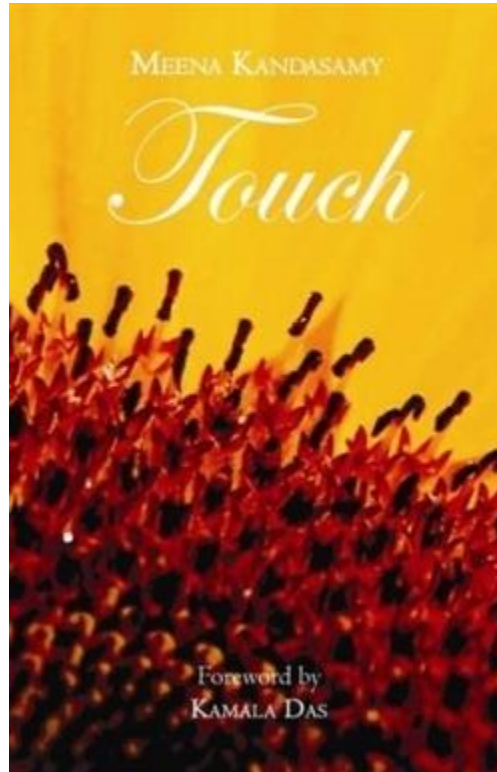


Treatment of Women in Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*
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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy is an emerging twentieth century Dalit poet, fiction writer, translator, journalist, and social activist. Her first collection of poetry, *Touch* (2006) is a scathing, militant attack on the perpetuation of the social oppression of the Indian women. It discusses the issues of caste, gender, sex, and cultural discriminations of the marginalized Indian women. The Indian system of life has some sort of social mechanisms, arrangements, customs, and institutions that act as covert modes of establishing and perpetuating the subjugation of women. India, being a male-ruled, patriarchal society, denied women of their fundamental rights as people. A woman was denied alongside numerous different rights, the privilege to education and the unequivocal power about her own life. The Indian caste system also has relevance to women's discriminatory status. The features of the caste system like "endogamy" act as a mechanism of retaining control over the labour and sexuality of women. The concepts like "purity" and "pollution," which segregate people from each other and regulate mobility of women deprecate the issue of gender equality. The present paper focuses on how Kandasamy's poetry concentrates on caste annihilation and the issue of women's equality on par with a man. It also portrays that Dalit women not just as the victims of

the lust of the higher caste men, but as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and champions the cause of the equality of women. Hence, this paper helps the marginalised people who plead for liberty, equality, fraternity, and Justice to lead their life with honour and dignity.

Key Words: Meena Kandasamy, *Touch*. social activist, sexual harassment, social oppression, discrimination, caste annihilation.

Introduction

Indian English Literature has attained an independent status in the domain of world Literature. It reflects Indian culture, convention, social esteems, and even Indian history through the delineation of life in India and Indians living somewhere else. Indian young women writers have an uncommon preferred standpoint amid this regard as they require themselves been presented to the anxieties and along these lines the strain to that the women square measure subjected. A critical improvement in modern Indian writings and Dalit works are the extension of a women's activist or woman- centred approach, an approach that tries to extend and translate ability from the point of view of a female awareness and sensibility. Dalit women have been victims of patriarchy as much as other women, and still endure huge obstacles to quiet presence. Under these conditions, it is uncommon to see a Dalit woman in a position of leadership, whether in the home, at work place or in social or political institutions. It is not feasible to the possibility that a Dalit woman should have power or basic leadership expert and be unengaged to practice it. Consequently, despite she figures out how to acknowledge such an a dependable balance, it's a most powerless position-Dalit young ladies sarpanches in punchayat more often than not confront mortification, dangers and physical brutality, because of the group can't simply acknowledge a Dalit woman as a pacesetter. Meena Kandasamy is one among the most remarkable Dalit young women writers in the historical backdrop of Tamil Dalit Literature. She delineates her outrage against caste and sexual discrimination which has crippled the Dalits to dehumanized state as they're subjected to mortification and mistreatment.

Kandasamy is a poet, translator and dynamic activist from Chennai. As a contemporary Indian woman writer Kandasamy is agonized to witness the age-old social practices like untouchability based on caste system existing in Indian society. She voices her anger against caste based injustice which has impaired the marginalized to dehumanized condition as they are subjected to oppression and humiliation. Her two collections of poetry *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) portray the real picture of the marginalized in Indian society. In other words, her works focus on poverty, oppression, injustice, caste annihilation, linguistic identity and pangs and predicaments of women. Maht, Mohan Lal in his article, "Meena Kandasamy's Touch: An Articulation of the Voice of the Marginalized" observed "Casteism is an old social evil which is used to subjugate the lower stratum of the hierarchal social structure of Indian society and to uphold discrimination as well as gain unfair advantage over the 'others,' marginalized (12). The first collection of poems of Kandasamy titled *Touch* includes 84 poems is published in 2006. It is a sweltering, activist aggression on the procreation of the social ill-treatment of the Indian women. It speaks about the problems of the unseemly behaviour of the women. She illustrates the problems of women, specifically the marginalised women not as the victims of the lust of the upper-caste

men but as rebels fighting against the abuse perpetuated against them and champions the cause of the equality of women.

Gender inequality has repeatedly been taken up as a subject matter by the Indian writers in their creative endeavours. But, the problem of the disparagement and exploitation of woman is not spoken about all things regarded. The problems related to women have rarely been regarded as significant either by political leaders or writers until as of late. The reasons may require to do with the financial status and socio-political condition of women who endure to remain voiceless even today. Some contemporary Indian writers, like Kamala Das, Arundathi Roy, Sivakami, Bama, and Kandasamy, voice out their anxieties with respect to the sexual politics and the sexual orientation in their works.

Kandasamy stands unique from other contemporary Indian women writers who are gotten amidst dualities, on account of the trouble between what they require and what they are supposed to write; she portrays the themes like caste discrimination and gender inequality with a legitimate accuracy. Kandasamy examines shrewdly the complicating system of never-ending suppression of the Indian woman in her works. She represents women, specifically the marginalised women not similarly as the casualties of the desire of the higher caste men yet as dissidents battling against the treachery maintained against them and champions the reason for the balance of women. The present paper focuses on how Kandasamy's poetry concentrates on caste annihilation and the issue of women's equality on par with a man. It also portrays that Dalit women not just as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men, but as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and champions the cause of the equality of women. Hence, this paper helps the marginalised people who plead for liberty, equality, fraternity, and Justice to lead their life with honour and dignity.

Status of Marginalized Women

The strong women characters portrayed in the poems of Kandasamy wage open wars to fight against patriarchal sovereignty to free women from their inferior position with the vigour of cognizance to provide them a transformative action. With prophetic understanding she examined the convivial and political system of society and fight against the austere caste system of India. Her principal consideration in her poetry is to empower women mainly the marginalised women to acquire a comprehensive vigilance and knowledge about their miserable situation. Her poems are born out from her own experiences and her commitment with the espousing caste and gender equivalence. Her poems provide a visual effect; she has a way of roping her readers in a forceful manner. She breaks the long silence that has misled traditional Indian women, their feminine experience and their female world.

Oppression of the Marginalized Women

A woman is perceived as a property in the male-dominated society. The men of all castes and classes connive in making certain belief of conduct and delineate the direction of female reinforcement and restrict her to the four walls of her home. In one of her poems in *Touch*, entitled "Songs of Summer," Kandasamy condemns the patriarchal society for concerning the woman as its serf and a needed dissent:

Where she could see the sunlight
Only from the lattice windows.
Domesticated into drudgery she is just
Another territory, worn out by wars. (35-38)

Kandasamy also denounces the society for not considering a woman as a woman. The male chauvinistic society concerns a woman as as a mother, a spouse, a sister and additionally a goddess, yet never as a woman herself. A woman's righteousness is judged upon her level of adjustment and servitude to her father, siblings, husband, grandchildren, and virtually every other man in her family and society.

Harassment of Dalits

In "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu," Kandasamy writes about the renowned Slaughter of Karamchedu which took place in 1985 in Andhra Pradesh where six Madiga (lower-caste) men are killed and three Madiga women are raped by the Kammas men (upper caste). The slaughter followed when a Madiga woman protested against the washing of buffaloes by the Kammas in the pond whose water the Madigas drank. Here, Kandasamy records:

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... (1-9)

Through this poem Kandasamy talks to the specialist of the favoured, and their endemic obnoxious state of mind towards the marginalized. It seems to be bizarre that unconcerned of passing many years of freedom, the delusion of social impartiality is still unachieved and the denied are forced to lead a hidden life. It is persuasive in a caste-ridden Indian culture Madiga men are killed and the women are raped because they are socially and economically powerless, they are weak.

Treatment of Women by Patriarchal Society

In "Dignity" Kandasamy calls upon the special men to be responsible and valiant towards the oppressed class. She believes in pride and uniformity of all. She aspires that they would not refuse due share of the downtrodden, maintaining their self-respect and determination. But, in a warning note she lets them know not to restrain the underrated with no rhyme and reason and renounce their dignity. This is presented by her in the following lines:

You stick to your faith
the incurable sickness
of your minds,
We don't stop you from continuing
to tend centuries

of cultivate superegos.
We will even let you wallow
in the rare happiness
that hierarchy provides
But don't suppress
our rightful share of dignity. (7-17)

In caste subjugated patriarchal Indian society, untouchable women are doubly exploited being untouchable and women. They pursue through the persecution, abuse, and untouchability from the upper-caste, while they are beaten at home by their husbands. Sometimes their brothers and fathers also oppress them. In this way, they are doubled victims. They are exposed, deprived, assaulted, attacked, ambushed and blazed for no reason aside from the class they are. They are exploited for sexual vindication. It is their fate to bear perils of assault and inhumanity from the hands of the upper-caste. At home they are placed in pitiful situation as well.

Social Condition of the Marginalized Women

Kandasamy is plagued to witness the desperate condition of the women of downtrodden. In her poem, "Narration" she presents the heart rendering grief of the victimised woman who is exploited by her landlords. The very shadow of an untouchable may dirt the upper castes; yet, they are not contaminated while attacking a Dalit young woman. It is expounded by her as follows:

I'll weep to you about
My landlord, and with
My mature gestures.
You will understand:
The torn sari, dishevelled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then. (1-7)

In Indian context, physical and mental exploitation of the young women of poor people segment is awfully normal. The most striking view is that the perpetrator needed in these sexual strikes find simple escape because of their high rank connections. In her poem "Shame," Kandasamy depicts how an untouchable young woman becomes the victim of a gang rape. But, the rapists are safeguarded as they have a place with upper stature and the innocent and defenceless young girl endures humiliation and desperate pain and ultimately chooses suicide:

Gang Rape.
Two severe syllables
implied in her presence
perpetuate the assault.
Public's prying eyes
segregate her the victim.
But the criminals have
already maintained.
Their caste is classic shield.
.....
Gory scars on the wretched body

serves as constant reminders
of disgrace, helpless. (1-9,14-16)

The helpless girl sets herself into fire as a solution to this sin:

Bravely, in search of
a definite solution,
and elusive purification,
she takes the test of the fire.
the ancient medicine for shame. (22-26)

Traditional System of Indian Society

Kandasamy's poem, "Becoming a Brahmin," retrieves the age-old conventions of Indian society, where the women do not have their right to select their own companions, and are in a route impelled to marry the individual, chosen by others, which is even criticized by the leaders like Gandhi and others and in patriot accounts which guaranteed and propounded secularism and equal rights to all. But, the desolation in the lives of women is heightened in her poem "Mascara" with the moment subtle elements of the distress of a whore and her inward quandary before setting out on another obvious consensual sex. The ignoble subtle elements of her physical and psychic torment repeat over and over all through the poem with her endeavour to behold back to her implicit and unfulfilled variegated dreams, which radiates through her silent tears. The allegory of "mascara" which manifests on numerous occasions with the unfurling of the poem is in a way her conscious effort not to reveal her long repressed resentment and not to wince before the social structure:

The last thing she does
before she gets ready to die
once more, of violation,
she applies the mascara...
.....
Mascara...
it serves to tell her
that long buried hazy dreams
of a virgin soul
have dark outlines. (1-4,12-16)

The origin of these hardships goes back to the age when people from the upper class used to infuse the 'Devadasi' and other concubines and later deviated from their liabilities. This culture has been prevailing over the years where the illegitimate children and mainly the girls endure their heritage and the stain related to their identity is beyond annihilation and they are obligated to be regarded as social outcastes in this hegemonic social system which evidently emerges out of some approaches of forceful ethical morals. This is gracefully presented in the poem, "Mascara":

Somewhere
long ago
in an
untraceable
mangled

matrilineal
family tree
of temple prostitutes
her solace is sought.
It has happened for centuries...
Empty consolations soothe violated bodies.
Sex clings to her devadasi skin,
assumed superficialities don't wear off,
Deliverance doesn't arrive. (21-34)

The predicament of the prostitutes which is sensitively portrayed with the composition of this poem is evocative of the appropriate representation of the agony of a woman, who is compelled to turn herself into a prostitute. "Mascara" tries exploring the anxiety and despair of transgression of her own self which portrays a monotonous sexual intercourse with a unknown person.

'Body' as a recurring image in the poems of Kandasamy is not only manifested with the categorical analysis of the untold sufferings of the prostitutes in this male chauvinistic social structure, but also manages to connect the idea of love with that of consensual sexual intercourse. Her poem "My Lover Speaks of Rape" perfectly delivers the agony of a woman for her lover's negligence and lack of reciprocation. The precise analysis of the bruises and scratches reveal the tendency of her lover to consider her as an object to appease his sensuality. Thus, the poem expels:

...Tragedy in
Bridal red remains a fresh, flushing bruise across
Brown-yellow skinscapes,
vibrant but made Muted through years of silent, waiting skin.
I am absent.
They talk of everyday assault that turns blue,
violet and black in high-color symphony. (13-19)

The above lines entailed an effort to generalize the agonies in the lives of the women which has been enduring over centuries. The absence of themselves from relationships evidently manifests the unanswered love of the women, who are considered nothing but the objects for their sexual pleasure which has become to be normal thing in their devitalised lives.

In a way Kandasamy's poetry actualises her claim to rejuvenate the third world women and to urge them to express their own dreams, aspirations, self-reliant outlooks and speak for themselves instead of spoken off by their male counterparts. Her focal point on woman's body as the main motif of her poetry and her inclination to resolve the diversified spatial and temporal proportions of suppression and how they become the subject to the various forms of social brutality are an experiment from her part to restore the self-consciousness of the women so that they can oppose the prevailing beliefs of this inegalitarian male-dominated society which tries to persuade them and legalise the prevalent enslavement of women and their repression in smaller grooves.

Kandasamy celebrates her womanhood by singing women's dreams and speaking their bodies. Her poems incite consciousness of women's psyche and her poetry bolstered other writers

to emphasis their poetry in a socio-cultural scenario as it accelerates their transformation from a marginal status to a central one. In her dreams, the modern woman is not the suffering wife, crying widow or sacrificing mother or loving sister. No other feminist poet in India can attain the outright rebellious dimensions like Kandasamy because she became the mouthpiece for revealing the right of every woman to fight and revolt against all those patriarchal forces in society which connive to impede the evolution of their personality.

Conclusion

To conclude, Meena Kandasamy's select poems from the collection *Touch*, presents the unadorned truth of the society where people living in the margins are still victims of senseless and irrational beliefs which bereave them of fundamental rights. It is also the voice of those who are chided to silence for centuries. Her poetry is an attack on the social discriminations enduring in the society such as caste system, cultural hegemony and suppression of women. Her poetry is a literary document of the humiliations, dilemmas, and barbarities experienced by Dalit women.

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