

Not Lost, Only Subverted: Understanding Dalit Literary Aesthetics in Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*

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Abstract

Against the Savarna critique of Dalit literature as lacking in aesthetics, stands undefeated the Dalit writers' embracing a subverted aesthetic trajectory, in complete disapproval of the traditionally accepted aesthetic yardsticks. Born out as a reaction against the upper caste hegemony, Dalit writers have developed a different kind of aesthetics for Dalit literature, chronicling the very life of the community in a language as uncouth and coarse as their own experience. Audre Lorde rightly said, "You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tool". The guiding force in Dalit literature is 'art for life's sake'. Pain, and not pleasure is the ultimate goal there. Humanistic values of equality, justice and dignity form the grounding stones of Dalit literary confluence. Besides being a chronicler of pain and suffering, Dalit literature is a tool of revolt and rebellion against the hierarchical social machinery. In conformity, the Dalit critics too advocate for considering 'revolt' and 'cry' as the 'tenth' and 'eleventh' rasa to complete the rasa theory. They refuse to comply with the Brahmanical aesthetics and develop their own kind of aesthetic touchstone to evaluate the literature. The present paper aims at understanding Meena Kandasamy's poetry collection *Touch* in the light of Dalit literary aesthetics. The discussion will revolve around the traditional aesthetic criticism of Dalit literary canon as well as the counter-arguments put forward by Dalit artist.

Keywords: Dalit literature, subverted, aesthetics, revolt.

"If society ensures its purity by relegating the untouchable to a liminal space, literature went a step further. It ensures that the untouchable would not pollute its world even by touching that space" (Limbale 4). A cursory look at Indian literary history would prove that it is for the most part a history of upper caste writing. There the Dalit experience has either been underrepresented or misrepresented, the Dalit characters mocked, ridiculed or sympathized. The origin of Dalit literature can be traced back in the writings of shramanic leaders like Buddha, Kabir, Phule or Ambedkar but Dalit literature, as a separate genre or entity, gained recognition in 1958 at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh in Mumbai. It was in the hands of Dalit panthers like Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale that Dalit literature reached wider audience and started influencing Dalits across the border of Maharashtra to speak their hearts out. Dalit literature has traversed a long journey, in the way, has been impacted by, rather has befriended the peculiarities of individual geniuses, making its ground more resilient, diversified and enriched to withstand the harshest banter coming from the savarna exclusivist literariate and their empathizers. Meena Kandasamy is one of

the most well acknowledged of the Dalit writers to have taken the genre of Dalit poetry to such heights of artistic experimentation that out-rightly proves groundless the underestimation of Dalit literary piece of work by upper caste writers and critics. Kamala Das in the forward to the poetry collection *Touch* writes- "Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Mena Kandasamy's anthology" (7). Born in 1984, in a Tamil family, Meena Kandasamy is a writer cum translator cum activist, who rises to eminence with publication of the very first poetry collection, *Touch*. Comprised of 84 poems divided into seven groups *Bring him up to worship you, Touch, and some spice, To that more congenial spot, Lines of control, Slander in a slaughterhouse, and Their Daughters*, this anthology has maddened the savarna critics with its experimentation of forms, content, style and other things

"By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness"(Limble 19). The founding stone of Dalit literature is Dalit consciousness. It is deeply entrenched in a rebellious impetus against the caste system and its by-products. Dalit consciousness makes 'slaves conscious of their slavery' and fueled in them the fire of revolt and rebellion. At the centre of Dalit consciousness is the aspiration for an egalitarian society based on the values of equality, justice and fraternity. Dr B. R. Ambedkar is the main inspiration there.

Dalit literature has been facing criticism from its very birth as propagandist, negative, lacking in aesthetics so on and so forth. The resentment comes mainly from the savarna writers and critics. Classical writer, N.S. Phadke's criticism seems shallow, not just logically but in articulation too. He said, as quoted by Limble, "The kinds of contexts and events that are needed to add colour to a novel are not found in Dalit lives"(Limble 108). What he actually meant by this is that Dalit lives are not novel worthy. There is another critic, namely, Kusumavati Deshpande whose opinion sounds something like only the upper caste people of our society have claim on 'sanskaras'(culture) and the rest are all sanskaraless, uncultured and therefore cannot have 'an articulate voice' or 'technical skill'. For Kusumavati Deshpande, "It is difficult for Dalits to find an articulate voice and be technically skilled because they are deprived of all sanskara"(Deshpande 3).

Aesthetics is the philosophical study of the nature of beauty and nature of taste. It is closely related to a philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art, and its concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated. The aesthetic consideration of a work of art takes into account the various components and multifarious aspects of the concerned piece of work. The aestheticism of literature involves discussion on its form, style, language, its effects on the readers. The Dalit writers are mocked for writing life narratives. It is even alleged that "Dalit writers' output ends after writing one autobiographical book"(Limble 111). However, it is the language of Dalit literature that has been the solid ground of scathing attack of the savarna critics down through the ages. Dalit writers make use of the very uncouth-impolite spoken language of their own community. It would be inauthentic to describe the experience of Dalit in standard language which does not include many words of the dialect the Dalits speak and even if it does, the words cannot capture the true essence of the root word. There would surely be semantic gap. Kandasamy is the first Dalit poet to compose and publish in English. She realized the immense potentiality in writing in English which has been acknowledge by the greatest of Dalit leaders of all times, Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. She dreams of an English which accommodates differences, assimilates diversity. In the poem "Mulligatawny Dreams", she writes :

I dream of an english
Full of the words of my language

An english in small letters
An english that shall tire a white man's tongue
An english where small children practice with smooth
round pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha (6-11)

The 'e' of English is not capitalized. Kandasamy hopes for a common noun 'english' and not a proper noun 'English', an english which can codify the experiences of both a white man and a children of Dalit ghetto.

Not only with language, but with forms and style too, Meena Kandasamy's pen proves its artistic brilliance. Poems like "Advaita: the Ultimate Question", "Becoming a Brahmin", "Liquid Tragedy: Karmachedu 1985", "Elegy to my first keyboard", "Blackboard Poems", have taken the genre of Dalit poetry to exceptional height. "Advaita: the Ultimate Question" has the most unique two parallel vertical line division, concluding in a single line placed in the middle position. What is far more interesting is the punctuation mark which has been allotted another single line :

Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
Will	You
Ever	Agree?
No	Matter
What	You
Preach,	Answer
Me.	Through
Your	Saints.
One	More
Final	Question

Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be
One	
? (37)	

Being a human is a biological process. Becoming one has emotional, ethical dimension to it. But becoming a brahmin, for Meena Kandasamy, is all too mechanical. She considers becoming a Brahmin to be a manufactured product which follows certain steps to be in exact shape. The process, as described by the poet are:

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.

Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.

Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.

Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End. (1-9)

“Liquid Tragedy: Karmachedu 1985” is another example of structural experimentation in modern Dalit poetry. The very structure of the poem has a visual similarity with a pitcher. In this poem, a Dalit woman draws water with her pitcher from the same pond where an upper caste fellow gets his buffalo bathed. The woman tries to resist which results in a fight leading to massacre and a complete exodus of the Dalit people from the village.

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit

Drinking Water for the Dalits

The very same Pond.

Practice for eons.

A bold Dalit lady

dares to question injustice.

Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation

is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.
 Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly
 consult History—"If there was a way out then,
 there shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with
 Esteemed Father of our Nation. His *Samaadhi* speaks:
 If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them
 set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example
 is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories
 Dalits exit—weary of the persecution
 And wander all over the nation.
 Again, a Dalit Exodus.
 Total Surrender (52)

The biggest concern of those critics searching for loopholes in Dalit writings is the effect these texts have on its readers. Traditional aestheticism certifies pleasure born of beauty as the primary effect a work of art can have on its audience. Pleasure has the highest appeal to an aesthete. But Dalit literature is not about pleasure or beauty, it is about the sufferings as well as the revolt of the Dalits. Therefore, its aesthetics cannot be based on the principles of a normative aesthetics of literature where the privileged derives pleasure from beauty solely. The very name of the anthology *Touch* has painstakingly driven home the aspiration of the Dalit writers which is to touch the hearts of thousands of readers with the account of pain, suffering of the Dalit people. Following are some of the heart-breaking description of the violence the Dalits had been subjected to down through the ages. In a poem titled "Prayers", a person suffering from typhoid for ten days visits a savarna temple to seek blessings, but is caught and thrashed to death. Kandasamy Writes :

An irked Rajput surged forth
 And smote the untouchable with a iron rod.
 He, warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate encroachment
 At the temple. By a Dalit. Deathly howls of a feeble-voiced
 rent the air, fervently seeking holy intervention.
 God, Lifeless as ever—watched grimly with closed eyes.
 In resigned submission, the sick man's Life was given away.
 Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll
 Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion. (14-22)

Anyone humane can't stand this scene. In another poem "We will rebuild worlds", a couple suffers exemplary punishment for violating the law of endogamy. The description goes -

“poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/ or hanged them in public/ because a man and a woman/dared to love” (18-20).

Dalit literature is ‘purposive’. Limbale describes its purpose variously as ‘revolutionary’, ‘transformational’, and ‘liberatory’. Every Dalit writer is an activist first. He is bound by social responsibility, moral commitment, in the first place, to make his fellowmen aware of their oppression and raise in rage against the history of subordination and subjugation. The call for revolution as perpetuated in the poem “We will rebuild world” is one hard to be ignored by any democratic person. Kandasamy cries:

We will learn/ how to fight/ with the substantial
spontaneity/ with which we first learnt/ how to love.

So/ now/ upon a future time/
there will be a revolution.

It will begin in our red-hot dreams that surge that/ scorch
that/ scald that sizzle like lava/ but never settle down
never/ pungently solidify.

It will begin/ when the song in the sway/ of our hips/ will
lead us to dance and sing/ and stand up straight / put up a
pretty fight/ redeem and reclaim/ the essence of our
earth. (43-53)

These lines resonates the very poetic exuberance of J. V. Pawar , “ The twisted fists won’t loosen now/The coming revolution won’t wait for you/ We have endured enough, no more endurance now” (Anand and Zellote 141). Another poem “ Model” reverberates the same revolutionary desire,“Somewhere, my afflicted conscience screams:/Whatever the evil do,/Let them not mutilate the hope in her eyes./ It will see her break the centuries of servitude” (23-26).The cry in a Dalit work of art is ‘art for life’s sake’, and not ‘art for art’s sake’.

Limbale argues as to why giving ‘extraordinary pain’ would not be considered as a parameter of literary standard while those literature providing ‘extraordinary pleasure’ is considered beautiful and standard. There are other critics like Acharya Jawdekar and Yadunath Thatte who propose as suggested by SaranKumar Limbale to include and recognise ‘revolt’ and ‘cry’ as the ‘tenth’ and ‘eleventh’ rasa consecutively to complete the Rasa theory. These critics have actually given a call for subversion of the traditional aesthetic yardsticks for it is impossible to map out the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the existing framework of conventional aesthetics.

Limbale has aptly put, “Our path is different, our direction is different. Therefore we should spend our energies in travelling our own path and seeking our own direction”(Limbale 21). Dalit literature, to a great extent, serves as an antidote to the exclusivity of the

mainstream literary tradition. Someone has to stand against the misrepresentation of Dalit characters and Dalit experience in the Brahmanic literature. Dalit writers have taken upon themselves this responsibility. And as we all know what Audre Lorde said, 'You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tool', the Dalit writers have well rejected the Brahmanic principles and yardsticks of literary creation. Thematically speaking, countering/debrahmanising the mythological stories is one of the most opted motif runs current in a piece of literary art by a Dalit. Meena Kandasamy is no exception to this. In the poem, "Eklavian", she vents out her angst against a guru who discriminates among his pupil. The brahmanical literature has glorified the guru dakshina of Eklavya but the poet here questions the same. She criticizes how a Dalit with immense potential is debarred and nipped in the bud even before she/he gets a chance to enter the competition. The poet consoles Eklavyas thus- "you can do a lot of things /With your left hand./Besides fascist Dronacharya warrant Left-handed treatment" (2-5). Limbale quotes M. N. Wankhede who had supported this move of the Dalit writers thus- "Dalit writers should abhor values determined by middle class writers and critics"(Limbale 107). This counter- literary tradition of the Dalit writers is, in itself, a very important aspect of their anti-caste activism.

The demand for a separate aesthetics as put forward by the Dalit writers has been sharply frowned upon by savarna critics. P.S. Rege vented out thus-

Art should be considered only as art. Dalit literature, being Dalit, cannot demand separate artistic yardsticks. It will have to be evaluated according to the autonomous and independent standards of art. To demand a different aesthetic for Dalit literature is like attempting to create a separate province-there is no justification for Dalit writers to develop a separate criticism. If their literature is great, it will stand any test, any time.(Limbale 106)

Kawthekar goes one step forward in saying that if the universal values of art are rejected then Dalit literature would have no framework for evaluation (12). What these two critics tried to establish is the supremacy of a single yardsticks for artistic evaluation. This very insistence on a single aesthetic framework for evaluation of literary works can well be called no less than 'literary dictatorship'. Sarankumar Limbale termed this as 'cultural dictatorship'. He commented, 'To assert that someone's writing will be called literature only when 'our' literary standards can be imposed on it is a sign of cultural dictatorship'(107).The creation of a literary work is the collective outcome of the experiences, likes, dislikes of the writers and the social surrounding he/she lives in. The emotions an artistic work arises in a reader too are equally influenced by the reader's mental make-up. Both these dimensions are flexible with time, place. Hence, how can the aesthetic parameter for its artistic evaluation be fixed?

Sarankumar Limbale sets the aesthetics of Dalit literature on three principles. The first one is said to be the social commitment of the artist. The second one asks for the consideration of the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation and last but not the least, it's the capable of raising the readers' consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice or fraternity that define a Dalit work of art as aesthetically qualified. Indian literary canon follows the tri-partite fabrication of satyam-shivam-sundaram. This has been reformulated with more realistic and material, ideological base in Dalit literature. The central focus in Dalit literature is human-centric. Satyam, the truth, is reconceptualized as prioritizing human beings above everything and anything; Shivam, the sacred, as the liberation of human beings; and Sundaram, the beauty, as the humanity of human beings. So, what is called as 'lack of aesthetics' in Dalit literature, is actually reformulation and re-fabrication of it.

Dalit literature is revolutionary literature. It has been developed as a reaction against the mainstream literary tradition. The obvious deliberation of the writers, therefore, is to refute the existing parameter for evaluating a literary piece and establish a new aesthetic paradigm where the yardsticks would be reconceptualized, subverted and reformulated for greater effectiveness of their desired goal of literary activism.

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