

## DALIT WOMEN SPEAK DIFFERENTLY: READING POETRY BY MEENA KANDASAMY

PRATIBHA

**Abstract:** Though Indian women writing poetry in English have adopted 'gender' as a principle to ground their experiences, articulating a quest for identity, self-discovery, self-assertion; writing extensively about the drudgery and drabness of quotidian life, intricacies of familial relationships, vicissitudes of love-experience and man-woman relationship; in order to challenge phallogocentric discourse, interrogate patriarchal canons and forge an idiom and language steeped in feminine sensibility; yet their protest is mired in individualistic perspective. The tropes of 'desire' 'sexuality' and 'body' do emerge as central to the lexicon and idiom of these women but the representation of the category of 'woman' largely remains monolithic, centered on self. The engagement with 'female body,' in visualizing it as the site where the intersectional ideologies of caste, class and gender collude remains absent. The nexus/links between larger structures of domination like religion, patriarchy, caste system that discursively construct the 'subjectivity' of and 'difference' amongst Indian women, remain largely unexplored.

This paper intends to critically examine the poetry of Meena Kandasamy published in two collections namely; *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) to explicate that the 'I or i' in her poetry it is not limited to an essentialist assertion of a single 'woman' rather it is anti-essentialist, a shape-shifter and performative. The category of 'woman,' as represented in Kandasamy's poems, is not undifferentiated, homogenous or conflict free, rather it manifests 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin's term); allowing "conflicting voices to be heard from contending perspectives" (Sarangi). Hence, her poems mark an epistemological shift within the tradition of Indian poetry in English by women by positioning the experiences of Dalit women that hitherto remain marginalized and obliterated in the symbolic domain of English Writing in English, right at the center of the mainstream literature.

**Keywords:** Indian Poetry In English, Dalit Poetry, Literature And Identity, Women Writers And Images Of Women.

**Introduction:** Though Indian women writing poetry in English have adopted 'gender' as a principle to ground their experiences, articulating a quest for identity, self-discovery, self-assertion; writing extensively about the drudgery and drabness of quotidian life, intricacies of familial relationships, vicissitudes of love-experience and man-woman relationship; in order to challenge phallogocentric discourse, interrogate patriarchal canons and forge an idiom and language steeped in feminine sensibility; yet their protest is mired in individualistic perspective. The tropes of 'desire' 'sexuality' and 'body' do emerge as central to the lexicon and idiom of these women but the representation of the category of 'woman' largely remains monolithic, centered on self. The engagement with 'female body,' in visualizing it as the site where the intersectional ideologies of caste, class and gender collude remains absent. The nexus/links between larger structures of domination like religion, patriarchy, caste system that discursively construct the 'subjectivity' of and 'difference' amongst Indian women, remain largely unexplored.

This paper intends to critically examine the poetry of Meena Kandasamy published in two collections namely; *Touch* (2006) [1] and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) [2] to explicate that the 'I or i' in her poetry it is not

limited to an essentialist assertion of a single 'woman' rather it is anti-essentialist, a shape-shifter and performative. The category of 'woman,' as represented in Kandasamy's poems, is not undifferentiated, homogenous or conflict free, rather it manifests 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin)[3] ; allowing "conflicting voices to be heard from contending perspectives" (Sarangi) [4]. Hence, her poems mark an epistemological shift within the tradition of Indian poetry in English by women by positioning the experiences of Dalit women who hitherto remain marginalized and obliterated in the symbolic domain of English Writing in English, right at the center of the mainstream literature.

Ridiculing the many disagreeable facets of gender discrimination rampant in contemporary India; Meena Kandasamy, an avowed feminist, uses her poetry incisively to combat patriarchy and engage with the material, social and cultural modalities through which gender ideology constructs the contingent and heterogeneous category of 'woman'. Using Judith Butler's theoretical paradigm, by gender I imply; a culturally mediated narrative that entails 'iterated performance' of masculine and feminine roles that produces the effect of 'true gender'. The narrative is, "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform,

produce and sustain discrete and polar gender as cultural fictions” (Butler 179) not agreeing to which has attendant punishment. It is not fixed, coherent and stable but plural, provisional and situated; with the subversive potential of ‘drag’ [5].

Kandasamy’s extremely personal, often confessional mode of writing records her private sensibility which is permeated with sociological awareness. Jaydeep Sarangi in his review of *Touch* writes thus:

*Touch* has been increasingly identified as political collection, because of polemics of Meena’s verse. She is outspoken and blunt. . . . Hers is a fiercely feminine sensibility which articulates without inhibition the hurts it has received in an insensitive and largely man-made world. (n.pag.)

Written as an emphatic response to the Blank Noise project initiated by Jasmeen Patheja in August 2003 in Bangalore, her poem “Give me the clothes” seeks to trigger dialogue on the issue of sexual harassment on

streets, that comprises of catcalling and eve-teasing, considered innocuous and notoriously difficult crimes to prove. The poem corroborates the project’s agenda: to defy the notion of ‘modesty’ and problematize the assumption that ‘the victim asked for it’ with her clothes being the incitement to sexual harassment or assault, as the poet imagines women across age groups; be it a girl at eleven in her school uniform or a women at twenty one in “Six yard of printed pink floral raw silk” being subjected to harassment despite their modest dresses. She demands, “give me the clothes / that set me forever free”

( *Touch* 133). The note of cynicism that reverberates in her poetry, pervades these lines from “Apologies for living on. . .” as well, where the poet decries the perverted society infested with oglers and lecherous stalkers:

once-  
i was making choices  
with insanely safe ideas of  
fleeing madly and flying away.  
i was a helpless girl  
against the brutal world of  
bottom patting and breast pinching.  
i was craving for security  
the kind i had only known while  
aimlessly afloat and speculating in the womb. ( *Touch* 4-12 )

Her poems grow out of contingent situations, within realized settings, mapping the terrain of public issues. Devoid of architectonics or pretentious abstractness, the colloquial language provides the poems an enchantingly honest quality, which Kamala Das applauds. Das in the introduction to *Touch* writes, “[o]nce again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry . . . . Older by nearly half a century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision. . . .” ( *Touch* 7). Akin to Das’ poetry, which Kandasamy admits has been a formidable influence upon her; Kandasamy’s poetry is also poetry of self-actualization, embodying genuine private fears and anxieties in a confessional tone. Though the confessional mode “is not as radical as we find in Mamang Dai, Archana Sahani and Kamala Das” yet “[s]he explores a wide range of subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulations,” according to Sarangi.

Kandasamy writes with a sense of political commitment, examining the personal and then

Flaming green of a morning that awaits rain  
And my lover speaks of rape through silences. . .  
Green turns to unsightly teal of hospital beds  
And he is softer than feathers, but I fly away  
To shield myself from the retch of the burns  
Ward, the shrill sound of dying declarations,  
The floral pink white sad skins of dowry deaths.

elevating the experience to a sort of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak) [6] invoking the collective category of ‘women’; that becomes her cherished differentia from Kamala Das, in dealing with themes like: man-woman relationship, marriage, sexuality, cathartic value of writing and a quest for selfhood, that form the leitmotif in the writings of both. For instance, her prize winning poem “My lover speaks of rape” traverses the terrain of violence and violation within man-woman relationship to demystify rape; busting the myth that rape occurs only among strangers; showing that “[v]iolence can come from love, from a very intimate person” (Kandasamy) with aggression often being the trigger than sexual desire. The reader can discern that the poem is implicitly suggestive of Kandasamy’s own ordeal with domestic abuse and her tumultuous relationship with her intemperate ex-husband; any discussion about whom she declines, except to admit that she has divorced him and moved on.

.....  
 Colorless noon filters in through bluish glass  
 And coffee keeps him company. She chatters  
 Away telling her own, every woman's story;  
 He listens, like for the first time. Tragedy in  
 Bridal bed 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.

*Open eyes, open hands, his open all clear soul.... ( Touch 1-20)*

In an interview Kandasamy admits that writing has cathartic value for her. She says, "I write out of my helplessness. I write because I want to rebel and this is the only way I know how . . . it lets me have the thrill of being a guerilla fighter without the fear of succumbing to bullets" [7]. She consciously resigned from her job of teaching English at a university in

Chennai in the year 2010 and decided to "survive by writing alone" (Kandasamy). One can observe in her poems the dialectic of negotiating space for articulation of her experiences as a woman within a hegemonic culture. This gives 'vitality' to her journey as a poet, according to Sarangi. In line with this, in the poem, "A breathless counsel" she writes:

curiosity will catch you dear for you are a writer and it is  
 your license to startle the world with a hundred thousand  
 words instead of a dazzling smile or those occasional winks  
 .....

. . . somehow i don't want to be  
 fledging you in security for what happens with all my  
 parenting will only be a compromise darling child instead i  
 let you free because i want you to ask questions i want  
 you to prick and not polish your wounds i let you be hurt  
 in the face of the world i want you to learn more than what  
 you want to learn . . . ( Touch 1-15)

The poem depicts the "challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored" infused with the "dynamic charge, its rhythm of struggle, need, will and female energy" (Rich 19) [8]. Within a dialogical framework, the poem invokes interactive relationship between the author and the reader, the text and the world and even the words in the text and the form. The rejection of capitalization and punctuation marks reinforces the repudiation of received ideas and beliefs, in favour of intellectual freedom from the phallic-logos. The lack of pauses brings a feel of urgency and desperation to the poem. From the perspective of Indian Poetry in English by women, the first-person-singular voice, a constant in de Souza, Kalia, Das and others, is recurrent in Kandasamy's poems too, but it is not limited to an essentialist assertion of a single 'woman.' It transforms into multiple identities; changing subjectivities like masks; she is an innocent school girl in "Aftermath"; a revolutionary in "We will rebuild worlds"; a sexually abused wife in "My lover speaks of rape"; a Dalit woman in "Narration"; a dreamy Tamil woman in "Mulligatawny dreams"; the subaltern in "Once my silence held you spellbound;" even the hapless anonymous upper caste woman bound in bed, in her poem "Cunning stunt." Constantly dramatizing the multitudinous moments, from the quotidian lives of women, her 'I' is dialogic

in consonance with her depiction of the category of 'woman' in its heterogeneity. It contains the 'reflective solidarity' [9] of 'we' in its performativity. In the introduction to *Ms. Militancy*, cheekily titled "Should you take offence", Kandasamy proclaims the motivation to her enterprise thus:

You are the repressed Ram from whom I run away repeatedly. You are Indra busy causing bloodshed. You are Brahma fucking up my fates. You are Manu robbing me of my right to live and learn and choose. You are sage Gautama turning your wife to stone. You are Adi Sankara driving me to death. . . . You are the conscience of this Hindu society . . . . That is why I am Mira, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi all at once, spreading myself out like a feast, inviting gods to enter my womb. I am also Karraikal Ammaiyar, suspected of infidelity for being ravishingly beautiful. Like each of these women, I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to be alive. . . My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger's lap. All my women militate. (Militancy 8)

In "Dead woman walking" Kandasamy retells the myth of Karaikal Ammaiyar, one of the greatest figures in Tamil mythology, a devotee of lord Shiva, a demon-goddess hunting cremation grounds and brings a different perspective to her story by suggesting that "suspected of infidelity for being

ravishingly beautiful” she is not someone who deserted her husband in devotion of lord Shiva, instead was abandoned by her husband who was “a merchant shifty-eyed” (*Militancy* 17) .

... he was lost in listless doubt-  
of how, what i gave him was more delicious  
than whatever, whatever had been given to me.  
his mathematics could never explain  
the magic of my multiplying love-this miracle-  
like materializing mangoes out of thin air,  
like dishing out what was never there. (*Militancy* 9-15)

The poem opens with an image of Ammaiyar that corresponds to the popular iconography on temple walls but Kandasamy employs it to bring out the anguish felt by a dejected woman. As a spiritless woman, with unsteady steps, matted and unruly hair, sunken cheeks counter balanced by protruding eyes, bruised wrist and wrinkled skin, Ammaiyar wanders in asylum cloisters, suffering from epileptic fits of speech and song, bearing only a single tale of

i shall see my dark one by moonlight , wearing a yellow sari. his  
lewd looks shall stray awhile but settle soon on my sheer silk  
blouse, my cleavage zone. silent and sultry-lipped, i shall tempt  
the lord, who once robed a royal lady, to disrobe me. hear me

well, townspeople! i shall tease out the lecher in my lover . . . (*Militancy* 16-12)

The use of myths in her poems becomes advantageous in transcending the narrow identitarian assertion to espouse collective affirmative stance, because in myth as a meta-language, the plane of meaning is not limited to the literal words on the page and functioning as the second-order connotative language, it allows culturally influenced universal meanings to emerge. Myths also serve potent in deconstruction of stereotypes, as they act on existing meanings transforming them into new ones. Therefore, her poems make a two pronged move of speaking in the “language of particularism” (Gajarawala 92) based on the claim of difference,

We understand  
why upper caste Gods  
and their good-girl much-married, father-fucked,  
virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses  
borne in their golden chariots  
don't come to our streets.  
. . .But Mariamma,  
when you are still getting  
those roosters and goats,

why have you stopped coming to our doors? (*Touch* 1-13)

Similarly the poem “Sacred thread” makes a travesty of the Brahmanical ritual ceremony of ‘*Upanayanam*,’ through the perspective of an eighty year old, poverty stricken beggar, who “[w]ith her old old metaphors, /and skinny hands cutting sea breeze / in the wildest

dejection between her “sobbing pendulous breast” (*Militancy* 17). Her rejection of the normative standards of femininity by opting for instant old age in exchange of her beauty is synonymous with the subversion of feminine attributes appropriated as essential for women, by patriarchal society. Likewise in “I Shall see my dark one”, she assumes the persona of Meera and makes her proclaim sacrilegiously her lascivious longings for Krishna:

common to protest literatures, while also depicting an impulse towards the community and unity [10]. The community in her poem is not based on particular caste name (which almost never features in her poems) but the constituency of ‘women.’ The category of ‘woman,’ as represented in Kandasamy’s poems embodies ‘polyphony’ of perspectives, in the Bakhtinian sense. For instance in the poem “Marriama” she laments in the voice of a Dalit woman; fracturing the monolithic image of ‘Indian Woman’, exposing the tensions, contradictions and articulating the ‘difference’ within the category thus:

gesticulations” narrates the tale, of how the “priest celebrated a twice-birth / ceremony of a three year old” (*Touch* 85), making the poet seek respite from the “never ending long drawn recital,” when the poet suddenly realizes :

her eyes mock me, satire embedded in tears,  
as stifled chuckles escape sunken toothless jaws.

“He- the three year old,

It was only a bull,” she says.

“The priest doesn’t have male progeny”. (*Touch* 42-26)

The beggar goes away smiling because she got to eat the 'Mahaprasad' rather the "Remains of a Royal Feast," "the waste of it" achieving "a temporary nirvana" from the agony of hunger but her departure leaves the poet with a haunting sense of grief. The poem brings out the differentiated class positions of the two women, highlighting their iniquitous access to means of sustenance. In a self reflexive manner the poet also critiques the pretentious nature of her concern for beggar as she dispassionately asks her in the beginning of the poem "Did you eat?" and then calls it, "a matter of routine, / flimsy gossip with a neighborhood beggar" (*Touch* 85). Similarly, the

A would have been foster mother  
writes emotional letters bearing costly checks  
to lawyers who promise the fight.

Asha, remains her hope  
And an homage to a dead daughter.

Elsewhere, in a dingy hutment  
her biological Lambadi pregnant mother  
sleeps on Family Planning posters.

Her coming kid is already booked. (*Touch* 32-40)

The poem is imbricated within the contentious issue of 'commercial surrogacy' that has proved to be the litmus test for feminists; with the pro-surrogacy faction arguing that the decision of women who wish to act as surrogates should be respected, whereas the anti-surrogacy faction condemning it, equating it with the unethical practice of human trafficking purporting that it undermines the bodily integrity of women, reducing them to the status of containers and children to the status of commodities. The poem does not resolve the debate, rather uncovers the market context within which commercial surrogacy operates on the principle of demand and supply. Infested with unlicensed brokers, agents and policy mishmash, the unregulated market promotes innumerable scandals and child selling rackets. It exploits poor, inadequately informed, illiterate, Third World women who often enter an agreement with commissioning parents by signing the contract in a language they cannot read. The poem poses several questions about adoption laws, social justice, the positivistic attitude to new reproductive biotechnology and the fate of such children, like Asha. Caught in the conundrum, she spends her precious childhood at an orphanage. "Her life fills a single page in a tattered file marked URGENT / of the child Welfare Department / . . . Her future ends here" (*Touch* 108). Likewise, in her poem "Let my sisters title this" Kandasamy portrays the perspective of a stay-at-home-wife-and-mother in her forties, who writes moving articles about 'the contentment of being a woman,' "how feminists are misled and they miss / out on the 'small joys of life' . . . and how with her husband away at work and her sons away at

poem "Precious moments" elicits the struggles of two women on the opposite ends of the spectrum of inequality, struggling to come to terms with their respective depravities and the "convoluted laws" governing surrogacy and adoption. One is an affluent westerner yearning for a child; a childless mother who is also, "the Consulate General of the United States in India / with her husband, an Ambassador in Brazil" (*Touch* 108); and the other is an anonymous woman suffering utter destitution both socially and economically, selling away her reproductive capability through contract pregnancies.

school. . . [s]he discovers the pleasures of life / by cleaning cupboards, sewing curtains and keeping home" (*Touch* 136), renewing her primeval interest in cooking and grinding batter for *idlis* and *dosas* with her own hands. Addressing such women who abstain from identifying themselves as 'feminists' due to the pejorative connotations that have come to be associated with the term, on account of feminism being misconstrued to be misandry, Kandasamy reiterates the indispensability of feminism, revealing how women continue to interpellate institutionalized patriarchal norms, underwriting their subordination.

**Conclusion:** The firebrand poet, describes herself as, "angry young woman," and remarks in an interview with Silvia Duarte that; "The world has not seen enough of our kind. . . . However, society will not let angry young women exist, we will be labeled heretics. . . . As women we are told that it is bad behaviour to be angry . . . Those of us who refuse to comply are shrews whom everyone loves to hate." Kandasamy's poetry flummoxes some critics, while fascinates others. Ashley Tellis dismisses Kandasamy's writing as "poems of an outdated, designer feminism" [11] but according to Jade Magazine "Meena's poetry has revived feminism in hitherto unsurpassed manner"[12]. To me the novelty of her poetry lies in the fact that the 'I' in her poems (often written in small case) is at once autobiographical and collective as well as mythical. It registers not a unified essentialized subject, rather is an inventory of multiple subjectivities in a performative mode, enabling the insertion of voices of the oppressed and marginalized in her 'personal voice'.

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Pratibha, PhD Research Scholar  
Dept. of English, Jamia Millia Islamia University