

GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ENGINEERING SCIENCE AND RESEARCHES RESISTANCE IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S THE GYPSY GODDESS

Shreya Singh

Ph.D. Scholar, Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Caste system is an unjust system that has prevailed for thousands of years in Indian society. It is the foundation on which Hindu society is built. In this system, Dalits are the one considered at the lowest of strata. Since time immemorial they have been exploited, tortured, harassed, disgraced and subjected to various inhumane customs and rituals in name of God. Even today, Dalits continue to face physical violence, mass killings, if and when they try to raise their voice for freedom from molestation, suppression or for fair wages. One such real life massacre is the inspiration for Meena Kandasamy's debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, which took place in village Kilvenmani of Tamil Nadu in 1968. In this incident 44 landless Dalit agricultural labourers, including women and children were burnt alive. Meena Kandasamy is hailed as the first Dalit women writer, writing in English language. She is a brilliant new face in Dalit Literature. She is militant, bold and ferocious in her depiction of multifaceted atrocities faced by Dalits in not only in her works but also in real life as an activist. Thus she represents a new face of resistance and Dalit literature is essentially a literature of resistance. It is articulation of rage, torment and rebellion of Dalits just to be accepted as a human and treated with dignity. From this point of view, my paper will look at Meena Kandasamy's text *The Gypsy Goddess* as a resistance. Apart from the text, the writer herself, the characters within the text and the events described in the text are all examples of everyday forms of resistance by Dalits. The aim of present paper will be to analyse the various forms of resistance portrayed in this text.

Keywords: *Dalit Literature, The Gypsy Goddess, Meena Kandasamy, Resistance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is the writings about Dalits whose primary motive is the liberation of Dalits. Sharan Kumar Limbale in the book, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* says, "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness". He goes on to define 'Dalit Consciousness' as "the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle". Though Dalit women of India have been living in the culture of silence throughout the centuries still the contribution of some dauntless Dalit women writers to this genre is also immense and significant. The last two decades of the 20th century have seen noticeable third world feminist struggles. In the Indian contents, specifically there was an assertion of caste identity and consciousness and the role of caste in the need to strengthen social movements and transformative politics was discussed. In the early 1990's, the emergence of independent and autonomous Dalit women's organizations and discourses prompted debates around the questions of "difference" in feminist politics.

Gopal Guru argued in essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" that Dalit women suffer two distinct patriarchal structure, the Brahmanical form of patriarchy that stigmatized Dalit woman due to their caste identity of being untouchable and political and literary marginalized of Dalit woman by Dalit.

In such scenario Dalit women writers like Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama and many other took pens in their hands articulating and recording their experiences of humiliation and oppression, subverting centuries of old historical neglect and a stubborn refusal to be considered as a subject. In case of Dalit women they were marginalised in their pursuit of knowledge so they did not have access to English language or preferred over English language to write their agony so we have a lot of work written in the regional languages by Dalit women writers especially in the form of Autobiographies. But today, we have emerging Dalit women writers like Meena Kandasamy and Sujatha Gidla who represent the unheard Dalit voice in English language. For disadvantaged and marginalized Dalits, mastering English promises liberation. It is refreshing to read an Indian English language novel like *The Gypsy Goddess*, which bears its politics and ideology on its sleeves that is about collective resistance rather than individual.

Meena Kandasamy as a Dalit Women Writer

Meena Kandasamy is a poet, fiction writer, translator and activist who is based in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. She has published two collections of poetry, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010). *The Gypsy Goddess* is her first novel. At 17, Kandasamy herself began translating books by Dalit (or “Untouchable”) writers and leaders into English. This awakening of her political and literary conscience took place at a time of concerted violence against India’s lowest castes and when K R Narayanan had become the nation’s first Dalit president. Yet the roots of Kandasamy’s rebellious streak can also be found closer to home. “I grew up in an extreme repressed Hindu family. If I did not put on the bindi, my dad would ask, ‘Are you thinking of a Christian boyfriend?’ I didn’t wear my first jeans until I was 25.” Kandasamy regards her writing as a process of coming to terms with her identity: her “womanness, Tamilness and low/ outcasteness”, labels that she wears with pride. She knew, she says, that “my gender, language and castelessness were not anything that I had to be ashamed of... I wrote poetry very well aware of who I was. But I was also sure of how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be taken on my own terms... I wanted to be totally bare and intensely exposed to the world through my writings. I wanted it to be my rebellion against the world.” It meant, she adds, consciously deciding that she wasn’t interested in winning “acceptance, or admiration or awards”. In an interview she calls herself “an angry young woman,” attacks academic language, and relates how she has faced harassment from people who feel assailed by her writing. She asserts, “I write as an angry young woman, even as it requires all my artistic skill to maintain that rage and to let it reflect in my writings”. She says “There are great Indian fiction writers. But some become very lazy. Some write the ‘Sari-and-Mango’ novel. People of my age write novels in airports. People of an older generation reminisce about cooking and spices – pandering to the exotic as well as the urban Indian

readers. I really did not want to write what was safe or comfortable.” Kandasamy’s interest in this little-known chapter of Indian history was partly inspired by her father. In 1977, he escaped rural poverty in Tanjore by moving to Chennai (formerly Madras) where he eventually completed a Ph.D. In her acknowledgments she expresses gratitude to her father about revealing the hunger and poverty of his childhood with a pain in his eyes that (her) words cannot capture, for sharing his reality that he had struggled hard to escape.

Resistance in Narration of the Gypsy Goddess

Meena Kandasamy breaks away from the conventional methodology of literary writings. In the novel, there’s no straightforward plot or narrative, there are no key characters, not even a central character. There is no intention to entertain. It is, as the blurb tells us, a “novel about the impossibility of writing a novel about a real-life massacre” ‘It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result; it has no life likeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality’ (31)

The narrator directly addresses the reader, “Remember, dear reader, I write from a land where people wrap up newborn babies in clumsy rags and deck the dead in incredible finery.” (139)

Kandasamy makes clear her refusal to make it an easy ride, to tell a linear tale, to explain, to exoticize, to give the reader what he/she expects from an Indian English-language novel.

“I am telling a story so that a story gets told, not with the intension that somebody, somewhere, is going to be awarded a PhD for studying the postmodern perversions of this novel. If you want to learn who was boozing that morning, who were the two lovers who stayed away from the village meeting for a secret rendezvous, or which was the one family that had switched its loyalty to Gopalakrishna Naidu, you won’t find it here.” (118)

At the same time, she points out that “the Communists will be outraged to be glorified in such an archetypal bourgeois literary form such as the novel... produced for the global market.” She anticipates much of the potential criticism of the novel in a way that is disarming and clever, but also, at times, irritating, in particular in the extended opening – the “background” – where we feel impatient for the story to start. She repeats after some gaps in between:

Once upon a time, in one tiny village, there lived an old woman (13)

Once upon a time, in another tiny village, there lived another old woman. (13)

Once upon some time, in some village of some size, there lived an old woman. (14)

Kandasamy also dares to give excuses that names of the novel which goes well with the story of the novel like 'KILVENMANI', 'CHRISTMAS DAY', or '1968' were not opted up by her. Instead she remarks:

'There go all my titles, and any effort at sincerity. Now I am out of choices. So I settle on the curiously obscure and mildly enchanting choice, The Gypsy Goddess.

I have a great title. I have a great story.

They don't belong to each other. In this author-arranged-marriage-without-divorce, these two will stay together.'(41)

Dalit Resistance in the Gypsy Goddess

The fiction examines multiple forms of Dalit resistance. The state apparatus complicit with the upper castes have always used coercive methods to quell the voice of dissent. These institutionalized forces of caste alliances embedded in the structure of the rural landscape have been strong enough to suppress any concern raised by Dalits. The social structure of the village is firmly entrenched in the caste system. 'In Tanjore, all the Brahmins were mirasdars, and all the untouchables were landless labourers.' The reluctant novel fictionalises the events that led up to the attack on Dalit agricultural labours, including women and children due to a long standing battle between powerful landlords and the communist party, who organised resistance against landowners, demanding better wages and working conditions. It was over the demand for an additional half-portion of rice that labourers in Kilvenmani were crushed so brutally "You will learn that criminal landlords can break civil laws to enforce caste codes. You will learn that handfuls of rice can consume half a village".(31)

Through the character of Muthusamy, the author categorically comments on dalit people's responsibility to make their communities socially aware about the politics of the landlords

What is being offered to us by the landlords –like the loans they grant us during marriages, like the promise to provide us jobs when we join their association-these are baits. None of these will give us rights. None of these will make us own the land we till. None of these will make us their equals. None of these will make them treat us with respect.(119)

It is not only the men in the village who are protesting, but even the women who are more physically and sexually assaulted by the uppercaste men participate in the protest:

"And then these women said that if the men wanted their mothers and wives and sisters and daughters to live with some honour and dignity, they should stand by the Communists and continue to fight these rowdy landlords."(117)

Kandasamy uses an array of iconoclastic narrative voices. The gruesome attack itself is described, as the fire "lick[s]away" at its victims.

"Facial features disappear and flesh now starts splitting and shin bones show and hair singes with a strange smell and the flames hastily lick away at every last juicy bit as the bones learn to burst like dead wood ...".(165)

Then there is the battle for justice, an impossible fight when the police are on the side of the landlords, when the political and legal system are disconnected from the lives of those at the very bottom. The long trial, in a language they don't understand (English) is like an absurd play for the villagers who seek justice: "How can they sit for so long in one place and silently listen?" asks one of the characters. "Even my buttocks have fallen asleep on this bench."

It is a shocking but a true story. It shows how the system works, how the power plays among Caste, class and money exploits. Kandasamy did not deter to expose the hypocrisy of Judicial system.

"Twenty-two of us (dalits) go to jail for two months after our village lost forty-four lives."(226)

"All the accused were acquitted. All of them walked free. The fire of Kilvenmani had been rekindled. We were burning with outrage.

We told them that we did not want compensation. We also did not want their justice."(256)

II. CONCLUSION

MeenaKandasamy's literary sickle takes an angry swipe at class and caste enemies. She doesn't just inherit the history of writing about the unspeakable and the forgotten, she rewrites the novel of violence, and questions every accepted way of turning violence into literature. This story is a part of the long history of caste conflict and the struggles of agricultural labourers in India. The Gypsy Goddess isn't only about craft. It's a searing condemnation of the inequalities of caste, class and power. Kandasamy's work articulates the voice of the [Dalits](#), the people at the lowest rung of India's ancient caste system. Her writing is precise, intense and brutally honest.

Under the predicaments of caste system, Dalits did not have any legitimate means to claim their self-respect and rights except to die in protest. Upper caste-violence against untouchables has a long history, Kilevanami (1968), Karamchedu (1985), Neerukonda(1987) and Chundururu(1991)are testimony to this phenomenon. Dalit history is not the history of human exploitation but also the history of collective struggle coupled with individual acts of transgression. The demand for self-respect and human dignity are at the centre of this assertion.

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