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***‘Come, Unriddle Me’ - Reality of the Dalit Feminine self in Meena Kandasamy’s Ms. Militancy***

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**Abstract:**

In the well identifiable inhospitable state of affairs of the literary world, to be a Dalit Woman writer is to suffer a two-fold marginalization from the social paradigm. The restrictions, so to say, aren't but only limited to gender oppression, but also extend to class subjugation. In such a set up, Meena Kandasamy's writings create a rupture. Seen from her subject position, Kandasamy's poetry seems to experience the prevalent ideologies from a radically different standpoint and endeavors to challenge them. Her poetry seems to seduce and steal the male generative energy. She re-constructs the images of women inherited from male literature. The dichotomy between the literary and the social context diminishes in her works. Kandasamy offers an alternative image of women- the Dalit women and the female personas from the Indian mythology. Her poetry protests against the very culture of words that has attained an arbitrary image. At times visual, her poetry attacks the binaries- both earthly and heavenly. One evidently identifies the containment suffered and the freedom sought. This paper intends to study her collection of poetry *Ms. Militancy*, and

identify therefore Kandasamy's efforts to break through the tendency of Western Feminism to universalize the female experience, and confirm what Sharmila Rege says: 'the category of dalit woman is not homogeneous'. The paper shall also borrow critical ideas and opinions majorly from Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru.

**Key Words:** Meena Kandasamy, Dalit Poetry, Universalization, Mythology, Dalit Women, Dalit Women Writing, Caste.

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*'I work to not only get back at you; I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me.'*<sup>1</sup>

Meena Kandasamy emerges as the dynamic young Dalit woman poet in pursuit of the reality of her Dalit feminine self. By looking closely at her collection published in 2010, *Ms. Militancy*, this paper would try to understand the modalities of feminine subaltern self as negotiated by a twenty-first century female Dalit poet. Kandasamy's poetry attempts to assert and subsequently subvert her caste, gender and regional identities. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* point out how 'to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead' (Tharu and Lalita). In such a view, Kandasamy's poetry, with all its performative traits, is too

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction (Kandasamy)

animated and lively to be just called alive, more so because of it being contained in the selfhood that Kandasamy bears as well as projects through her poetry. Gilbert and Gubar talk about the engagement of women writers ‘in assaulting and revising, destructing and reconstructing the images of women inherited from male literature- especially the paradigmatic polarities of the angel and the monster. (Tharu and Lalita)’ Kandasamy’s poetry suggests an endeavor to see through the binaries, while making sure that such schisms are being destabilized by creation of conundrums within. As the poet declares in the Introduction to *Ms. Militancy*- ‘I strive to be a sphinx: part woman, part lioness, armed with all lethal riddles. Come unriddle me. But be warned. I never falter in a fight. And far worse, I seduce shamelessly. (Kandasamy)’

In order to understand Kandasamy’s stance, one has to consider the hostile and unwelcoming state of the socio-literary milieu, where any Dalit woman poet is subjected to a multi-layered oppression, characterized by her experience of many distinct patriarchal structures. Anupama Rao in *Gender and Caste* has elucidated the doubled oppression that a Dalit woman in India faces almost inescapably, reflecting on how a more generic set of arguments about sexual subordination needs to be operationalized to reflect the sexual experience of Dalit women who are marked by the disabilities of caste and gender (Rao).

In the case of Kandasamy, not only there is existence of the apparent brahmanical form of patriarchy as a basic structure of subjugation that deeply stigmatizes Dalit women in general because of their caste status, along with the oppression within the community – besides, there is another layer, which constitutes of being *authorized* upon by her literary fathers.

To assume coherence within the category of Dalit women as belonging to a collected entity in itself is to reject the inevitable call for a situated and manipulated consideration of the geo-political and cultural locations of the being of Dalit women as a category. In other words, this indicates to a prevalent tendency where the category of 'woman' is conceived as based on the collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood, which is universalized as 'Women experience'. Chandra Talpade Mohanty indicates towards such a possibility of 'women' to have formed a coherent group identity within the different cultures, 'prior to their entry into social discourse' where,

the homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. The discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as a always-already constituted group, one which has been labeled 'powerless', 'exploited', 'sexually harassed', by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses (Mohanty).

Mohanty therefore suggests that the intention is to look for as many locatable cases of 'powerless' groups of women as available, to prove the point that women-are-powerless and declare it universal as well as essential. Experience, therefore, becomes the root source for personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression. This universalization on the basis of the 'sameness of oppression', thus, leads to exclusions around

race, class, caste and ethnicity. There has been a questioning of the Indian feminism's hegemonic impulse to speak for, or in the name of 'Indian' women. Dalitbahujan feminists critique both the anti-caste and feminist movements for their particular forms of exclusion. The category of Dalit women has been identified as an *imagined category*, crucial to give new critical dimensions to both the Indian feminist movement as well as the Dalit movement. The need to create such an imaginary category can be derived from what Ania Loomba calls the 'reverse tendency in India to oversimplify Western Feminism' (Jackson), by which she means that such an oversimplification flattens out the differences between the varieties of Western Feminism and ignores the relationship between gender, sexuality, class, nation, race and culture.

Kandasamy ably dramatizes and clarifies the multiplicity in the uniformity. In an attempt to confront such a constructed 'sisterhood', Kandasamy advocates a sisterhood within the community (here, of sex workers) in *Backstreet Girls*- where she exclaims aloud '*to the moral police*' that-

Tongues untied, we swallow suns.

Sure as sluts, we strip random men.

There's self love on our minds.

And yes, my dear, we are all friends.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Source for all the extracts of poetry by Kandasamy in this paper: (Kandasamy)

Evidently, the sisterhood projected here is contrary to the universalized sisterhood/womanhood, something that Sharmila Rege also points out when she says- ‘the category of Dalit women is not homogeneous.’ In *A Dalit Feminist Standpoint* she states that, ‘The feminism that developed in the 1970s differed from the left in three crucial areas- the categories of woman, experience and personal politics; all of which were central to feminist theorization. Though powerful as political rhetoric, these categories posed theoretical problems. (Rege)’ Meena Kandasamy’s poetry is constantly conversing with such an argument. She proclaims in *Once my silence held you spellbound-*

You wouldn’t discuss me because my suffering

was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough.

Enough. Now I am theoretical enough.

I am theatrical enough.

I have learnt these big big words.

I can use them with abandon.

I can misuse them. I can refuse them.

Nevertheless, the poet clarifies her position by-

But because I use these bedeviling words

the way you use me never means

that I have stopped seething in anger  
that I have stopped swearing

In illustrating a heterogeneity, Kandasamy doesn't abstain herself from sabotaging the myth of secular history, while at the same time challenging various other grand narratives too. 'Should you take offense', quoting the poet from the Introduction to the collection yet again, 'My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths...The criticism I embark on, like your codification and like my cunt, is beyond all culture. (Kandasamy)'

As the lines in *Random access man* follow-

Denial aroused desire and  
Lust rolled on her breasts,  
Lust rode her hips.

Sure that he would never come  
She sent her dickhead husband  
On a wild goose chase- Get me  
The testicle of a golden deer,  
She said, get me its musk  
So we can rouse your manhood.

She picked herself a random man

...

By the time she left

This stranger's lap

She had learnt

All about love.

First to last.

*Mamasita.*

Here, *Mamasita* isn't the subservient wife obliged to be servile to her husband. And, unlike in the epic, nor is her husband rendered an ideal persona. Kandasamy shows an easy confidence in asserting women's claim for pleasure. Sita could pick 'a random man', a complete 'stranger'; if her 'dickhead husband' is unable to satisfy her desire, or her lust, as it were.

Kandasamy leaves us wondering- '*what shall we make of them?*'<sup>3</sup> In *Big Brother: An epic in eighteen episodes*:

In that Sin City, with its slot machines,

This gaming guy lost all to loaded dice-

His brothers, his bonds, his villages, his wife.

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<sup>3</sup> From *I shall see my dark one* (Kandasamy)



His sanity- untouched by poker dons-  
Slipped away when he saw his lady leave for work:  
A high heeled item, a stripper queen

About the women in the epic, Arti Dhand in *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahabharata* states that ‘in the fulfillment of their desires, they are aggressive, resourceful and tenacious. While these markers of concentrated determination are commendable when in the service of *dharmic* bonds, it is feared that women’s desires may be so immense as to inspire deceit and a reckless pursuit of hedonism. (Dhand)’ At the same time, Dhand’s argument is to put forth that the prejudices of the Mahabharata do not differ from the contemporary feminist assessments of female sexuality practiced. ‘It is the value assigned to female sexuality that is contested,’ she says (Dhand).

The images of celestial women in her poetry are not narrowed to that of a ‘Dharampatni’. They are but multiple identities. They could be the ‘Pancacuda’- governed by sensual pleasure. They could be ‘Amba’- eager to compete with men to reinstate their will and their identity. The men who contain the women in strictures are certainly the same who exercise their will and escape pompously; like the Hindu god of war, Indra, who Kandasamy outrageously addresses as ‘the genocidal god of gods’ in *Massacre of the innocents*.

In *Nailed* she discerns that

Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous  
Portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she  
Will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her.

Her poetry, therefore, not only remains an explicit protest against the images that seem to belong to constructions; but also a female literary reaction to the male literary allegation and intimidation. Agreeably, K. Satchidanandan describes the poetry by Kandasamy in *Ms. Militancy* as: ‘de-romanticizes the world, de-mythifies the religious and the literary traditions by re-appropriating the hegemonic language in a heretical gesture of Promethean love for the dispossessed. (Kandasamy)’

Meena Kandasamy materializes the advent of these unprecedented women in *Celestial celebrities*, by displacing them from their celestial and mythological positions. She articulates, almost smugly, how

The rivers bear the names  
Of fallen women exiled to earth  
When the heavens found them  
Too bloody hot to handle

This remains another revolutionary use of mythology by the poet. Positively, women in her poetry are in a constant pursuit to assert their subjectivity.

Further, Kandasamy explores the relationship of the sexual participation of woman's body to the realm of language. *A Cunning Stunt* in the same collection explicates an act of sex where words once scribed, do impose meanings. Following are a few extract(s) from the poem:

Bound in bed and blindfolded  
I hear the man of words come to me.  
  
Memory gives way to medical terminology  
Give way to metaphor as this man  
Turns into a word monster  
...  
He is tearing away to  
Make the meanings fit in

It seems that Kandasamy's protest is to defy the culture of words itself, such that acquire arbitrary meanings. 'Body of the Dalit woman becomes the locus of her victimization and her revenge, exploitation and retaliation', states Akshay Kumar in *From Confusion to Consolidation: Politics of Counter-aesthetics in Dalit Poetry* (Kumar). Meena Kandasamy thoroughly elucidates such dualities in her poetry and ostensibly defies them.

There can be an inquiry as to what validates, or rather, how validated is Kandasamy's perception of the reality of Dalit women; also, the reality of her own Dalit feminine self. Antonio Gramsci had argued that 'the perspective of the dominated is necessarily contradictory and fractured; a doubled or negative consciousness that must both acknowledge the force and power of elite domination in real and symbolic terms (in this case- patriarchy, classism and castism), while struggling to maintain the critical distance necessary for defining oneself against such homogenizing attempts.' When we consider Meena Kandasamy as a female Tamil Dalit poet writing the kind of provocative performance poetry that she does, we notice that she rules out the assumption of any 'risk'<sup>4</sup>. She seemingly (read: deliberately) presupposes the 'critical distance' to define the reality of her distinct self and appears personally as well as politically indulged into her vociferations. Her acknowledgement of the power that dominates a 'powerless' subject (here, a Dalit woman), only serves as fodder to generate adequate command for the immobilized, out of her poetry. In *Dalit Women Talk Differently*, Gopal Guru, in a similar argument, suggests how 'the perception of reality is largely determined by social location. Dalit women's claim to talk differently assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, talking differently can be treated as genuinely representative (Guru).' Considering which, Kandasamy's standpoint as a Tamil Dalit Woman Poet is sufficiently genuine as her multifaceted social location determines for her the perception of the reality that she not only sees but suffers to an extent. Perhaps, Kandasamy's poetry adheres to the stability that

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<sup>4</sup> As an answer to my question to Meena Kandasamy at Jaipur Literature Festival' 15, that if she sees a possibility of any 'risk' when she writes the kind of poetry that she does, her reply was as plain as: 'Risk? I don't know any risk.'

Guru refers to, which is set about to make sure that it talks as differently as possible. Kandasamy talks differently, indeed.

Given that their gender as well as their caste and class identity causes the Dalit women to talk differently – it is their experiences which show that what Dalit women need most are localized and specific forms of resistance. That is, to resist formation of a sisterhood that is based on gender, and not forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis. For that matter, male violence must also be theorized and interpreted *within* such specific societies for a better understanding of the role(s) of oppressor(s), oppressed and the layers of oppression involved between them; as well as for better organization that leads towards a required change. Kandasamy’s poetry does not plainly demand a social inclusion of Dalit women. It seeks for an analysis of gender relations as they are inflected by multiple and overlapping patriarchies of caste communities that produce varying registers of vulnerability. There is search for a feasible transformation of the subjectivities from a cause which is *theirs* alone, to one which is *ours*. The last line of *The Belt Bomb Girl’s Suicide Note*: ‘Where there is no tale bearer, strife ceases’, certainly asserts what Kandasamy earnestly wishes to propose, that is, ‘Educate – Agitate – Organize’<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> B.R. Ambedkar.

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