

A Study of Gender Equality and Caste Issues As Reflected in Works of Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract – Caste and Gender equality literature is totally weaved around Dalit community and their life experiences, especially of the people who belong to the lower strata of the society. There is a real character that is underlying behind the hypothetical character that is explained in the story. This story is based on the real story that will unveil about the reach incidents happening around the society and in every genre of Dalit literature. The literariness and fictionalization be it related to poetry or prose is totally based on the real incidents and situations. An emerging poet, fiction writer, translator, journalist and a social activist, Meena Kandasamy maintains her focus, in throughout her writing, on caste annihilation and the issue of woman's equality on par with a man. She is hailed as the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English. Dalit literature is a resistance kind of literature. It is very important for a woman to address (or) present the issues that are experienced by the women in the society. It is also important to encourage writers, especially women writers from the marginalized class to have a place in literature. The society is dominated by males in every level. There are many male writers belonging to marginalized class are accused of not giving equal opportunity for women Dalit writers to present their works. The present research paper has evaluated the gender equality and caste issues as reflected in the works of Meena Kandasamy.

Key Words: Gender equality, caste issues, Meena Kandasamy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The writer, like Gopal Guru who has written in one of his works that: Dalit male writers will not take literature seriously and the work of Dalit women too and therefore dismisses all their works. The common question that is raised by every Dalit woman is why they are not given or hired for top positions in the literature institutions and conferences.

It is really daunting for one to understand about this caste and gender mechanism. However, the fact is that, being a Dalit female writer and a female writer are not the same. There are a few female writers belonging to upper caste would feel that women of other communities, especially who belong to low caste are discriminated by the male writers and especially Dalit women and therefore, they would fall victim of this discrimination. These professionals will not even give a second thought about the works of the Dalit women. Basically, women are classified based on their caste and class. So, it has become easy for the male writers to find the difference

between, the writers belonging to upper class and Dalits.

A. Caste Equality Issues in Meena Kandasamy's Works

Meena Kandasamy maintains her focus, in throughout her writing, on caste annihilation and the issue of woman's equality on par with a man. She is hailed as the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English. Dalit literature (Kandasamy, 2006).

Many a times, Dalit literature works of Tamil women are victimized by the males, i.e. by their husbands, fathers, and sons. You can take the example of a few novels like Sivakami's novel *Pazhiyana Kazidalum* (1989) along with the autobiography *Karukku* (published in 1992) on Bama. In Dalit community, many women would be facing the difficulties. However, there is no Dalit movement or feminist movement in Dalit community can really help Dalit women. The current generation of Dalit women is not ready to

turmoil like the women in the older era. Bela Malik has covered the complete proceedings of the Dalit women's summit that was hosted by All India Democratic Women's Association on December 20, 1988 in which the young to old writers have taken place where one of the young writers stated that the young generation is not ready to tolerate the discrimination shown on them. This is the actual reality that is faced by Meena Kandasamy who presented the harsh realities in the metropolitan city of Chennai, both in her poetry as well as a fiction novel. This paper will predominantly focus on the poetry work of this writer where she is portrayed as the aggressive, stubborn and courageous Dalit woman who is representing the Dalit group. She has good penchant for poetry and is also a famous female poet who is in late 20's. However, when you take a look over the poetry that is weaved by this writer, you would never feel that an amateur or young woman has written it. In fact, it makes you feel like as it was woven by an experienced poet. Her poetry would mainly focus on cast, society and love (Kumar, 2010). She has sound knowledge of how women writers were treated earlier and have a good grip on poetry. This will show the reality in her works.

Though, she was barred from the social paradigm for being a Dalit woman in the Tamil region, but she is gifted and was able to present her skill of poetry and better usage of the English language. She is very fluent in writing English literature which she uses as a powerful weapon to attack critics and also to defend her. It is surprising to know the reality that many Dalit and OBC students are going through many difficulties in getting proper education and getting enrolled in English medium schools. The key reason that is underlying is that, English would represent about the power and privilege and has remained not easily accessible to the people belonging to different walks of life in India. People who are financially weak and belong to the lower caste in the society would be pushed out of the boundaries. The belonging that belongs to elite group would become the policy makers and wantedly expel the people who belong to low caste from writing and speaking English, since they do not want to lose the privilege of being the monopoly. In one of the interviews that is given by Kandasamy clearly signifies that she has chosen poetry out of passion, since it deals with the language and language is considered to be the best way to showcase your domination and suppression. The poetry of this writer has the ability to confront the language oppression and inequalities. She shows about how women, especially Dalit women are treated in the society by using language as the medium. She very well knows that she belongs to the lower strata of society and is a feminist. This writer strongly believes that crafting the poems in English has more power to reach the voice to the audience in every nook and cranny of the word. She writes the poetry in English, which she thinks to be a language that is white man's sway and is totally controlled by the rich class people. The

English language in which she writes would have the words that are from her mother tongue. She states that, she dreams of this language to be words of her thinking. This English should comprise of small letters and would act as a tire to the white man's tongue.

Kamala Das is the inspiration for this writer. She follows all her works and tries to emulate her style of writing in her poetry that is written in English by her kind. You can see the foreword that is written in her debut anthology of poems *Touch* where she has acknowledged about the power of honest poetry. Das appreciated about the "the Indianness of her thought". While writing many of the poems on love, she embraced the boldness and style of Kamala Das. The main focus of this writer would be on Dalit, she writes the poems on only Dalits and she has taken up this project seriously. The first collection of poems is named as *Touch* (2006). This book has become the sensation which was appreciated by many people. Even though, the religious person would close his/her eyes, nose and eyes, but the touch would keep him/her connected to the world. Touch is something that no one can get away from. The touch is the main taboo that is underlying in the society and is haunting many women in terms of gender and caste. Kandasamy has explained it very realistically and wonderfully in her poetry book, *Touch*.

You can never know or feel the touch, the pain of getting barred from the society or treating ill by the society that when clubbed with caste would caste serious hatred.

Kandasamy would like to prove that the peacefulness of the taboo has somehow pushed into the taboo when a touchable person touches and untouchable person. The conventional myth in India filled with dirt would get revived automatically (Rao, 2004). When a classless or low caste people touches elite group of people, then it creates a ruckus in the society and in the Brahmin caste where it becomes totally impure, the water, God and their dynasty. There are a few people who are prone to serious or spreadable diseases and would like to thank God for one last time would be seen in the *Prayers* of Kandasamy. The partial recovery or ten days of typhoid are clearly depicted in her poetry. When the person is not going to the temple, he would get bent with supplication, since he is not supposed to enter the Hindu temple that is run by caste. The public will not be able to digest or tolerate to see this diseased person. She has presented it ironically with consequences.

The following are a couple of lines from her poetry book:

"An irked Rajput surged forth, and smote the untouchable with an iron rod.

He, worrier cast lion couldn't tolerate encroachment".
At the temple. By a Dalit.

There are many other stories that are presented by this writer. Few are being reported while a few are left unreported or rejected. The murdering of past and present bring into the limelight to the readers to tell them about the bitter situations that are experienced by the people belonging to deprived class. These works are also preserved for the next generation. Many Dalits would die for devotion. Caste in the country is considered to be crueler over disease. Moreover, it has no emotions and is bland. The poems that are composed by this writer would present about the awful situations and agonies of Dalits. The poems by this writer can be considered as an encyclopedia that comprises of only woeful inventories. The untouchable people will become touchable for the higher caste people to fulfill their needs, do their menial jobs and lusty demands. In the poem that is named as Narration, this poet has narrated it as follows:

"I'll weep to you about

My landlord, and with

My mature gestures-

You will understand.

The torn sari, disheveled hair

Stifled cries and meek submission

I was not an untouchable then (Abrams and Harpham, 2009)."

In the other poem that is named as "Shame", the poetry explains about the life of women after is sexually abused by a group of men. This victim will not even get the sympathy of the people and she was a Dalit woman. Moreover, this victim is the one who becomes a victim again.

"Public's prying eyes

Segregate her-the victim.

But, the criminals have

Already mainstreamed-

Their caste is a classic shield."

The lady who was gang raped would not have any option to cope up with the sorrow other than to take the extreme step in her life. The caste is what makes her more vulnerable to this kind of brutal harassment and would make her fall prey to the sexual crimes. Gopal Guru states that, caste would also make Dalit and tribal women face sexual violence more

intensely in the society (Krishnaswamy, et. al., 2001). Food and water are the most important and needful things that are required for a Dalit to survive and struggle for. As per the Telugu Poet, Jeshuva:

"When his (dalit) hand do not work

The green fields hesitate to yield crops

He sweats, provides food for the world

But he himself has no food."

Unfortunately, it is the people who belong to deprived class despite of cultivating food grains are not left for having a morsel of food. This is very helpless in the history of Dalit and is also the most evil thing that is happening in the society.

"We are made to sit opposite you"

Force-fed a 'meal'-bland food mixed

With your hair, nails, spit and pus.

Illegally (despite the government ban),

We take your hoard of evil spirits

Barter-system: for having your food (Anand, 2005)."

In the words of Spivakian, Kandasamy is trying to revive the lower status of history. She has a gut feeling that the history of Dalit is totally distorted by the social rivals over time. She grieves for burying the facts about Dalits, but also remnants for destroying the history, which is actually used as a weapon against the weak people in the society to fulfill the needs of the rich caste people where it is merely impossible for the low class people to come out of. Meena Kandasamy vociferously states that dearth of water for the people of low class are due to the fact that they are not allowed to drink clean water. The water that they have to carry to homes is polluted waters in which buffalos will take bath, urinate and do bullshit. There are two options that are available for the people who belong to low caste can do, one is to tolerate and wait for the change to come or else speak and bring the social change in the society against these unlawful activities (Krishnaswamy, et. al., 2001). Kandasamy will have concern about Dalits keeping tightlipped and not raising the voice. As per this writer, silence will make one to wait endlessly, bear it and finally would break the walls.

"But, don't suppress

Our rightful share of dignity.

Her style and attitude resembles with that of African-American poet Arna Bontemps.

God gives the yellow man

As easy breeze at blossom time....

Give blue-eyed men their swivel chairs to whirl in tall buildings...

for black man God,

no need to bother more

But only fill afresh his need of laughter

His cup of tears

God suffer little men the taste of soul's desire."

In a few poems that are composed by this writer, she directly uses African-American vocabulary to distort the norms of the language. For instance, in the poem entitled as "For Sale", which will weave about the story of a Dalit person who grow as a rich one and was allowed to enter into the temple, which was otherwise not allowed for Dalits. This poem is a direct attack on the people who would give respect to the people who have money irrespective of their caste. This is to the Priest who gives blessing to the rich people who give them a fifty rupee. No person has stopped him to step into the temple as he is filthy rich. Though, this dalit is allowed into the temple, but not the other folks who belong to his community.

Dalit who are in India are getting the inspiration from the movements that are carried out by the Black Americans. For instance, there are many Dalit Panther movements successful led in Maharashtra with the inspiration that is gained from the American Black Panthers Movement. These communities are equally victimized and belong to the same group. Kandasamy tried hard to show the difference between these two groups. There is a famous writer named Gwendolyn Brooks who wrote "We Real Cool" where he has extolled about the characteristic that this community hold (Today, the person who belongs to the same group has become the President of the US). The writer put a lot of efforts to differentiate this from the hot temper that her community possesses (Anand, 2005). To the lines that are stated by Brooks, "We teal cool. We / Left school.... We jazz June. We /Die soon", for which the writer, Kandasamy responded that, we real hot. We / Ne'vr rot... We / Never late. We / Fuck fate". She presented about the temperament of dalit people adding her own feelings so that the next generation will not suffer with these mythical customs any more in India. On the similar lines, she presented few more examples from Sylvia Plath's apostrophic poem entitled as "Daddy". She wrote the same poem by changing the title as "Mohanda Karamshand" who is

the Indian "Daddy". She has outraged and composed a poem that addresses to the father of the nation where she clearly made one understand about the actual crux of non-violence and ahimsa. Dalits also called as Harijans will be serving as derogation in the speech act. Few of the lines from her poem include"

"Truth. Non violence

Stop it. Enough taboo....

Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds-

We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe.

...You called us names,

You dubbed us pariahs-"harijans"

Goody goody guys of begot god

Ram Ram Hey Ram-boo....

Bapu, bapu, the big fraud, we hate you."

In this poem, she has anticipated and presents about the style of revolution where the Dalits who do not possess any kind of power would take vengeance against all the people who are responsible for their misfortune that they are prone to. She also takes a vow that, she would be learning, fighting and make people teach how to love. She calls herself to be a witch who is trying to vent out all her anger and emotions that is buried within them from centuries to the society. She would like to fly to the temple stress to hunt the oppressors who keep their heads shaved and then cut all their sacred threads.

Despite of writing poems on diverse subjects, but her all time favorite and most focused subject would be about caste. She presents her emotions, experiences and misery that was gone through by the Dalit group in her writings. Though, she is living a happy and secured life between the educated people, but she will never forget the upper caste people who made their lives miserable in the past. Now, she is unable to deceive the current condition on Dalit, especially on Dalit women.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani has observed the same points that are in her mind in these papers that are written by Kandasamy and it would be perfect to conclude it with the right quote:

Dalit women writers/poets would feel very courageous and strong when the issues of dalit women are presented properly in the mainstream. The vulnerability to which they are prone to since ages to meet their basic needs is still the main focus of Dalit women.

Gender inequality has often been taken up as a subject by the Indian writers in their literary works. However, the issue of the marginalization and oppression of Dalit woman was not discussed by and large. The issues related to Dalit women have hardly been taken up seriously either by political leaders or scholars until very recently. The reasons might have to do with the socio-political and economic conditions of Dalit women who continue to remain voiceless even today. (Raj Kumar, 2010, p.211) Some contemporary Indian literary artists, like Meena Kandasamy, voice out their concerns regarding the „sexual politics“ and the gender inequality in their writings (Mohanty & Class, 2008). Meena Kandasamy stands apart from those contemporary Indian woman poets who are caught in the midst of dualities, because of the dilemma between what they want to and what they are expected to write; she delineates the subjects like „gender inequality“ and „caste discrimination“ with a candid precision. She dissects, Very deftly, the complex mechanism of perpetual subjugation of the Indian woman in her writing.

B. Gender issues in Meena Kandasamy's works

Kamala Das, one of India's foremost poets, in her foreword to *Touch* (2006) praises the poet as:

Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive. (07) Her first collection of poetry, *Touch* (2006) is a scathing, militant attack on the perpetuation of the social oppression of the Indian women (Kandasamy, 2006). It discusses the issue of the sexual harassment of the women. Meena Kandasamy, unlike other poets and writers dealing with this subject, portrays women, particularly the 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.

A woman is considered a chattel by the male dominated society. Men of all castes and classes collude in making certain rules of behavior and circumscribe the trajectory of female growth and confine her to the four walls of her house. In one of her poems in *Touch* (2006), entitled 'Songs of Summer', Meena Kandasamy rebukes the patriarchal society for treating the woman as its slave and a desired object (Kandasamy, 2006):

The Poet also criticizes the society for not treating a woman as a woman. The male-dominated society recognizes a woman as a sister, a wife, a mother and also a goddess, but never as a woman herself. A woman's goodness is graded upon her degree of submission and servitude to her father, husband, brothers, sons and almost every other man in her

family and society (Sharma, 2010). She targets the society thus:

She vehemently condemns the stereotype male biased custom of girl seeing practiced in the Indian society, intended for judging her in order to assess her potential of being a possible bride to a man. A would be bride is judged on accounts of her femininity, education, beauty, physical fitness, her character, her politeness and submissiveness etc. On the other hand, the boy who wishes to get married to her is not judged on all these counts. A girl who wishes to get certified as a bride by the boy who comes to see her and his family, is required to behave in a certain way in order to project herself as expected by the would be groom's family which underpins the ideology of the patriarchal society (Malik, 1999). The poet enunciates her views about this unjust treatment imparted to woman in the following words

Women in our society are subjected to various atrocities and the Sexual crimes against women keep on increasing alarmingly. Given that the fear and the shame that women (victims of sexual assault) undergo and the apathy of the concerned authorities to record such crimes, many a times the sexual assaults on a woman by man don't get reported and recorded (Guru, 1995). Domestic violence and the dowry deaths also contribute a lot to the victimization of the women in our male-biased society. In a poem, „My lover speaks of rape“, she discusses the victimization the women at the hands of the men:

The Inhuman treatment given to women in the Indian society is related to the caste as an institution. Endogamy acts as a social barrier which circumscribes the upliftment of the lower caste people. On the other hand, exogamy, if practiced across all castes, classes, and cultures, can help transcend the barriers of caste, creed and race. Since a woman is capable of giving birth to a child, if she marries outside her caste and delivers children, she acts as a gateway to the other castes, those Dalit women who dare to love the upper caste men are brutally assaulted and murdered as part of the retribution for their acts. This plight of a Dalit woman is appositely described by Kandasamy, 2006:

II. CONCLUSION

Though the upper caste women as well as the lower caste women are the victims of the gender discrimination, the plight of the Dalit women is far worse than that of the upper caste women. A Dalit woman is considered as „other“ even amongst women of all castes. In her seminal book, *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination*, Meena Anand articulates the situation of a Dalit woman

The Dalit women are not only discriminated by men and women of other castes but by the men of the

very caste to which they themselves belong. They are quite often subjected to the domestic violence and are deprived of their basic rights. Theirs is such a plight that they become the lame and meek victims who can't protest against the injustice done to them. This predicament of a

To recapitulate, gender discrimination is an omnipresent social evil which is very much prevalent in the society even today. Meena Kandasamy espouses the cause of the gender equality in her poetic discourse in *Touch* (2006) by dissecting the matrix of female suppression and expressing her concerns about it. Hers is an acerbic attack on the social malaise of the systematic domination of the female sex. Through her witty arguments and polemical style of writing she attempts to champion the cause of the gender equality.

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