

When Dissent Becomes a Crime: Political Poetry and the Poetics of Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You*

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023), subtitled *Political Poetry 2010–2023*, brings together poems written over more than a decade marked by significant political and social upheavals in India and elsewhere. The collection engages with caste, gender, state violence, freedom of expression, political repression, love and friendship, often refusing to separate the intimate from the political. This paper examines how Kandasamy uses poetry to respond to a political climate in which dissent and criticism can increasingly be viewed with suspicion. Rather than treating political poetry simply as poetry that addresses political events or ideas, the paper focuses on the ways in which Kandasamy's poetic language and form themselves become part of her resistance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's understanding of power, surveillance and the regulation of discourse, the paper explores how the collection represents the pressure placed upon individuals who speak, protest or refuse to conform. The study also draws on Jacques Rancière's understanding of politics as a struggle over who is allowed to speak and be recognised within the public sphere. Through close readings of selected poems, this paper argues that *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* presents poetry as a space where fear can be articulated rather than concealed and where political violence can be remembered rather than allowed to disappear. The collection therefore shows how political poetry can function as witness, memory and resistance, not only through the subjects it addresses but through the ways in which it speaks.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy; *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You*; political poetry; dissent; resistance; Michel Foucault; Jacques Rancière

Introduction

When dissent becomes punishable, silence is no longer simply the absence of speech; it becomes something produced through fear, surveillance, and the anticipation of punishment. The question of who is permitted to speak, what can be said, and what consequences may follow from speaking has therefore remained central to the relationship between literature and political power. Political poetry occupies a particularly uneasy position within this relationship. It does not merely describe political events from a safe distance; at its most forceful, it intervenes in the very structures of language through which power names, categorises, excludes, and silences. Poetry can preserve voices that dominant narratives attempt to suppress, record experiences that official histories overlook, and turn private fear into a form of public speech. It is within this difficult relationship between speech and power that Meena Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* (2023) acquires its particular significance.

Published by Atlantic Books in the United Kingdom and Juggernaut Books in India, *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* is presented as a collection of “Political Poetry 2010–2023,” bringing together poems written over approximately fourteen years. Kandasamy's long interval between *Ms Militancy* (2010) and this collection is significant: the volume is not a response to one political incident but an accumulation of political, personal, and literary experiences across a changing social landscape. The collection moves between subjects that are conventionally placed in separate categories—love, sex, friendship, motherhood, caste, racism, political repression, freedom of expression, and state violence. The publisher itself describes the poems as chronicling “wanting, art-making, and the practising of resistance and solidarity in the face of a hostile state” (Kandasamy). The phrase “practising of resistance” is particularly important because it shifts attention from resistance as a political theme to resistance as an ongoing activity. The poems do not simply tell the reader that resistance is necessary; they explore what it means to continue speaking, loving, remembering, and writing when such acts may themselves become politically consequential.

Kandasamy's literary career provides an important context for understanding this political orientation. A poet, novelist, translator, and activist, she has consistently brought questions of caste, gender, sexuality, and political violence into her writing. Her earlier poetry collections, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010), established a poetic voice that was deliberately confrontational and attentive to the intersections of caste and gender. Her work as a translator of Dalit writing is equally significant because translation introduced her early to questions of caste violence, dispossession, and the politics of literary representation. Her poetry has consequently

developed at the intersection of literary practice and political engagement rather than treating the two as separate spheres.

The political urgency of *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* is particularly evident in its title poem, which was written in the aftermath of the 2015 arrests of Kandasamy's friends Jaison Cooper and Thushar Sarathy under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The arrests became an important context for the poem because political literature itself could be treated as evidence of criminal activity. The poem imagines the progression of repression through a series of increasingly threatening possibilities: "Tomorrow someone will arrest you"; the police will prepare a list of names; the arrested subject will be labelled a "terrorist"; the home will be searched; and even those associated with the accused may become targets (Kandasamy).

The importance of the poem, however, lies not simply in its political reference. Its formal construction turns the anticipation of arrest into an experience of reading. The sentence "Tomorrow someone will arrest you" is repeatedly returned to, creating a rhythm of inevitability. The future tense is particularly striking. The arrest has not yet occurred, yet the poem is already occupied by its consequences. The repetition therefore produces a peculiar temporal condition in which the future threat governs the present. The speaker does not have to describe an already completed act of repression; the possibility of repression is sufficient to alter behaviour. When the poem moves from arrest to the command "Stop speaking," the relationship between punishment and silence becomes explicit (Kandasamy).

This anticipatory dimension makes Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power particularly useful for reading Kandasamy's poetry. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shifts attention from spectacular forms of punishment towards forms of power that operate through surveillance, regulation, and the internalisation of discipline. The significance of such power lies partly in the fact that the individual may begin to regulate their own behaviour because they know that they may be observed or punished (Foucault). Kandasamy's title poem can be read through precisely this tension. The threat of arrest does not remain confined to the moment of arrest; it extends backwards into speech, association, domestic space, and political thought. The repeated "tomorrow" consequently becomes more than a marker of time. It becomes a mechanism through which fear enters the present.

The poem's closing words, "Long Live Silence," sharpen this contradiction (Kandasamy [page]). The phrase is ostensibly a celebration, but what it celebrates is precisely the condition that the poem itself refuses. The irony is central to Kandasamy's political method. The poem speaks at length about the production of silence and concludes by giving that silence a slogan-like form. Yet the poem has already defeated the command to remain silent by making the machinery of repression visible through language. Silence therefore becomes both the object of political power and the condition against which the poem defines itself. In this sense, Kandasamy's resistance

does not depend solely upon making an explicit political statement; the act of continuing to speak becomes part of the poem's political meaning.

Jacques Rancière's understanding of politics as a struggle over who can speak, appear, and be recognised as a political subject provides a second useful framework for the collection. In *Disagreement*, Rancière distinguishes politics from the ordinary management of social order and emphasises the disruptive force of those who make themselves heard when they are not expected to possess a legitimate political voice (Rancière). This perspective allows Kandasamy's poems to be read not simply as representations of oppressed subjects but as interventions into the question of whose experiences count as politically visible. Her poems repeatedly bring intimate experiences sexuality, love, friendship, family, grief into contact with caste, gender, nationalism, and state power. The movement between the personal and the political is therefore not incidental to the collection; it is one of the ways in which Kandasamy challenges the boundaries imposed upon political speech.

The collection's organisation reinforces this movement. Its sections "The Poet," "Her Comrade," "Her Lovers," "Her Friends," and "Her Country" move between different forms of relationship and belonging. The sequence is revealing because the political subject does not emerge as an isolated individual standing outside society. The poet is also a lover, friend, comrade, and citizen, and each of these positions carries its own relationship to power. The intimate poems consequently cannot be dismissed as departures from the collection's political concerns. Rather, they demonstrate how political structures enter the most personal areas of life. Kandasamy's politics is therefore not restricted to public protest; it also concerns the ways in which caste, gender, sexuality, and social expectations shape private experience. The collection's own description emphasises this relationship by insisting that "the personal is political" and by placing desire and family alongside caste, racism, and freedom of expression (Kandasamy).

This relationship between the intimate and the political also complicates a common understanding of political poetry as primarily angry, declamatory, or overtly oppositional. Kandasamy's poetry certainly contains anger, but anger is only one element of its political vocabulary. Love, friendship, memory, vulnerability, and solidarity also become forms through which political experience is understood. In "In Lieu of an Artist Statement, In Lieu of a Poem, In Lieu of a Diary," for instance, Kandasamy reflects on her own hesitation about poetry's usefulness in comparison with essays and political commentary. She writes that poetry "didn't serve the practical purpose of essays/op-eds" and could not "argue with razor-sharp precision" (Kandasamy [page]). Yet the poem itself becomes evidence against this apparent dismissal: its final movement towards the effect of her writing on a young reader demonstrates that poetry can intervene differently, through identification, recognition, and affect rather than through the direct argumentative structure of an essay.

The collection therefore raises an important question about the nature of political literary practice: what can poetry do that political prose cannot? Kandasamy does not answer this by claiming that poetry can directly overthrow structures of power. Instead, the collection suggests a quieter but no less significant possibility. Poetry can preserve what political power attempts to make disappear. It can give form to fear before that fear becomes silence; it can remember people whose experiences have been reduced to statistics or accusations; and it can place private experience within a wider history of political violence. In this respect, the poems function not only as protest but also as forms of witness and counter-memory.

Although critical responses to Kandasamy have frequently recognised the political force of her writing, the present study shifts the emphasis from the *politics represented in Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* to the *poetics through which that politics is produced*. Existing responses to the collection have highlighted its engagement with caste, gender, freedom of expression, racism, political repression, love, and solidarity, while discussions of the title poem have particularly focused on its relationship to the UAPA and the arrests of Cooper and Sarathy. This paper builds on those readings but asks a more specifically literary question: how does Kandasamy turn the experience and anticipation of repression into poetic form? What happens when repetition becomes a representation of surveillance, when direct address makes the reader vulnerable to the same threat as the poetic “you,” and when irony exposes the absurdity of political language?

Power, Language, and the Politics of Resistance

Reading Meena Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* as political poetry requires moving beyond the question of what the poems are “about” and asking how political power enters the language and form of the poems themselves. The collection addresses arrest, surveillance, caste violence, sexual violence, neoliberalism, nationalism and the suppression of dissent, but its political force does not arise simply from the subjects it chooses to represent. Again and again, Kandasamy is concerned with the language through which violence is described, justified, concealed, or remembered. A person becomes a “terrorist”; exploitative labour is described as an improvement; a raped Dalit woman becomes a body whose death is controlled by the police; historical violence is made to appear as something that “has happened before” and will therefore happen again. The poems consequently raise a larger question about the relationship between language and power: who has the authority to name reality, and what happens when poetry refuses the names imposed by dominant power?

Michel Foucault provides the principal theoretical framework for addressing this question. His understanding of power is particularly useful because it moves beyond the idea of power as something possessed exclusively by the state and exercised only through visible acts of coercion. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that power is productive as well as repressive: it produces forms of knowledge, categories of identity, accepted truths, and ways of speaking about

individuals and social relations (Foucault). Power therefore operates not only by telling people what they cannot say but also by shaping the language through which they understand what they see and experience. His account of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* further demonstrates how surveillance can become internalised, so that the possibility of being watched or punished begins to regulate behaviour even before direct coercion occurs (Foucault).

This understanding of power is particularly productive in reading “Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You.” The poem repeatedly begins with the same sentence:

“Tomorrow someone will arrest you.”

The repetition is deceptively simple. The arrest is always located in the future, yet its consequences are already unfolding in the present. The poem imagines the accused being labelled a “terrorist,” friends being monitored, lawyers being frightened away, homes being searched, and protestors being placed on police lists. Most significantly, the poem ends one of its sequences with the abrupt imperative:

“Stop speaking.”

The command condenses the relationship between surveillance and silence. The subject does not have to be permanently silenced through imprisonment for power to succeed; the anticipation of punishment is itself capable of producing silence. The poem's repeated “Tomorrow” consequently becomes more than a temporal marker. It creates what may be described as a poetics of anticipatory repression: the future possibility of arrest begins to govern the present.

The poem's dedication to Jaison Cooper and Thushar Sarathy, who were arrested in 2015—grounds this imagined future in an actual history of political repression. Kandasamy does not, however, reproduce that history as documentary prose. Instead, she converts it into a repetitive poetic structure in which the reader is repeatedly placed in the position of the threatened subject. The second-person pronoun is important here. The poem does not say simply that *someone will be arrested*. It says: “you” will be arrested.

The reader is therefore addressed as though already implicated in the political situation. The distance between the poet, the arrested subject, and the reader becomes unstable. This is one of the ways in which the poem turns political repression into an experience rather than merely an event being reported. The reader is made to inhabit the uncertainty produced by surveillance: Who is being watched? Who will be named? Who will be arrested next?

The poem also demonstrates that political power works through classification and naming. The arrested person becomes “a Leftist,” then “Ultra-Left,” and eventually a “terrorist.” These labels

appear to provide political description, but their cumulative effect is to transform ideological difference into criminal identity. Once the subject is called a “terrorist,” the label persists:

“you / will be considered a ‘terrorist’ for life.”

The phrase “for life” is crucial. The label exceeds the immediate event of arrest and becomes a permanent identity imposed upon the individual. Foucault's account of the relationship between knowledge, classification and power helps illuminate this process: the subject is not merely punished; the subject is produced as a particular kind of subject through political discourse.

Kandasamy's poem exposes the violence contained within such apparently descriptive language.

The same struggle over language becomes even more explicit in “The Discreet Charm of Neoliberalism.” Here, however, power does not operate primarily through arrest. It operates through spin. The poem begins with Guy Debord's formulation that “truth is a moment of falsehood,” immediately establishing a world in which the distinction between truth and its representation has become unstable (Kandasamy). Kandasamy then turns to the language used to describe workers entering and leaving sweatshops: “the working conditions have improved” and “the community has been sensitised.”

The irony is sharp. The first phrase transforms the movement of workers into sweatshops into evidence of improvement; the second converts workers leaving “in droves” into an apparently positive social development. The political reality remains exploitation and dissatisfaction, but the vocabulary used to describe it has changed.

This is where Foucault's concept of discourse becomes particularly significant. The problem is not simply that neoliberal language lies about reality. More significantly, it creates a vocabulary within which exploitation can be represented without appearing exploitative. Kandasamy's question,

“How to spin about a spin master?”

captures the difficulty of confronting a system whose power lies partly in its ability to control the terms through which it is discussed. The poem therefore treats language itself as a contested political space.

The final movement of the poem makes this concern explicit. The speaker's lover observes that “they have reduced language / to a rotting corpse,” while the speaker responds physically—“I wince”—to the “serrated edges” of his words (Kandasamy). The image of the “rotting corpse” suggests that language has been emptied of its capacity to communicate lived reality. Yet the

poem simultaneously offers another possibility. The lover's intimacy allows the speaker to "birth / afresh a language always, already there." The contrast is important: neoliberal discourse deadens language, while poetic and intimate language can regenerate it.

The poem's final statement,

"Neoliberalism finds room in a poem,"

is therefore more than an assertion about subject matter. It is a statement about the possibilities of political poetry itself. The poem initially suggests that "Neoliberalism is not a word / that belongs in any poem," but it ends by making precisely that word central to its poetic vocabulary. Kandasamy thus challenges the conventional separation between the lyrical and the political. Love, the body, sexuality, economics, labour and ideology occupy the same poetic space. Political poetry does not have to abandon intimacy in order to become political; rather, Kandasamy demonstrates that intimacy itself exists within political structures.

This relationship between speech and political legitimacy can be developed further through Jacques Rancière. Rancière's account of politics is concerned with the distribution of what can be seen, heard and recognised within a social order. Politics emerges when those who have not been recognised as legitimate speaking subjects make themselves heard and disrupt the established boundaries of visibility and audibility (Rancière). His work is particularly useful for Kandasamy because her poetry repeatedly asks who has the right to speak and whose account of violence will be believed.

"Sangharsh Karna Hai," written in memory of Jyoti Singh, offers a powerful example. The poem begins with an intentionally compressed formulation:

"here, the hurried truth: day

after day after day"

The repetition of "day" refuses the distance that can make violence appear like a completed historical event. Jyoti Singh's death is not presented as an isolated tragedy but as part of an ongoing struggle over whose suffering is recognised and remembered. The poem then shifts from the individual "you" to the collective "we":

"we became the body"

"we became"

"the scream cutting loose"

"from the curse of silence"

This movement is central to the poem's politics. Jyoti's final words, "Sangharsh karna hai"—"have to struggle/fight"—are transformed from an individual utterance into a collective imperative. The poem does not claim that the speaker can simply reproduce Jyoti's voice. Instead, it shows how an individual's words can enter collective memory and become part of a wider vocabulary of resistance.

Rancière's framework helps us understand this movement from individual suffering to collective speech. The "we" in Kandasamy's poem is not simply a grammatical plural. It is produced through an act of political identification. The poem takes those who have been reduced to spectators of violence and transforms them into participants in a collective response:

"we became the protest

that poured like blood

from a wounded night."

The image of protest "pouring like blood" refuses to separate political action from the body. Protest is not abstract political opinion; it emerges from wounded bodies and from the memory of violence inflicted upon them. The poem consequently converts mourning into political speech.

This question of who is permitted to speak becomes even more urgent in "Rape Nation." The poem begins not with an abstract discussion of gender violence but with a specific act of institutional violence in Hathras:

"In Hathras, cops barricade a raped woman's home, hijack

her corpse, set it afire on a murderous night."

The verbs are deliberately violent. The police do not simply "handle" or "manage" the body; they "barricade," "hijack," and "set it afire." Kandasamy's diction refuses the euphemistic language through which institutional violence can be sanitised. The body becomes the site upon which state power, caste power and patriarchal power intersect.

The next line makes caste central:

"In a land where

Dalits cannot rule, they cannot rage, or even mourn."

The progression from "rule" to "rage" to "mourn" is significant. Political exclusion operates at several levels: the right to govern, the right to express anger, and even the right to grieve. Mourning itself becomes political. The poem therefore expands the meaning of political speech

beyond formal political participation. To mourn publicly, to name violence, and to refuse victim-blaming become forms of resistance.

The repeated refrain,

“This has happened before, this will happen again,”

is central to the poem's structure. It initially appears almost fatalistic, as though history has trapped the present within an unbreakable cycle. Yet its repetition has another function: it prevents the individual case from being treated as an isolated aberration. The poem forces the reader to place Hathras within a longer history of caste and gender violence. It remembers the “satis,” “castecrossed lovers,” and “raped women” alongside the contemporary victim. The past is therefore not presented as safely concluded. It returns through the present.

Here, the concept of counter-memory becomes useful. Kandasamy's poem constructs an alternative historical memory from the perspective of those whose suffering is repeatedly excluded, distorted or minimised by dominant narratives. The line “This has happened before, this will happen again” does not simply establish historical continuity; it exposes the failure of existing social structures to produce meaningful change. The repetition becomes an accusation against a system that repeatedly treats structural violence as an exceptional event.

The poem's attack on Manus further demonstrates the importance of discourse in sustaining violence. Kandasamy writes:

“Manu said once, so his dickheads repeat today:

all women are harlots, all women are base.”

The deliberately abrasive phrase “his dickheads” is significant stylistically. Kandasamy refuses the reverence that can surround canonical patriarchal texts and instead strips the authority from the figure whose ideas she identifies as contributing to the continued regulation of women's bodies. Her language is intentionally confrontational because the poem is confronting a discourse that has historically legitimised inequality.

The four poems therefore reveal different operations of power while remaining connected through their concern with language. “Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You” shows the state producing the dissenter through labels such as “Leftist,” “Ultra-Left,” and “terrorist.” “The Discreet Charm of Neoliberalism” shows economic power producing a vocabulary in which exploitation can be made to sound like improvement. “Sangharsh Karna Hai” transforms the last words of an individual victim into collective political speech, while “Rape Nation” challenges the historical and institutional language through which caste and gender violence are normalised.

Power attempts to determine what an event means: an activist becomes a terrorist; exploitation becomes development; violence becomes an isolated incident; mourning becomes something that can be controlled. Kandasamy's poetry interrupts these processes by giving alternative names and forms to experiences that dominant discourse seeks to contain.

Guy Debord's presence in "The Discreet Charm of Neoliberalism" becomes useful as a supplementary theoretical point. The poem's epigraph and its treatment of "spin" suggest a world in which political reality is increasingly mediated through representations that can obscure the conditions from which they arise. Debord's analysis of the spectacle helps illuminate the distance between an event and the image or language through which that event is presented. Kandasamy's response, however, is not to abandon representation but to fight over it. Her poems become spaces in which the official version of reality can be interrupted and contested.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* demonstrates that political resistance is also a struggle over language, memory, and visibility. Across "Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You," "The Discreet Charm of Neoliberalism," "Sangharsh Karna Hai," and "Rape Nation," power appears not only through arrest, policing, caste and gendered violence, but through the words used to define and contain these realities. Foucault's understanding of discourse and disciplinary power helps illuminate how such structures regulate both bodies and speech, while Rancière's account of political voice reveals how Kandasamy brings silenced or marginalised experiences into the field of public speech. Her poetry repeatedly refuses the vocabulary through which violence is normalised: the "terrorist" is restored as a political subject, exploited workers are not allowed to disappear behind the language of "improvement," and individual experiences of sexual and caste violence become part of a collective memory of resistance. The collection ultimately suggests that when institutions attempt to control what may be spoken, remembered, or believed, poetry can become an alternative space of articulation. Kandasamy's resistance therefore lies not simply in speaking *against* power, but in reclaiming the language through which power has attempted to define reality.

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