

Trauma of Inequality: A Struggle of Dalits in Meena Kandaswamy's The Gypsy Goddess

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Abstract: *Dalit is defined as a consciously chosen ideological position against the caste system. Dalit literature has established itself as a separate category of writing in many of the Indian languages. Several writings under this category have emerged as a strong voice of Dalit communities in different literatures over the last five decades. The impact of Dalit writers and writings has also compelled the literary associations and academics to recognize as a separate category of literature and reward it through several means. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality. One of the leading voices of Indian English Literature, Meena Kandasamy is a candid activist, fierce poet, critically acclaimed novelist, and noteworthy translator of the current era. As a writer, she excels in the stark portrayal and deconstruction of caste and gender-based violence in contemporary Indian society. The Gypsy Goddess (2014) is Indian Dalit writer Meena Kandasamy's first novel. The narrator recounts the 1968 massacre of forty-four landless Dalit villagers striking for higher wages in the village of Kilvenmani, Tamil Nadu. Because the victims of the massacre were marginalized, they did not receive justice and were obliterated from history. The narrator persistently addresses the readers to force them to look at the horror of this event. This article aims at analysing Kandasamy's representations of an unrepresentable massacre in order to ponder over the ethics of the depiction of horror.*

Keywords: Justice, Horror, Caste system, Dalits, Marginalization

I. INTRODUCTION

'Dalit' is a term that has been embraced by individuals of untouchable group of India to depict and distinguish them. "Dalit" envelops the defenseless portion of the Indian society, which lives at the limit of the town, just as Adivasis, landless homestead workers, laborers, the enduring masses, and migrant and criminal clans and ladies. It isn't just material to the untouchables yet to all who are falling behind socially and monetarily in the nation's formative procedure. Dalit literature is characterized by its fundamental criticism of the caste system and all kinds of discrimination and by its call for destroying social hierarchies. It is the literature of social and political commitment that challenges the status quo. It is the literature of questioning the exclusion from the mainstream of society and culture. It is the literature that promotes equality and human dignity. Most Dalit writers also believe that the principal purpose of writing literature is to bring about social change rather than recreation or mere intellectual sophistry. By its very nature, Dalit literature remains at the margin as it challenges mainstream. This literature is more realistic than romantic and is unified in by the portrayal of discrimination and exploitation. Dalit writers are severely critical of the silence of the mainstream literature about surrounding social realities and their romanticisation of Indian society and its hierarchies. Even when higher caste writers have voiced concerns about Dalit communities, they are seen as condescending in nature and aimed at blunting Dalit resistance and amalgamating Dalits in mainstream society.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is one of the contemporary eminent Dalit voices and an activist from Chennai who uses her writings as tools to oppose the injustice of the caste system that prevails in India. Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, writer, translator, and activist known for her bold and uncompromising voice on issues related to caste, gender, and social justice. Born on October 12, 1984, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, she grew up in a politically engaged household that influenced her interest in activism from a young age. Kandasamy's work often focuses on the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and women, blending personal narrative with political critique. Her writings advocate

the oppressed people by caste system in India. She is one of the boldest young writers of India with a focus on the issues of caste and gender. Noting that dalit women are nowhere truly represented, she has attempted to bring together the issues of caste, class and gender realistically in her writings. She had only turned seventeen when she decided to take responsibility for accurately portraying truth without any embellishment. Since the beginning, her primary concern has been the portrayal of the underrepresented class, which she has been working to address up to this point. In the beginning, she was a poet, and later on, she began translating works by dalit writers from the region. Her academic background includes a 'Doctorate of Philosophy' in Sociolinguistics, which she earned from Anna University in Chennai. She is the first woman to write about dalits, and she does justice to the task she has embarked on, which is to expose continuous crimes committed against dalits. Since 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers and activists established an organization known as Dalit Panthers, Dalit literature has been gaining momentum. During the middle of the twentieth century, the practice of untouchability posed a threat to the underprivileged class, and the movement was initially a reaction to the discrimination that existed in society. Despite the fact that a large number of social reformers took a stance against it in the latter part of the nineteenth century and were successful in abolishing the practice in 1950 under article 17, the reality on the ground nowadays is that the situation is exactly the opposite. Meena highlights the class's plight. She expressed herself nicely in English. Her work has always inspired dalit authors. She works selflessly for dalits. Meena's verbal expression is remarkable. She says she wants an English with words from her native language. She published her first novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* in 2015. Her works are radical and liberating. She has published two anthologies of poems, *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*. *Ms. Militancy* draws on Tamil mythologies to deliberate on the issues of caste and gender. Her latest novel, *When I Hit You or The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, is a powerful and thought-provoking novel about an abusive marriage. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* deals with the worst case of atrocities against dalit community in history, the Kilvenmani massacre.

II. MAJOR THRUST

Exploitation based on caste is deeply rooted in the Indian caste system. Dalits in India experience exploitation as a daily reflex. They live under constant threats of exploitation, humiliation and violence from upper castes. There are many cases in which they are beaten, chased, humiliated and murdered. In such a direction, Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* draws on Dalit pain and persecution. *The Gypsy Goddess* was published in 2014. The narrative intricately weaves personal stories with historical events, employing a kaleidoscope of narrative techniques that reflect the complexities of caste-based violence and the resilience of marginalized communities. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kandasamy utilizes a non-linear narrative structure that intersperses various perspectives, allowing readers to engage with the emotional and psychological ramifications of the massacre. Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) has garnered scholarly attention for its radical portrayal of caste violence and its disruption of conventional narrative form. The novel begins with a Prologue, which consists of the letter written by Gopala Krishna Naidu, the president of the Paddy Producer's Association, to the chief minister of Madras, to complain about the agricultural laborers who are getting influenced by communism which is spreading like wildfire in their region, he seeks 'immediate redressal of the grievances of paddy cultivators' (TGG, p.3), in the letter he explains how the self-styled communists are responsible for the disobedience of agriculture laborers. In Part One, titled "Background" the writer mostly talks about her anxiety regarding how to tell this story, she is concerned with its rebellious nature as well as with the rebellious power of her hybrid language and there she touches upon legends of that area, reveals bits and pieces of history of Nagapattanam district to which Kilvenmani belongs. The constant flip in the narration, references to people like Ptolemy, and intertextuality, appear to be an attempt to add more layers of meaning to the already complex retelling of an incident. The first chapter of Part Two 'The Cutthroat Comrade' offers a critical description of Gopala Krishna Naidu's personality and the authoritarian way he conducts the Emergency Executive Committee Meeting of the Paddy Producers Association, the following chapters also deviate from the linear narrative style once in a while, however, they manage to bring the readers straight into the story of a village and its people. Even though the narrative style of all the sections of the novel is experimental, they paradoxically narrate a true story, which is part of the long history of

Casteism in India. The remaining chapters of the novel deal with the plight of the peasant class people largely Dalits, who live in inhuman conditions, coping up with relentless oppression and atrocities in the hands of upper-class landlords of Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu. The novel has adopted an incident that happened in the late 1960s by which The Green Revolution was in full swing and the farm yields of paddy fields had risen. The communist party mobilized the agriculture laborers to demand a higher share of yield, when the landlords denied their plea, the laborers decided to go on strike, but most of the landlords broke the strike, in their inhuman ways.

The novel deals with the pitiable plight of Dalit landless agricultural labourers mainly from the untouchable Pallar and Paraiyar castes in the village of Kilvenmani, in the east Tanjore district- the area known as the granary of South India. (TGG, p.88) The novel, set against the backdrop of the Green Revolution, draws on the historical massacre that took place at Kilvenmani on 25th December 1968 in which around forty- four striking Dalit village labourers were chased and murdered by the armed upper caste people, led by the ruthless landlords. The gruesome incident occurred after the poor labourers from different villages under the influence of red flags of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) organized a one-day district-level agricultural strike demanding rise in their daily wages. The plot of the novel revolves around the tripartite structure basing conflicts among the arrogant upper caste landlords-the Naidus, the Communist Party leaders and the untouchable landless labourers. The labourers are mobilised by the Communists to demand a higher share of the yield in the east Tanjore belt. The labourers demand an increase in their wages, daily wages instead of weekly wages and women's right to take breaks to attend to their infants during work. The labourers participated in a one-day district-level agricultural strike organised on 15th November 1968 in which the landlord killed the local Communist leader Sikkal Pakkirisamy in vengeance. The workers attend Pakkirisamy's funeral procession and as a result, remain absent for two days on their work. The landlords term it as arrogance and insolent and impudence and a Communist nuisance (TGG, p.105) and demand that the labourers should pay a fine for abstaining from work.

The Gypsy Goddess does not only focus on the villagers' deaths, but also on their existences and on their community's experience after the massacre. Jesse Prinz argues that we cannot empathize with a collective and that we need to take into account individuals' experiences in order to empathize with a group of people (Prinz, 2011, p. 221). The novel illustrates how empathy fails to occur if one does not regard the massacre as individuals' experiences but as a mass murder, the victims of which one cannot identify. Kandasamy also gives voice to the labourers and their families, allowing for a deeply human portrayal of the victims' suffering. This diversity of voices reflects the complexity of the socio-political dynamics at play, illustrating how power operates through language and representation. One of the most striking features of The Gypsy Goddess is Kandasamy's frequent reflections on the act of storytelling itself. The novel is deeply self aware, with the narrator repeatedly questioning the ethics and limitations of narrating trauma. This metafictional element critiques both literature and history, drawing attention to the politics of representation. At one point, the narrator states: It prides itself on its ability to disappoint (TGG, p. 78). Here, Kandasamy acknowledges the impossibility of fully capturing the enormity of the massacre in words.

The Gypsy Goddess is a powerful intervention in Indian English literature. Through its radical form and fierce content, it challenges dominant narratives and reclaims history for the oppressed. Meena Kandasamy transforms literature into a site of resistance, where Dalit women are not silenced but empowered, and where caste and class oppression are exposed in their full brutality. Her work is a call to remember, to resist, and to rewrite the stories of those who have been erased. By foregrounding Dalit women's agency, critiquing institutional complicity, and dismantling narrative conventions, Kandasamy crafts a novel that is not only a memorial to the victims of Kilvenmani but a manifesto for justice. Her storytelling embodies dharma through defiance—an ethical response to adharma rooted in truth, rage, and revolutionary hope.

III. CONCLUSION

In The Gypsy Goddess, Kandasamy fills in the blanks of official history, shedding light on an unfair system which dehumanizes an entire part of society on the grounds that they are Dalit. The narrative reveals various points of view,

which it confronts with each other, in order to better highlight the landlords' cruelty and the victims' humanity. Thus, the novel aims at denying the possibility of a selective empathy, which would leave an entire part of the population aside, because they are culturally considered unworthy of this feeling. Kandasamy's writing reveals her own empathy for her characters and the actual people they embody, and her aim of doing them justice, as they did not receive it from the judiciary system. The novel's rich imagery and raw language compel readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of systemic oppression while highlighting women's strength and agency in these communities. Kandasamy's portrayal of anger as a necessary response to injustice is a powerful motif throughout the narrative, emphasizing the importance of resistance and survival. Through her innovative storytelling, Kandasamy not only brings to light the historical injustices Dalit communities face but also critiques contemporary India's broader socio-political landscape. The Gypsy Goddess stands as a testament to the power of literature as a tool for social change, urging readers to acknowledge and challenge the ongoing violence and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. Kandasamy's work exemplifies the intersection of art and activism, making her a vital voice in contemporary Indian literature.

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