

# Savage Treatment of Untouchables in Meena Kandasamy's “One-Eyed”

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## Abstract

Meena Kandasamy always sketches the weakness and struggle of the Dalits in her poems. In her poem, “One-Eyed”, she delineates the continued existence of oppressive structures of caste, class, race and gender domination within the Indian society. She has designed her poem in such a way to incorporate the marginalized, the voices of the Dalit community. She delineates the savage treatment of untouchables. The perspectives of the inanimate objects on the Dalits are quite common but the society rebels against the use of inanimate objects touched by the untouchables.

**Keywords:** Meena Kandasamy, “One-Eyed”, Dalit, untouchable, community, inanimate.

Maintaining equality is a major issue expected in the world at the present time. The treatment of inequality prevents the peaceful atmosphere of a society. Inequality prevails because of the discrimination among people related to the class, caste, race and gender. Meena Kandasamy brings out some of the literary works that express caste, class, racism and also brings out the depressed condition of the marginalized people especially the Dalits who live among the exploited people.

Meena Kandasamy is a Chennai-based, contemporary poet, fiction writer, translator and activist. She articulates the voices of her own community, her own country to which her forefathers belonged at a given point of time or history. She tries to recreate the lives of her community native to her and makes her voice heard in the dominant discourse. She finds herself marginalized on the psychological level and suffers from a split self. She presents herself as a Dalit woman writer and retells the Tamil myths by feministic and anti-caste perspectives.

Meena Kandasamy approaches the state of her birth as an outcast and she tries to scan the inside with open-mindedness and neutrality. Her literary output treats all shades of identity crisis such as alienation, marginalization, despair, readjustment, assimilation, adaption and adoption. Her writings are essentially autobiographical and mostly her protagonists and the significant characters are marginalised people especially the Dalits. Her works centre on the complexities, the extraordinary range of possibilities, situations present in Indian family life whereas her themes, however, remain universal - love, loss, separation, heroism, despair,

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happiness, untouchable, etc. The poems of Meena Kandasamy offers contrapuntal readings of Indian multiculturalism, readings that give scope for alternative views of a whole ensemble of marginalized attitudes – cultural, political, social and literary.

The Dalits have very few opportunities to alter their fate because the society, which is controlled by the elite class, closes the options like education, awareness and equal rights to elevate their position. Meena Kandasamy always sketches the vulnerability and struggle of subjugated human beings in her poems. In her works Meena Kandasamy delineates the continued existence of oppressive structures of caste, class, race and gender domination within the boundaries of the secular Indian democracy. She has designed her poems in such a way to incorporate the marginalized, the voices of the Dalit community.

Meena Kandasamy's poem "One-Eyed" was published in Ms. The poem talks about Dhanam, a little girl who feels very thirsty, touches the pot and drank a glass of water from the pot to quench her thirst with her "clumsy hand". The learned teacher in the school slapped on the little girl's cheek especially for breaking the rules. The concept of untouchability is practised mainly against the lower caste as well as the lower section people. They are the worst sufferers. As they do not have the political and economic power to fight against the upper class people's supremacy, they mutely accept subjugation. They do not have the voice to express their conditions and portray themselves before the world. Even the inanimate objects surrounding her feel the pitied condition of the girl:

“the pot sees just another noisy child  
the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand  
the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst” (One-Eyed)

Even the pot, glass and water take pity upon the girl. These inanimate objects feel for her and they allow themselves to quench her thirst. In reality, the Dalits are not allowed mingle with the public and they are not allowed to touch vessels, or any other items used by the upper caste. They have to use separate vessels, pots, glasses, etc. Dhanam in the poem is a submissive girl. She does not even react to the upper class supremacy. But she sees a kind of world which is torn into two. The poet pathetically concludes the poem as:

“dhanam sees a world torn in half.  
her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,  
the price for a taste of that touchable water” (One-Eyed)

Water is a natural resource and it never gulps but sacrifices itself to all creatures in the world. But some human beings divide water for the upper caste and water for the lower caste. It is very nonsensical to think deeply about the classification and caste system which still prevails in some places. Meena Kandasamy has concentrated on the pessimistic image of her land, gives an insight into rural India and mentions the atrocities committed on the

untouchables. The children of the low castes were denied the right to drink water with the other; Dhanam was slapped severely when she drank. What is the price for tasting that untouchable water? It is nothing but a slap and for that particular reason her one-eye is damaged. She sees the torn world but not a complete one. In her eyes, the world seems to be partial one and it shows partiality to a particular group.

Meena Kandasamy reveals that the weight of social pressure operates to confirm in each case their extreme subordination despite whatever personal effort may be applied towards upward mobility on the part of the untouchables or towards autonomy on the part of the woman. In an interview with Sampsonia Way Magazine, Meena Kandasamy remarks, “My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people; my poetry speaks for my people.” (Mitsu 1)

Meena Kandasamy vehemently condemns and criticizes the devilish practice of casteism and savage treatment of the untouchables in the name of supremacy of the caste Hindus who, according to Hindu mythology are supposed to be the most cherished children of the Brahma, the Supreme Soul. It is the hypocrisy of the Hindu tradition which renders the untouchables as born of the feet of the Brahma, therefore regarded as the lowest in social hierarchy. In the surrounding villages also the low castes underwent untold sufferings. Meena Kandasamy recounts the brutal and inhuman treatment given to the little girl of this caste. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Education is a panacea” but here in this poem the reader could see that an institution corrupts the little child. According to Meena Kandasamy, the school, hospital and the press violate the rules.

The social pictures of Meena Kandasamy look ironical and depressing, but they have a message to be shared with the readers. The contrast involved has to be well understood by the readers who want to comprehend what Meena Kandasamy suggests about the relationship between art and society. Her artistic device of contrast gives real insight into the way of the Dalits healthy adjustment in Indian society at a time when other options are available to them. Time passes, things change but the fate and struggle of the untouchables and subalterns do not change. They remain stagnant at the same point where they were before independence. The representation of the Dalits in her poem is realistic, putting aside many controversial issues. Symbols and images are used adeptly by Meena Kandasamy in her poem. She gains maturation as an artist of excellence, significance, relevance and consequence. The style of Meena Kandasamy’s writing is like that of E.E. Cummings, a familiar American poet who is known for small letters in his poems. Meena Kandasamy’s poems are characterised by both ethnocentric and minority discourse features. Naturally, her poems clearly portray the anxieties, alienation and feeling of insecurity of a modern day Dalit. She also uses different narrative techniques in her creative work.

Meena Kandasamy voices for the unvoiced especially for the Dalits. Human beings are born equal in dignity and rights. But basic rights such as right to live, right to protest, right to express oneself, right to live safely from violence and torture, etc are being denied to the marginalized communities. They continue to endure the evils of bonded labour system with their poverty and literacy. The Government of India plans and introduces welfare schemes in paper but could not uproot it completely in effective practice. The benefits of the schemes are pocketed by the politicians and bureaucrats. The concepts of equality, fraternity, liberty, and democracy in Indian context seem to be illusory for these unfortunate layers of the society. Even the inanimate objects have life and see this world as one, but the treatment of the Dalits are dissimilar.

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