



Rebelling through the language of love: A study of sexual violence in the love poems of

Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract:

In the discourse of Dalit feminism the question of the Dalit woman's sexuality is pertinent. Largely portrayed as the victim of sexual exploitation, assault and humiliation by both the men from the upper caste and the Dalit men, what becomes of the 'untouchable' body of the Dalit woman when she desires? Through the provocative and explicit love poetry of Tamil poet Meera Kandasamy I explore how through language a Dalit woman can turn gendered-caste violence on its own back and break away from the narrative of victimhood to assume a vocal, rebellious, desiring self. While Kandasamy is conscious of her identity as a Dalit woman writer and her aesthetics are informed by this identity, it is difficult to homogenise the Dalit woman either with the Dalit identity or the universal womanhood; and still more difficult to locate the centre and

medium of her sexual rebellion. While in much of the Dalit Literature and discourse education appeared as the panacea to the malaise of socio-economic subjugation and caste based exploitation faced by the Dalits, in the poems of Kandasamy language and the power it confers to an individual does more than simply alleviate the social oppressions, it takes the structures of patriarchy and ossified caste mores and turn them upside down creating a new aesthetic of rebellion.

Key words: Love, identity, repression, Meena Kandasamy, homogenise, discourse, Dalit Feminism, erotic, rebellion, mythology, sexuality.

The assertion of Dalit Feminism in the 1990s suitably challenged the hegemonic discourse of the feminist movement in India- often representing and speaking for the upper caste, university educated woman. It also exposed the patriarchy of dalit politics, thus creating for itself a theoretical space outside, both, the dalit and the feminist discourse. Though recognised as the doubly marginalised- by caste and gender- the dalit woman found herself adequately represented in neither discourses. While the mainstream feminist discourse elided the more specific caste identity politics of a dalit woman unable to engage with the notion and images of body that the concept of 'untouchability' produced; dalit politics often marginalised dalit women, unable to detect patriarchal structures in dalit households and the need to address and correct them. This paper attempts to engage with the issue of the dalit female body and its place within the larger debate around gender and caste through the portrayal of love and sexual violence in the poems of contemporary dalit woman writer Meena Kandasamy. Her poems are consciously erotic and

scandalous and voice the concerns of the dalit woman ranging from caste violence, domestic and sexual violence to representation of the woman and the dalit in mythology. I focus only on her love poems, thus looking at the specific question of the production and representation of the 'untouchable' female body in the act of love.

The discourse of 'Love' is produced through the act of 'desire'. How does the 'untouchable' body, then, operate in the power network of male desire? Does the dalit woman find herself more bound in the discourse of the body than an upper caste woman? Does sexual violence perpetrated by the upper caste male acquire a more complex character because of the confluence of caste and gender? When M. Swathy Margaret recalls "The stories of Dalit women being used and thrown by upper caste men, told and retold by my mother ...", is she pointing us to a more complex power structure when it comes to the body of a dalit woman in love? These are the few questions that concern this paper.

The Dalit woman's sexuality has often been a bone of contention. Recalling her experience in the university M. Swati Margaret further notes that the male members of the Ambedkar Student's Union though quick in coming to her help at the time of the admission, deliberately excluded women from active decision making, intellectual expression and significant party work. They were relegated to the ceremonial functions of holding out bouquets to chief guests or at best delivering the vote of thanks. This policy was adopted in cognisance of the fact that women are a problem, "their sexuality being an uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the unassuming dalit men in the movement" ("Dalit Feminism", Counter currents.)

The body and hence the sexuality of the dalit woman becomes central to any politics of caste or gender. The questions of autonomy or expression, choice or empowerment become

threaded to how this body operates within the many power transactions. It is through this framework that I study the poems of Meena Kandasamy and analyse her 'politics of protest' through a specific sexual lexicon. Meena Kandasamy is a young woman writer and scholar from Tamil Nadu who emerged on the contemporary Indian English literary scene in 2006 with a brilliant collection of poems titled *Touch* and then *Ms Militancy* (2012). Her identity as a dalit woman remains strongly entrenched in her writing. In fact, she states in an interview published in the *Wall Street Journal* "People will force that label on you so you might as well make the most of it," ("Female Dalit Poet", India Real time).

The title of her book is very telling. 'Touch' remains central to the lives of bodies, especially so to a caste or sexed body. The touch may invite physical violence in form of punishment administered to the dalit body touching a water tank or a building which is 'untouchable' for the 'untouchable'. The same touch can be the beating by a dalit husband, or rape by a brahmin Man. But can the dalit woman exist outside these stock constructions of the dalit woman as a victim? Can she become also just a lover, a desiring and desired body-subject? Is there no sex outside the discourse of violence for her? This question takes me to the comments of Dr. Sanjay Kumar, a feminist theatre activist based in Delhi, in one of his workshops- "which sex is not violence?" there may be a collectivist view in this line of thought which views all women as essentially at the receiving end of sexual violence or subjugation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also indicates towards a possibility of 'women' to have formed a coherent group identity within 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, 35)

A similar conflation is made by the Dalit ideologue Gopal Guru when he perceives all women as dalit on the ground the even upper caste women are not allowed to enter their kitchens during their menstrual period and are considered "impure" and are hence all "untouchables". To this Swati Margeret aptly retorts:

What Guru overlooks is that untouchability is a phenomenon that evokes various notions and images of bodies--bodies that are marked by their caste, gender, class, age, sexual orientation and other identities. And different bodies are ascribed different cultural meanings. Not all bodies possess even identities. Not all Dalit bodies are one, not all female bodies are one. They interact with each other being caught in a complex web of intersecting identities. ("Dalit Feminism", Counter currents)

The sexual experiences of the dalit women are thus coloured with a specific identity politics, an identity uncomfortably outside the collective politics of the dalit movement and also the women's movement. 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 (85)'. The poems of Kandasamy try to locate this dalit femaleness, the dalitbody-ness. They talk

of the experiences of the dalit woman. Even when there is the autobiographical ‘I’ it seems extendable to the larger identity. Her works, of course, derive from her lived experiences and thus take on a political character and a conscious militancy. I take her personal history as the point of entry to her writing.

Kandasamy was recently a victim of a violent marriage. In her shocking article she describes the domestic and sexual violence that she was subjected to. Her identity as a militant woman writer who has written erotic poetry was used as an arm against her, to threaten her. She describes in the autobiographical piece how she learnt to deal with the violence through a new language of colours. She colour coded her wounds. She notes in the article titled ‘I Singe the Body Electric’ published in *Outlook India* on 19th March 2012, “I colour-code the domestic violence: fresh red welts on my skin, the black hue of blood clots, the fading violet of healed bruises. It appears that there is no escape from this unending cycle of abuse, remorse-filled apology and more abuse.” (“I Singe the Body Electric”, *Outlook India*) A curious analogy can be seen in the poem that won her the first award ‘My lover speaks of rape’ over eight years ago.

...Tragedy in

Bridal red 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-colour symphony.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .

Blues blend to an unforgiving metropolitan black (2006, 48)

While the morning is ‘flaming green’ the noon remains ‘colourless’ as everywoman’s story is told. The story beginning at the bridal red and ending, perhaps, in the ‘floral pink-white sad skin of the dowry-dead(th)’ woman. The journey of the dalit woman through the various colourscapes of violence rings a familiar bell in Kandasamy’s personal experience of domestic abuse. The construction of the ‘high-colour symphony’ becomes the way to survive. The loneliness of the black blended from blue offers safety that the bridal red could not give. Kandasamy, in an interview, reflects on the function of language in the process of construction of the self. She responds to a question relating to her choice of poetry as the form she chooses over prose and points out the important role of language in militant activism.

Poetry is intricately connected with language, and since language is the site of all subjugation and oppression, I think poetry alone has the power of being extremely subversive. Because, on several levels, it can challenge a language, its patterns of thought, its prejudices and its enshrined, encapsulated inequalities. Though languages may have their hierarchies firmly in place and though they tend to be degrading to women and Dalits in the Indian context, they are a level playing field. I can offer my resistance through language.

Poem after poem, the lover appears, either through recollection or as a character. Sometimes as the customer of a call-girl, sometimes as the beating husband; he could be a prying

molester or a brazen boyfriend. Kandasamy conjures this lover variously. As in the poem 'Returning home' she writes:

And I thought of my lover.
*A primitive man who would invade
your aloneness on insomniac nights
and challenge your assumptions of
love and your sophistications and fill
your ears with the four letter words of
his ancient language that have begun
to sound to you like earth songs to
which your body awakens.*
(And you are his love,
so you listen to his lines.) (2006, 93)

The verse seemingly runs in the usual romance of a young woman for a man. There is an obvious eroticism in the lines. The body is at the centre of the songs sung by the lover who 'invades' the 'insomniac nights' of the woman. His primitiveness challenges sophisticated assumptions of love romanticised through the metaphor of 'earth song'. The military verb used for the lover's action, however, points to an implicit violence in any act of love. The words in parenthesis almost point to a hostage audience the beloved plays to the love rituals of earth songs- asentiment confirmed in the anti-climactic last stanza:

On the way home, the small
lessons you learn of life. . .
Love, or the promise of love,
its lack of choice.
This large world.
And its littleness.(2006, 56)

Is Kandasamy a sceptic, or worse a cynic regarding love? Does she reject love or any such notions of romance as an upper-caste bourgeois mechanism often applied by the upper caste men as a means to obtain and exploit the dalit woman's body? In another award winning poem 'Mascara,' Kandasamy talks of the lower-caste prostitute- the desperate victim of caste-class-gender subjugation.

It has happened for centuries. . .
Empty consolations soothe
violated bodies.
Sex clings to her devadasi skin,
assumed superficialities don't wear off,
Deliverance doesn't arrive.
Unknown Legacies of
Love made to Gods
haven't been ceremoniously accounted
as karma.

But still she prays.
Her prayer words
desperately provoke Answers.
Fighting her case,
Providence lost his pride.
Her helplessness doesn't
Seduce the Gods.
And they too
never learn
the Depth of her Dreams. (2006, 39-40)

Repeatedly, in her poems we see the language of violation in sex and 'choicelessness' in love. Even when gods are the lovers, the consolations are empty and deliverance impossible, the only possibility of protest that Kandasamy projects for the women is through words. Even as the call-girl dons the mascara- the war paint- she whispers to the heavens. In another poem 'He Replaces Poetry' words become the essential substitute for the lover. She begins with the possible end and post-mortem of a love affair, fighting his thoughts, memory and the desire.

Two months into love and today I turn into a whore
Hunting for words, tearing them out from soiled sheets
Of mind or pinching them from the world like removing

Jade-green flecks from tiger's eyes. . . And poetry refuses
Entry into my mirrored life that is bequeathed to him. (2006, 73)

She looks for words to redeem her from the pain and savage tears. Even the expression of the hurt through a violent scream can happen only with words “And I wait for offending/Words to row me into worlds where I shall cry wildly for whole/ Nights like the lament of lonely, old and greying seas (2006, 74)”

Finally, the much consuming lover is replaced by poetry in the last line of the poem- “Poetry, in the end, shall replace all of him.” Can one then infer that Kandasamy is offering a certain kind of dalit feminism through the ‘word’? That, in her writing language becomes not simply the means of protest but an entire mode of existence? 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. (2012, 31)

She rejects the available model of love, replicating it with an empowerment through language, an ability to write the self. In a long love poem ‘Songs of Summer’ Kandasamy uses language of unbridled sexuality and explicit erotic expression

“I would like to make love.”

Wanna fuck? It is easier saying it this way
For something that you paid for in cash
And cheques and credit cards.
Forget the lesser action, the lack of poetry—
What mattered was how you let go
Of your hate and heat and hunger
But never had the courage to talk
To her of love or loneliness. . .(2006, 93)

A recurrent feature of her love poems is the image of sexual exploitation. The devdasis and the prostitutes appear again and again in her poems. Even if the woman is not a sex worker, the lover always abandons her after a period of sexual use and abuse. It almost seems that the normative ‘love’ is not an easy possibility for a dalit woman. As Swathi Margaret recalls her fears as a young dalit woman,

Dalit men, even those identified with the movement, do not want to see us as intellectuals. “You are a Dalit body, a Dalit female body. Why can’t I possess it. Why can’t I just come near you?”. It is threatening. This happens at a very physical level. To prevent this, one of the strategies that I use, is to stay with upper-caste women as Dalit men will not dare do express and behave in the same manner with them. In such a situation who am I closer to? The Dalit men, or the upper-caste women? Neither.

Kandasamy’s poem continues in a scandalous sexual vocabulary:

“Let’s make love.”

~all that you thought~

What’s taking her so long to undress?

Quick! Sooner!

~all that you said~

Imgonna fuck till ya faint. . .

“Oh how nice to have made love.”

~breathless~ Iminahurry. Cyasoon. ~panting~(38-45)

The other alternative is a sustained sexual subjugation which seems to be the destiny of most dalit woman as pointed out by other dalit women thinkers as well. If the upper caste male exploits the dalit female body the dalit male simply subjugates it. In the same poem Kandasamy continues

“She’s mine.”

To make her yours and yours alone,

You pushed her deeper into harems

Where she could see the sunlight

Only from the lattice windows.

Domesticated into drudgery she was just

Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave

Who maintained your numbers.(2006, 30-37)

The description of the Dalit woman as a slave is not uncommon in writing by dalit women. Heera Bansode, another dalit poet, writes in her poem 'Slave'

Where a woman in her youth is dried up by tradition
she is confined all her life like a stunted tree
she remains in the shadow of someone else's light
In that country a woman is still a slave ("Unpacking Fulmination", Dalitweb)

Kandasamy, however, is not writing an 'autobiography of woe'. She has often criticised the publishing industry for printing what she calls the 'autobiography of woe'. It's not just the description of a miserable and enslaved life that one sees in her poems but a challenge to the love-power structure. The poem ends not with surrender or a woeful narrative; it ends with the question of language, the militancy of words. The function that they may perform in giving the dalit woman a claim over her territory- her body

Here are the words, again—
I am happy. Life is good / I would love to make love.
You are trespassing on my territory/ She's mine.
Let's make love/ Oh how nice to have made love.
On sunny green fields these are the only
Six sentences the male of a grasshopper can ever say.
But what have we done with words?(2006, 46-52)

It is in this spirit of *écriture feminine* that I view Kandasamy's poetry. Her poems are not simple documents of the oppression of the dalit woman. They not just state the sexually subordinate position these women are accorded within the dalit or non-dalit male universe. Her poems become invariably a method to transcend the poetics of exploitation and arrive at a language of choice and self-creation. The collective referent of her poem 'Their Daughters' refers to the inheritance of the dalit women born to the legacy of domestic violence and also points to the arms of their rebellion- writing.

Of my people—father's father's mother's

Mother, dark lush hair caressing her ankles

Sometimes, sweeping earth, deep-honey skin,

Amber eyes—not beauty alone they say

.

.

.

Young woman near my father's home, with a drunken husband

Who never changed; she bore his beatings everyday until on one

Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seedbags. . .

We: their daughters.

We: the daughters of their soil.

We, mostly, write. (2006, 3-6...14-19)

The love poems of Meena Kandasamy are a representation of sexual subjugation of the dalit woman. They variously express her anguish but most importantly develop a new form of rebellion, the one through language. Her writing becomes an unbridled exercise in rebellion. She forms the body through the words and fills it with rebellious rage. In her writing she rejects the secure domesticity or an arrested sexual existence and makes writing the tool of empowerment and voicing. It is as she confesses in an interview: "I write out of my helplessness. I write because I want to rebel, and this is the only way I know how. I write because, if I were to be silent today, I will be condemned for my silence tomorrow." (*Postcolonial Text*, Vol 4, No 4 (2008)). It is pertinent to end with these from her poem *Once my silence held you spellbound-*

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. (2012, 56)

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