

The Soul in search of an Oasis: An Analysis of the Selected Poems of Meena Kandasamy

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Every culture gives rise to varied literary traditions. Based on the principles that govern the social, religious and cultural orientations of a society, there are voices which continuously emerge as the forerunners of changes, transformations, revolutions and rebellions and women are no exception on the scene. The literary world has witnessed the arrival of emancipated women in the form of prose, poetry, fiction and non-fiction writers. Indian women have had to suffer at multiple levels and casteism is one of the predominant factors that continue to haunt the Indian society even today and here also women have been the worst hit. This paper aims to bring to light the psychological pressures and emotional trauma in Meena Kandasamy's select poems and her attempts to empower women by granting them with a 'new identity' in a society that continues to segregate women and thwarts all her endeavors. Meena Kandaswamy addresses multi-faceted problems in her community and champions women's rights through her multilayered poems and essays. According to her, poetry heals her and helps in channelising her anger. Her poems are revolutionary and there is fire in her words. She is bold and assertive and expresses her ideas without fear or favour. She expresses strong will power and determination.

Meena Kandaswamy, based in Chennai, is an emerging poet, fiction writer, translator and activist. Meena has published two collections of poetry namely, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010). She has also authored a number of essays on social and political issues. Her poems "Mascara" and "My Lover Speaks of Rape" have won first prizes in All India Poetry competitions. Her poems have appeared in a number of national and international journals. Her translations include the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumavalavan, leader of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal or Dalit panthers of India, and the poetry and fables of Tamil Eelam poet, Kasi Anandan. . In her volume of poetry, *Touch*, Kandasamy discusses the most elementary of all bodily sensations. The elementary feeling of touch, however, becomes a taboo when it tries to move beyond the set barriers of caste, gender and traditions. Whenever any person belonging to the

high caste division of the society by choice or by chance touches an untouchable the questions of impurity raise their heads very high. The indo-Anglian poet, Kamala Das, is all praise for Meena's verse that "she wore a fabric rare and strange, faintly smudged with the Indianness of her thought that saw even the monsoons come leisurely stroking like decorated temple elephants" In her foreword to Meena's *Touch*.

Kandasamy's second collection *Ms. Militancy* includes full-blooded and highly experimental poems which challenge the dominant mode in contemporary Indian poetry in English. This paper analyses few of her poems from *Ms Militancy* titled as – "Backstreet Girls", "Dead Women Walking", "Firewalkers", "Moon-gazers", "Ms Militancy", "One Eyed" and "Princess-in-Exile".

"Backstreet Girls" is a poem addressed to the moral police. This poem breaks all shackles and grants independence to women. They don't have to play by the rules anymore. Like men, they too can act according to their will. They can choose their own roles – 'sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews'. No more can they be kept within the iron bars of culture and tradition. No Manu can limit or contain them. Men can no longer choose them for wives but they are the ones who pick up and "strip random men". The poem ends with a note. "We (women) are not the ones you can sentence for life." (14) This is the freedom Meena Kandasamy wants to achieve for her people.

In "Dead Woman Walking" she approaches the story of Karaikal Ammayar, a mythological figure who was deeply in love with her lord shiva, in different perspective. To Meena Kandasamy, Karaikal Ammayar is not someone who deserted her husband to be with her lord but she was a wretched woman deserted by her husband. She was once a beautiful wife of a merchant but he became doubtful of his wife's talent in providing delicious meals. Instead of understanding "the magic of my (her) multiplying love" (17) he took her to be a mystic and left her to marry "a fresh and formless wife". She became a dead woman but this story kept on throbbing in her heart. Her pain is aptly captured in the line, "I wept in vain, i wailed, i walked on my head, i went to god" (17). Meena writes:

I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors,
with faltering step, with felted flying hair,
with hollowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes,
with seizures of speech and song, with a single story

between my sobbing pendulous breasts

The poem sarcastically underlines how such women die while they are physically alive. “Firewalkers” is also a powerful rendition of the plight of poor woman who are exploited by people belonging to upper classes, shattering the traditional image Goddess Maari is portrayed as an exploiter who gains pleasure from the pains of her believers. Maari is a mania who needs blood to drench her hair and her devotees are the dream-chasers, the fire walkers. They offer their bodies to be burnt and whipped. This is the supplication, “The pain is the prayer” which along with blood appeases the goddess. Maari in “Firewalkers” is none other than the inhuman oppressor of the dalits.

One important aspect in the poetry of Kandaswamy is the discussion and resentment directed at the sexual exploitation of women. Women in general are already viewed as the “other” and the dalit women exist as “others within others”. The exploitation that these women are subjected to deprive them of the very basic right to survive with dignity. They are a constant subject for torture and maltreatment both within as well as outside the domestic sphere. They are always seen as silent sufferers lacking the power to resist, to assert and to live by choice. Meena, however, emerges as an open rebel refusing to surrender to the dictates and constructed norms. She speaks as a lover: When you called me to light up your life I could never refuse... Love I can’t be a candle for I know it’s an ancient lie. The candle is for the solemn...for those who yearn a slow and Tenderness/Not for us... (Kandaswamy, 2006)

“Moon-gazers” depicts the unquestionable superiority of non-dalits over the dalits the poet brings in a class room situation in which the teacher talks about a bird that watches the moon through out the night when a girl questions that the bird does on new moon days. She is seen as impudent and is mocked at. She sinks into the teachers limitless eyes without ever reaching the surface. This is the common fate shared by all the dalits. They are forced to oblige without any questions and made to lead a passive life devoid of any sign of existence.

“Ms Militancy” the title poem of the volume is based on Kannaki, the heroine of the Tamil Classic silapathikaram. The very first stanza of the poem has a pathetic tone:

She thought she was dying- ants crawled
under her flaking skin, migraines visited her

at mealtimes, her tender –as-tomato breasts
bruised to touch, her heart forgot its steady beat.

This poem is a call to women to be revolutionary and courageous like the heroine herself. Though Kannaki is deeply effected by her husbands betrayal. She readily accepts him when he returns from his dancer mistress's lap. She supports him by giving him one of her anklets to start a fresh life. The Kannaki in the first part of this poem is very devoted and loyal when judged by the standards of Tamil culture which advocates patriarchal dominance. But the rage she displays at the death of her husbands shows that she is not a passive, submissive Kannaki but a bold, assertive, revolutionist she gains the justice which her husband, a patriarch at figure failed to get. Justice alone can suffice her anger and she burns down the entire city by – “a bomb of her breast” Such is faith in her self and in woman by coming to the fere front and voicing her protest at a very young age. She has set herself as a model for down trodden, subjugated women.

Kandaswamy gives an example of various atrocities committed against the dalit women in her short poem “One eyed”. The poet, the glass and the water she the thirst of a person but he the teacher the doctor the school and the press the violation of rules and are indifferent to the needs of people. Human beings fail to understand their follow beings what the inanimate things where able to comprehend. Dhanam's world was ‘Torn in half’. When she lasted the forbidden water at the cost of her left eye. “Princes of Exile” is about Sita. Kandasamy's Sita is no longer of chaste women. She doesn't want women to follow the rules laid by the patriarchal society. Her Sita has perfected the art of vanishing from the day she was kidnapped. Her constant walkout is her way of taking revenge on her husband who was not careful enough to protect her or even to rescue her within a short time span. Kandaswamy fearlessly with her trashing words attack the superstitious and the age old orthodox beliefs forced upon the lower caste women by the patriarchal society. Commending on her poems Meena Kandaswamy ones says that: I work to not only get back at you. I actually fight to get back to myself. I donot write into patriarchy. My Maariamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs onto a strangers lap. All women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. (Kandaswamy, 2010)

Meena Kandasamy is one among those few Indian poets who have managed to convert their deepest anguish into brilliant poetry. The poet herself has a militant spirit. She takes up myths and characters from Tamil Classics and demythifies them by providing them with an identity entirely different from their original one. As a woman, she has forced her way to the forefront to represent her community through her powerful language and rebellious writing. Her voice is like the voice of her African-American counterparts. Her soul is endlessly search for an oasis. Most of her themes and her choices of diction are taboos in the cultural context of India. This can be justified because crude realities cannot be explained in sophisticated forms and language. As Ranjit Hoskote puts it in his review of “Ms Militancy” in *The Biblio*, “There is considerable current of surprise and elusiveness that does battle with the strain of predictability in Kandasamy’s poetry; even when she rehearses a well established choreography of feminist self-assertion, she does so with a sharp eye for detail, a grasp of worldly insight, and an appetite for phrasal shape-shifting.”

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