

Revisiting Myths and Beliefs: A Study of the Iconoclastic and Non-conformist Elements in Meena Kandasamy's Selected Poetry

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Abstract

In the realm of Indian English Literature, women writers have proved their mettle and won a place of privilege right from Krupabai Saththianadhan and Toru Dutt. In almost every literary genre, they have contributed substantially and have formed the group- Indian Women Writers in English. However, within this group there is a large section of women writers known as Dalit Women Writers. As Dalits and as women, they are doubly marginalized and this marginalization has inculcated in them a sense of subversion and rebellion. This subversion takes place in different forms like challenging the popular and prevalent myths and beliefs and re-interpreting them. This is the challenging of the ideology. These writers question and challenge the pertaining ideology which perpetuates and normalizes their subjugation. In a very bold and rebellious way the Dalit Women Writers have reacted to the atrocious patriarchy and caste discrimination which has reduced them to a mere physical existence. The present paper proposes to analyze the select poems of the contemporary Dalit writer and activist Meena Kandasamy with focus on the non-conformist and iconoclastic elements and the biting exposure of the male and upper caste domination through revisiting popular myths and beliefs in order to revise the understanding of the ideology of oppression.

Keywords : Iconoclastic elements; Ideology; Marginalization; Myths and beliefs; Patriarchy.

India has a long tradition of women writers writing in English. The first Indian woman novelist Krupabai Saththianadhan and the first Indian woman poet to write in English- Toru Dutt laid the foundation of this enormous corpus of Indian Women's Writing in English. For more than one and a

half century, women in India have been showcasing the manifestation of their literary talents in different forms of literature. To speak in terms of quality, these writers have won many international awards and recognitions for their contribution to the world of international literature. A variety of themes have been incorporated in their literary works. Indian women writers write about love and marriage, family relationships, confinement and parenthood, Diaspora and displacement, domestic violence, harassment at home and workplace, physical and mental trauma and, above all, gender based discrimination and marginalization.

Within this huge section of women writers, there is also a significant group of women writers who belong to the Dalit community. In addition to being Dalit, they have to face all the trauma of being women. So the canvas on which they work is larger than that of the mainstream or the so called upper caste women writers. They are doubly marginalized and this agony is fully reflected in their writing. Non-Dalit writers also speak about the agonies of the Dalit women in their writings, but the works of Dalit women writers are replete with the first hand experiences of their trauma. In almost all the states of India, Dalit women writers have spoken about their experiences of being both a woman and a Dalit. According to Beena Agarwal, "They are 'Dalit of Dalits' because their humanity is crushed under the burden of patriarchy as well as under the burden of caste prejudice" (167).

Some of the well-known Dalit women writers in India are Bama aka Bama Faustina Soosairaj and P. Sivakami from Tamil Nadu; C. S. Chandrika and Rekha Raj from Kerala; Yashica Dutt from Rajasthan; Baby Haldar from Kashmir; Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Pradnya Daya Pawar, Shantabai Dhanaji Dani and Urmila Pawar from Maharashtra; Gogu Shyamala from Andhra Pradesh and Rajni Tilak from Delhi. These writers have written both in their regional languages and in English. Though their treatment of the themes varies, they write about the women's problems which are in different forms as per the different regions and cultures. One of the youngest and most outstanding of these writers is Meena Kandasamy (Born 1984) - a poet, novelist, translator and Dalit feminist from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The poems from both the collections- *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) deal with the experiences of an educated Dalit woman in a very bold and straightforward way. The present paper proposes to analyze the iconoclastic and non-conformist elements in Kandasamy's poetry with reference to the select poems.

In any era of history, the dominant ideology controls and rules over the

marginal sections of society. The ideology, however, is structured on a very firm foundation of the economic base and fortified by the myths, beliefs and legends which direct and mould the thinking of people. This process is always concealed and indirect. In all ages, the rebels have questioned the very validity of these myths, beliefs and legends and tried to re-interpret and explode the paradoxical elements in them. Meena Kandasamy, through her poems, tries to demonstrate the hollowness of the popular myths and beliefs which have been internalized by the selfish ruling classes to subjugate and exploit the subaltern. A close analysis of the select poems of Kandasamy clearly shows that she dismantles the myths deliberately made to dominate and subjugate the weaker sections of the Indian society.

In the poem entitled "Advaita: The Ultimate Question", Kandasamy strikes at the most famous and highly revered concept of Non-dualism in the Hindu religion. In a very straightforward manner she asks the question that if *Atma* (soul) and self are the same, and the *atma* is untouchable, but is considered to be god, then are all the untouchable people gods? Or are the *atmas* of all equal and the same (04)? This is a very simple and direct exposure of the double standard with which the abstract and unbelievable things are glorified, whereas living human beings are reduced to a very low status due to their caste and creed. In another poem entitled "Becoming a Brahmin", Kandasamy unveils the illogical methods of caste determination. It exposes the weak foundation of the caste system in India and shows how caste is stuck to the people by a systematic process that takes place for generations.

The poem "Another Paradise Lost" depicts the interaction of the poet with a serpent which tells her about the paradise lost in Hinduism. According to the serpent, long ago he was Nahusa, the great monarch on earth. After ruling over the kingdom for twelve thousand years, he died and entered the heaven. In heaven he raised questions about the caste system and discrimination which infuriated the gods and a curse fell on him. He was transformed into a vile snake on earth and would return to heaven after sixty million years. The poem clearly brings out that in this *Paradise Lost* in the Hindu religion, the good were cast away for questioning the age-old beliefs, customs, myths and traditions that are perpetuated to subjugate the weaker and marginal sections of the Indian society. The non-conformists are tolerated neither on this planet nor in the so-called heaven. The poem shows the ancient roots of discrimination in India.

A close analysis of the poem "Big Brother: An Epic in Eighteen Episodes"

shows how it is a critique of the great Indian epic Mahabharata. Kandasamy denounces the very glorification of the incidents and characters in Mahabharata, the greatest Hindu epic. She calls Hastinapur a 'sin city' and the eldest of the Pandavas- Dharma (Yudhishtir) 'a gaming guy'. She questions the sanity of Dharma, who-considering his wife a commodity-puts her at stake during the game of dice. While considering the repercussions of the great war of Mahabharata, she describes it as 'mafia shootouts on the street' (15), violating all the rules of war. She holds Dharma mainly responsible for all the destruction and devastation ensuing from the war. The poet does not speak about the Kauravas at all. Another poem dealing with an episode from Mahabharata is "Ekalaivan" which exposes the partiality and hypocrisy of the Guru (teacher) of the Kauravas and Pandavas. From the ancient times, the hard working, talented and skilled untouchables like Eklavya have not been tolerated by the dominant class. The poet asks the Eklavyas not to worry about the lost right-hand thumb to the 'fascist Dronacharya' as supremacist people deserve only left-hand treatment. Instigating a spirit of violent rebellion among the marginalized, Kandasamy says- "You don't need your right thumb, / to pull a trigger or hurl a bomb" (23). Kandasamy seems to justify violence to resist and subvert the crooked and wicked attempts of the dominant class to suppress and oppress the able and skilled people like Eklavya.

One more poem that slaps hard at the glorification of the heinous acts of gods is "Massacre of the Innocents". The poem opens with the line for the king of gods i.e. Indra-"Indra, chief Vedic deity and inspirational hate-monger". As the myth goes, Diti, the mother of demons, had challenged Indra and threatened him that she would beget such a demon who would defeat him in war. In order to avoid future calamity, Indra, in a very inhuman (or ungodly) way entered Diti's womb and split the foetus into small pieces. The poet compares Indra with the dictators and enemies of mankind like Herod, Hitler and the activists of LTTE who killed human beings in a very inhuman and cruel way. As per the poet, Indra is superior to all these killers as he killed the 'other's children even before their birth. She calls him "the genocidal god of gods (51)".

Another poem which deals with worship and faith is "Maariamamma". The poet speaks to the goddess Maariamamma who is considered as the goddess of the 'poor' and the 'other'. She, in a very ironical manner, states the reason for the upper caste gods not coming to the houses of the slum dwellers. It is their poverty and low status which prevents the gods from associating with the slums. But the poet asks the goddess Maariamamma whether she has also joined hands with the upper caste gods and stopped

coming to them (47).

The poem "Reverence: Nuisance" mocks at the practice of using the pictures and idols of gods for 'preventing' people from spitting in the corners of offices and staircases of public places. Still, people do not defer to spit at these places. In a very humorous manner, the poet attributes the non-retaliation of the gods to their tolerance. She also adds that some people think this serves them right. Thus, Kandasamy, mocking at gods in whom people have lost their faith, questions the very existence of gods.

The poem "The Gods Wake Up" talks about the indifference of the gods to human sorrows and sufferings. According to the poet, the gods spend most of their time in sleeping. They even don't pay any heed to the prayers offered by the human beings or even Brahmins. The chanting of 'Om' is also not taken seriously by the gods. The poet calls the gods 'necrophiliac', as they wake up only at the times of funerals to receive the dead with an excitement (92). This blasts the very notion of gods being the saviours of mankind.

The poem "For Sale" strikes hard at the commercialization of faith. Meena Kandasamy criticizes the agents of gods for turning the shrines into the centres of deception and loot. The poet talks about one of her schoolmates who has become rich after a lot of hard work. He, being untouchable, was not allowed to enter into the places of worship. However, with money everything changes and he is most welcome in the temples. Thus, with money, the rich buys the paraphernalia of worship and even a front place and a special prayer in his name. When he gives the priest a note of fifty rupees, he is given extra blessings. The guy is astonished as it is his first time at the temple. He asks the poet, that if all these things can be bought with money, what is the cost of the god itself (32)? Even though this is very hard to digest, it is the reality that many places of worship offer special treatment and privilege to the rich and procure wealth from them in the name of god. The agents of gods seem to agree with the statement that "one is white above a certain financial level" (Capecia 202).

In addition to revisiting the myths, which have been ruling over the minds of generations, Kandasamy also speaks about a number of popular beliefs and legends which have shaped the human understanding in a wrong manner. In her poetry we come across the tone of 'aggression' and she justifies it in the poem entitled "Aggression". She terms the 'aggression' as "the best kind of troubleshooting" (5). The poem advocates the violent and revolutionary reactions of the downtrodden classes as the outer man-

ifestation of the inner struggle going on in their minds for centuries. The revolution, according to the poet, is the result of the explosion of their dreams. This gives the readers a clear idea about the revolutionary and non-conformist elements in her poetry. This also makes a case for the use of the harsh and non-conventional form of language in her poems.

The poem "Inheritance" speaks about the practice of land acquisition in the name of development and industrialization. Most of the times, in this process, the pieces of land of the poor peasants are acquired with the deceptive promises of jobs and other benefits that would follow. The poet calls the government "a full time bewitching whore", expert in the art of deception. Most of the times the acquired land is used for totally different purposes (mostly favouring the capitalists) and no reasonable compensations are given to the affected. The small land owners are uprooted and live the life of refugees- "unsettled in a resettlement colony". They have nothing with them but memories of a bright past. In a very ironical manner, the poet recollects the lines of the father in a church- "Blessed are the meek/ for they shall inherit the earth" (39). Here the inheritance is totally different. Actually, the meek here inherit nothing, but whatever they had, is lost to the system. The poem, though very short, speaks about the agony of the poor who are deprived of everything in the name of globalization and development.

The poem "Their Daughters" speaks about the brave women in the ancestry of the Dalit. According to the poet, the legends of these women are a sort of "pain relievers". She speaks about such women who were the women of action and not of words. One is her father's father's mother's mother who was not only beautiful but also very courageous, who married a man who had murdered thirteen men and she too murdered a British soldier who tried to "colonize" (93) her. The poet also speaks about another woman who killed her husband, fed up with his drinking and beating. The poet compares these women with their heirs today, 'their daughters', who only believe in writing. Indirectly, the poet appeals the feminist activists to enter into action mode in order to overthrow injustice and exploitation.

Another poem dealing with the present condition of women is "Nailed". Here the poet counts the ways of the patriarchs to 'silence' women. According to the poet, brave and courageous women are first proved to be evil by the society and then killed as a social necessity. Even the goddesses like Durga and Kali were either outcaste or shut in. In a very humourous manner the poet speaks about the fate of other women- "They were con-

siderably low risk, so most other women were locked up at home" (60). This is the 'nailing' of the women inside the coffin, which is very hard to break and to come out.

The boldest and most striking of the selected poems is "Mohandas Karamchand". The very title of the poem gives us an idea about its tone. The poet purposefully avoids using both the words 'Mahatma' and 'Gandhi' as they carry an aura about them. The poet quotes Albert Einstein's most celebrated quotation about Mahatma Gandhi and straightly declines to call him 'Mahatma'. She calls the principles of truth and non-violence as taboo words and as obsolete. The poet states that Gandhiji and his glorification need a 'thorough review'. She blames him for calling them 'Har-ijans' (the people of god). The supreme court of India in a ruling called the term as abusive, which the Dalits have been reiterating for decades (Ramanathan). In the present times the word is considered as insulting. Further, the poet warns Gandhiji, not to act a holy saint as his impurities can be seen through. She charges him of a lot of injustice to his wife. According to her it is the books written by his followers and admirers that have taken him to such a height which he does not deserve. He knew well that caste would not go from India and still showed that he was working for caste eradication. The poet calls him sadist and writes- "Bapu, Bapu you big fraud, we hate you" (54). This line reminds us of the last line of Sylvia Plath's famous poem "Daddy". The poet questions the greatness of Mahatma Gandhi who is considered a legendary personality of the millennium by the whole world, thus displaying the inclination to scrutinize even the popular and to re-interpret it.

It is obvious that such a bold and revolutionary, non-conformist approach would invite a lot of criticism from critics and readers alike. Kandasamy well anticipates all the reactions her poetry would incite in her poem "This Poem Will Provoke You". This poem enlists all the charges that would be leveled against her poetry. Most of the charges enumerated in the poem are baseless and have the smell of hatred for the poet for her boldness and non-conformity.

Kandasamy's resistance and subversion is not found only on the thematic level. A study of the linguistic features of her poems shows that she displays non-compliance in the use of language. The violation of the rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling shows the subversion of the patriarchy in a symbolic way. In many of her poems we come across words which are considered traditionally as taboo. However, the use of bold and suggestive words in Dalit women writing is justified by some critics.

Teresa Hubel theorizes- “this use of sexual language...can be read as a powerful disruption of the feminine that it refuses to play to patriarchal expectations about feminine decorum” (52).

In conclusion, it can be rightly said that most of the poems penned by Kandasamy display a spirit of rebellion against whatever is unjustifiable in the society. From the Dalit Feminist point of view, the poems well express the traumatic experiences of the ‘twice Dalit’ i.e., Dalit women who have to face double marginalization and subjugation. Her poems clearly indicate that she, being unable to accept the conformist attitude, raises objections to the discrimination on the basis of class, caste and gender and expects equal treatment to all.

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