as its property and slaves:

To make her yours and yours alone,
You pushed her deeper into the harem
Where she could see the sunlight
Only from the lattice windows.
Domesticated into drudgery, she was just.
Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave
Who maintained your numbers (Kandasamy 112)

She fiercely denounces the male-biased, stereotypical practice of girl viewing in Indian society, which is meant to evaluate her potential as a future wife to a man. A prospective bride is evaluated based on a variety of factors, including her femininity, education, attractiveness, physical health, character, politeness, and submissiveness. However, the male who wants to marry her is not evaluated based on all of these factors. A girl must act in a specific manner to portray herself as anticipated by the prospective groom's family to be approved as a bride by the boy who visits her and his family, which supports the idea of a patriarchal society.

In addition to being discriminated against by men and women from other castes, Dalit women also face discrimination from males in their own caste. They frequently experience domestic abuse and are denied their fundamental rights. Their situation is so dire that they turn into helpless victims who are unable to speak out against the injustice they have experienced. Because men and women are treated differently in society, the themes and issues they convey in their poetry may differ significantly. It is societal as well as biological. Although men and women are members of the same species, "Homo Sapiens," we must acknowledge their differences. Women are envious of men's "more equal" treatment in the home and in society, not of their penis.

The power and agency that males alone have is something that women dislike. Her compositions, especially her poetry, frequently deal with the topics of caste destruction, social marginalization, and gender inequality. She declares a revolution via poetry and uses language as a tool of resistance. According to Kandasamy, a true poet is inextricably linked to politics. In many respects, Kandasamy attempts to defy Western feminism's norms. While the types of oppression and suffering that women experience worldwide are similar, the situation of a woman who is doubly or triply disadvantaged differs.

The status of the marginalized groups in Indian society is significantly influenced by caste. Meena Kandasamy's writings are especially pertinent as a counter-discourse to the dominant narratives of the upper caste. Her dissatisfaction with the narratives that promote a uniform form of nationalism is shown in her poems. A high vocabulary of secularism, democracy, and togetherness in variety is used to minimize the repulsive specifics of assaults committed in the name of caste.

Meena Kandasamy believes that women may get independence via writing. She won't keep quiet because she thinks that tomorrow her silence will be criticized. The harsh realities of caste inequality in India are often addressed in Kandasamy's poetry. Her art frequently expresses her sympathy with marginalized populations and her personal experiences as a Dalit woman.

These protest poems highlight the abhorrent and shameful aspects of casteism practiced by the upper caste. Hindu texts are replete with directives and guidelines that must be followed to preserve the caste system and the community's purity. Many anti-woman and anti-Dalit beliefs found in Manusmriti are practiced by caste Hindus, such as pouring molten lead into an outcast's ears if he chances to hear the Vedas spoken. She reveals the anguish of untouchability in her poem "Touch."

All people love the sensation of touch. One of the five senses through which human emotions and bonds are formed is touch, yet the same touch, "when crystallized in caste," serves as the foundation for disgust and hatred. The victim's verbal consolation does not address the underlying issue. In the poem, the girl's sole option is to undergo a "elusive purification" by undergoing the fire test, which is "the ancient medicine for shame/Alas, her death is an irrevocable side effect." At the same time, because they are members of the "superior caste," the goons from the higher caste get away with it.

The poem "Narration" is especially intriguing because of its harsh critique of both the males in her own society and those from higher castes. In a patriarchal society, being a woman is nearly synonymous with being a member of a lower caste.

When a Dalit woman is exploited, ostracized, and sexually exploited three times, the situation gets much worse. The swords of patriarchy hanging above her head endanger her life and dignity. The poem's protagonist sobs over her landlord's abuse and the temple priest's lustful stare that defiles and disrobes her. Pollution and untouchability don't stop them from sating their lust. She harshly condemns patriarchal society in "Songs of Summer" for treating women like slaves or sexual objects. Her poetry addresses a variety of topics that are both universal and complex.

She attempts to convey via her poetry that caste only exists in the mind and that the harsh physical effects of segregation and untouchability may be eliminated by eradicating caste from the mind. However, the elderly man was beaten to death with an iron rod since this act of worship was seen as an intrusion. The dead deity just "watched grimly with closed eyes" as he howled in a weak voice for a heavenly intervention in vain. The highest classes are the only ones who can sing prayers, and "Dalits die, due to devotion." She ends the poem by posing an open-ended query to the audience: Life teaches us that various gods can be found at different temples. Day and night, memory is plagued by a single notion.

What happened to the sixty-five-year-old soul of this unfortunate man?

To paradise, to be with honourable martyrs who gave their lives for a cause.

Or to hell, where the gods live and enact caste regulations? (Touch 57)

Caste is harsher than illness and crueller to these untouchable elderly guys. She challenges the naive faith of those who disregard the fundamentals of mankind and worship a non-existent, moral deity. She uses the irony and hypocrisy of the Brahmins in another poem, "For Sale," when they permit a Dalit who "grows damn rich" to join the temple. He purchases "flowers for five dollars," "incense for two dollars," and "extra blessings for twenty dollars." With his money, he is permitted to stand on the front lines. As a result, the concept of contamination and untouchability vanishes in front of the wealthy and powerful.

A Brahmin priest says a prayer in "Prayers in the Bathroom, Overheard" to make the water he uses for baths as clean as the holy rivers like the Ganga, Jamuna, and Godavari. An untouchable pump operator hears the plea and responds satirically by distributing corporate water. According to the responses, the priest continues to alter his prayer, and when the pump operator eventually exposes that he is an untouchable, "the learned man" leaves the restroom without showering.

The tangible history of the Dalits' pain, labour, and long-term captivity is typically left out of conventional historiography. The conventional historiography, which was written based on the subjective opinions of the upper caste historians, denies them a trustworthy narrative of history. There is little recognition in society for the important knowledge systems used in the fields of health, agriculture, and food culture. In society, Dalits are referred to as "unpaid teachers." Their contributions to the realm of knowledge are not acknowledged or valued. The poem "Fleeting" laments the loss of history, which is frequently a "destroyed history." Caste smashes them like a "scheming bulldozer."

They are only reminded of their painful past by the history penned by the upper caste. The power centers, which are often inhabited by the "elite" minority, are frequently the source of the centre-periphery structure. In India's homogenous cultural past, the rituals, traditions, and practices of the upper class are appropriated while also excluding cultural diversity. One way to shatter the

stillness is by aggression. The downtrodden have rebelled against all of those divisions. It's time to stand up for their right to a dignified life. Only after hostility does revolution occur, and only then can freedom be attained.

In her poem "Aggression," Kandasamy alerts society to the potential for long-suppressed fantasies to erupt into violence: At times, the external manifestations of internal conflicts might assume enormous proportions. And when our aspirations blow up, a revolution takes place. The best method of troubleshooting is, for the most part, aggression (Touch 38).

Touch revolves with identity and resistance. Kandasamy's poetry contains communal voices of resistance against tyranny as well as personal observations. It exposes the arbitrary and unfair nature of caste systems using a sarcastic and caustic tone. The poem is a humorous take on the notion that one's social position may be changed by following specified activities. Touch's examination of identity by Kandasamy is a powerful declaration of individuality and resistance to dehumanization. Her writing in English, the language of status and power, contributes to her global renown. Touch has won praise from critics for its daring ideas and avant-garde aesthetic.

Kandasamy's ability to sensitively and powerfully convey the challenges of underprivileged populations has been commended by academics and critics. Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) have called the book a "landmark in Dalit literature," while Gopal (2012) has called it a "significant contribution to feminist poetry."

Conclusion:- Considering the previous debate on the lyrical inventiveness of female poets, we see that, like male poets, female poets have made significant contributions to the acceptance and development of Indian English poetry. The vibrant and enthusiastic poetry of female writers is equally worth reading. It is accurate to say that "poetry in English by Indian women oscillates between writing as a social manifestation or assertiveness and the desire to accomplish a literary competence." Women "are poets first, and only genetically- and some, perhaps, defiantly- women," as Iyengar correctly notes.

Caught in the masculine maelstrom of historical battles, turbulence, and change, they have made a significant contribution to society's social consciousness. They have brought up issues of cultural identification and written extensively about how traditional values relate to evolving realities in our society and collective identity. In my opinion, Meena Kandasamy has made a huge contribution to poetry, culture and identity, social consciousness, distinctive subjects and striking approaches, meditation on sociopolitical issues, and the study of the ethical, spiritual, and mystical facets of life. The chapters are organized as follows to accurately describe the topic of my research.

References

1. Anand, Meena. Ed. Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination. Delhi: Isha Books, 2005.
2. Kandaswamy, Meena. Touch. Peacock Books. Mumbai: 2006
3. Kandaswamy, Meena. Ms. Militancy. Navayana Publishing Pvt.Ltd, New Delhi: 2010
4. Kandaswamy, Meena. We Are Not The Citizens. Tangerine Press. London: 2018
5. Kandasamy, Meena. Touch. Mumbai: Peacock Books, 2006.
6. Krishnaswamy, N., John Varghese, and Sunita Mishra. Contemporary Literary Theory: A Student's Companion. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Pvt. Ltd. 2001.
7. Kumar, Raj. Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, And Identity. Kolkata: OrientBlackSwan, 2010.
8. Rao, G.Vijayeshwari. Women And Society. Mumbai: Himalaya Publishing House, 2004.