



## **Re-interpreting Myths and Re-configuring Resistance: A Critical Study of Meena Kandasamy's *Ms Militancy***

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### ***Abstract***

*Famous for her astringent attack on the social doldrums of the constructed domination of women, Meena Kandasamy; a poet, writer, translator, and activist is one of the boldest voices of the angry, young Indian woman today. She, as a champion of Dalit's rights, uses her literary eminence to draw public attention to the plight of the marginalized, even as she draws upon her Dalit identity to enrich her works and to crave for herself– and Dalit women in general – a special niche in the world of letters. The paper intends to study her collection of poetry entitled *Ms Militancy* (2010) and aims to unleash the power and sexual politics by re-interpreting Hindu and Tamil myths, ancient texts and popular folk tales. It will also interrogate how in the name of tradition women's sexuality is controlled, a Sita wronged, a Draupadi wrecked. And finally, it will address women especially Dalit women, who are experiencing extreme violence due to double colonization and are in search of their identity and individuality, space and freedom.*

***Keywords:*** *Mythology, Dalit, Body, Feminism, Identity.*

It is true that there exists a deep relationship between patriarchy and caste, the most adverse effects of it could be seen on the state of women and that too on Dalit women who are doubly colonized and are subjugated by two distinct patriarchal structures; one by the Brahmanical form of patriarchy and the other by Dalit men who try to control their sexuality as well as economic labour. Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *Jina Aamuch*, Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* and Sivakami's *Pazhiyana Kazidalum* narrate the story of victimized women and have laid bare the real status and conditions of the marginalized community. The new generation of Dalit women writers has begun to echo the suffering and oppressive conditions of the older ones. Javaid Ahmad Lone quotes the words of Bela Malik as: "the younger women [are] most militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence" (Lone 318).

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Meena Kandasamy is one such name who, though precluded from the social criteria for being a Dalit woman based in the Tamil region, continues to prove her skills of poetry and writing in her works. She is the first Indian woman writer writing Dalit poetry in English exhibiting her concerns on sexual politics, gender-inequality, and caste annihilation in her works. In her anthology of poetry entitled *Ms Militancy* (2010), she has applied a feminist hermeneutic perspective to re-read the scriptures, cultural norms, social and moral codes and value systems. A hermeneutical legacy is an intrinsic aspect of Indian thought and knowledge and all religious, cultural and aesthetic texts have been interpreted by male thinkers from a male perspective. Mythological prototypes considered as an idealized example of masculinity and femininity are reiterated which strengthens the immoral power relations between men and women. Such a revisionist account aims to interrogate patriarchal sanctioned norms, religious texts, epics, and signifiers from a woman-centered perspective in order to unveil its intrinsic androcentric bias thereby seeking to re-establish a strong woman-centric perspective.

Kandasamy's language is a tool which she uses to defend as well as attack, and her poems appear to be an encyclopedia of painful narratives. In the poem entitled "Once my silence held you spellbound" she claims:

You wouldn't discuss me because my suffering  
was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough.  
Enough. Now I am theoretical enough.  
I am theatrical enough (Lines 12-14).

The title of the book *Ms Militancy* bears its connection to a Tamil legendary woman, the Kannagi, who is the central character of the South-Indian epic '*Silapathikaram*'. She is worshipped as a goddess and stands as an idol of a brave woman who fought against injustice courageously. Kandasamy posits her as a paragon of revolt she wishes to see in the female Dalit persona. She declares in the poem entitled "Ms Militancy" that: "Vending vengeance, she made a bomb / of her left breast and blew up the blasted city" (Lines 21-22).

In the poem entitled "Random access man" Kandasamy reiterates the tale of Sita's abduction by Ravana. The striking point here is that she represents Ram as an impotent husband who is unable to fulfill the corporeal desires of Sita. "Denial aroused desire and / lust rolled on her breasts, / lust rode her hips" (Lines 7-9). So, to get rid of him she sends him to fetch the testicles of a golden deer so as to arouse his manhood and meanwhile picks a 'random-man' (Ravana) with many heads and hands. According to mythology Ravana took Sita to his kingdom i.e. Srilanka but never touched her. Here, Kandasamy inverted the tale and says that Sita herself chose Ravana, a man full of masculine vigour. Here, Sita has been portrayed as a woman who is aware of her bodily desires and yearns for its fulfillment. Sita is represented as an epitome of all those women who are bound in a soulless marital relationship and so in order to find her true self she needs to break the shackles of marriage: "By the time she left / this stranger's lap / she had learnt / all about love / First to last / *Mamasita*" (Lines 27-32). Laura Fingerson in her book *Girls in Power: Gender, Body, and Menstruation in Adolescence* (2006) admits that women's bodies are often culturally depicted

as passive and are devalued. She also says that: “bodies themselves can be used in an agentic manner as they shape the course of social interactions...the body is a location for the negotiation of power” (84). This form of agency on the part of the body is represented by Kandasamy through language thereby challenging the gendered symbol. Foucault believes that power is dependent on language and it allows us to interact with the world and assist or resist the hierarchical institutions. Hence, Sita here as an agent and subjective being resists the power institutions and re-negotiates her identity.

The poem also attacks Mahatma Gandhi’s action of observing celibacy during the period of the freedom movement of India thereby neglecting his wife’s needs. She bangs: “on / cold nights he played Gandhi / To her waiting wife’s body” (Lines 4-6).

In India, women are not supposed to ask for sex whether inside or outside the marriage. They only have to remain passive in all the play that happens to their body—since the body is colonized by the male and hence their property. Kandasamy attacks this ideology and assaults terribly on the Hindu society which considers women as silent observers, taking the very archetypal Sita as an example. By reinterpreting the myth, she cross-questions the hegemonic society which always suppresses women’s desire and sexuality. Kandasamy, the artist, is of the view that she allows existence to everyone. She writes poetry to be heard and for that, she has to turn insane, uncommon into something alive and vibrant. In the Preface to the book she declares, “I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamama bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger’s lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me” (*MM* 8).

Mari or Maariamama is the main worshipping goddess in South India and is associated with goddess Durga. Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas was the incarnation of goddess Kali but this truth was known to none but Lord Krishna. In the poem, “Firewalkers” the tale of Draupadi is retold:

Maari had a one-point goal. Maari had a maniac soul.  
Maari made her men wage war, with her rapist’s blood  
To drench her hair...  
Combed her hair with his left thigh bone (Lines 1-5).

The goddess is presented here as an angry, violent, avenging woman, an idol of fearful femininity, synonymous to Kali. Kandasamy believes that language is not just the combination of words but also a medium to showcase one’s domination and suppression and so she fiercely announces: “Your myths put me in my place. Therefore, I take perverse pleasure in such deliberate paraphrase” (*MM* 8).

Kandasamy’s pen is the sword that spares none. She takes charge of the Buddhist philosophy to criticize present-day society and its people. The eight-fold path viz. Right view, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right concentration are re-meditated in the poem “The noble eightfold path” and given a

new meaning which is suitable to contemporary society. She defines Right action as: “The celibate Buddha and his monks / never spilled any semen and it is your bounden duty / to make up for that by raping every woman in sight” (Lines 34-36). The lines bear an indirect criticism of the increasing number of rapes in the country and that too especially in the Dalit community where the doer, mostly an upper-caste does not get punished for his crime.

Again, the poem “Massacre of the innocents” opens with chiding and snubbing Indra, the God of rain and thunder. He is addressed as bad-cop, Vedic cop, and hate-monger. The poem bears allusion to the mythological tale of Indra according to which Indra splintered the fetus of Diti into many pieces on knowing the truth that she wanted to have a son more powerful than him. Kandasamy condemns his actions and charges him of genocide. The myth of ancient and modern-day killing of babies (especially girl child) in fetuses is blended together to question the evil practice that exists in contemporary society. The line reads:

but indra indra narindra alone  
perfected this science of slaughter,  
killing of children of the other  
before they were even  
born...  
the genocidal god of gods (Lines 18-24).

The expectation of chastity and sexual fidelity is always one-sided in the context of male-female relationships which entails that only women be asked to maintain fidelity and be chaste and pure. The poem “Six hours of chastity” subverts the notion of chastity as the ornament of women by retelling the story of Nalayini, who was a chaste and loyal wife of Rishi Maudgalya. Rishi Maudgalya, once excited by a wish to enjoy the company of another woman, was taken to a prostitute’s place by his obedient wife. Kandasamy imagines the events that progressed during the night while “She sits in the veranda of the brothel and / Someone who saunters in mistakes the devout / Wife to be a mistress of guilt, a woman of the night” (Lines 5-7). The representation of Nalayani is in sharp contrast to her mythical counterpart. Here, the modern wife manipulates the situation and enjoys several pleasures, with six men, one for each hour. Indication of the priest's vulnerability to corporeal desires is unfurled here who too visited the prostitute and the dogma of religious beliefs is well stated when she says: “*After the fifth man, every woman becomes a temple*” (Line 23). Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) sheds light on the issue of fidelity where she says that infidelity was born on the day when the natural flow of sexual desire was bound in formal and legal permanence of marriage, and to control progeny, women were fettered with the chains of fidelity and chastity.

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 is not ashamed of her gender, castelessness, and her language. What she most desires is to be taken to her own terms. She wants to be exposed to the world through her rebellion that comes out

in writing. And she simply discards admiration, awards, or any kind of recognition for the same.

Gilbert and Gubar conveyed in their phenomenal work *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) that, “to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (25). She is one of the most selfless writers conscious of the injustice on Dalits. To assume Dalit women as a category is rather problematic to her just like Chandra Talpade Mohanty who proposes to form a coherent group identity in different cultures just to prove that there are many powerless groups of women across the world and in India particularly. The idea is to look for the varied experiences of Dalit women as powerless women rather than a universal category of them as oppressed women. Thus, race, class ethnicity, geographical location should be included while bounding/categorizing them on the same ground.

The experiences and spaces of marginalized women indeed have multiple nuances of formation and understanding, they are the ones who are on the margins of class, gender and caste discrimination and so are their sufferings too on the periphery. Their sufferings are not seen as something wrong rather it is considered as a usual consequence of everyday life. The women are devoid of any voice in regard to their own body. Hence, the act of mutilation of the body not just in one layer but in multiple shades of oppression and domination is normal in the case of marginalized women. The poem “A Cunning Stunt” establishes the relationship of the carnal involvement of a woman's body to the arena of language. ‘bound in bed and blindfolded/ I hear the man of words come to me. / ...cunt now becomes seat, / abode, home, lair, nest, stable / and he opens my legs wider/ and shoves / harder and I am torn apart / to contain the meanings of family, race, stock and caste (Lines 1-27). The poem bears clear reference to the violence and assaults made on Dalit women by men. It also highlights the truth that a woman’s body does not belong to her for experiencing pleasure rather she is seen as an object of men’s needs and pleasure and is understood as an asexual and non-existent being.

The origin of caste discrimination dates back to the era when *Manusmriti* was written. The Laws of Manu favoured Brahmins over other castes and males over females. He equated women with the Sudras. According to him: “Both women and Sudras are life- long slaves from birth to death with slavery inborn in them” (Katrak 176). The ‘*Varnashrama*’ which constitutes the Hindu caste system is the reason for Kandasamy’s anger and protest too. But there is another group of people regarded as ‘untouchables’ metaphorically apart from all. The plight of untouchables is exposed in the poem “One- eyed” where a child is subjected to the onslaught of caste segregation and caste politics. The poet says: “the pot sees just another noisy child / ...the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst / but the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule / ...dhanam sees a world torn in half. / ...the price for a taste of that untouchable water” (Lines 1-10). Kandasamy here highlights how casteism with a rigid patriarchal system impose violence and sexual victimization on the body of Dalit right from birth.

It is true that subordination of women varies in terms of its nature but what remains perpetual and similar is the control of women's sexuality, reproductive power which cuts across class, caste, race, religion, region, ethnicity, etc. These are the modes of control which is common to all patriarchies. Kandasamy sees poetry as a means of deliverance to Dalit women. But, as she proclaims in the poem "Nailed" 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" (Lines 1-3). Even the goddesses Durga, Kali, and Kulamaayi were punished for raising their voice. The reference is for Dalit women who protested against the conventionally established gender frames and claimed their space but pitiably denied freedom like the goddesses and were locked up at home. Jasbir Jain maintains that:

If a female body was to be nailed down as Gulliver was by the Lilliputians, the different nails would be the projected religious and mythological role models, the issue of purity (inclusive of virginity and fidelity), marriage, lineage, caste and economic status. Thus, violence, rape, abduction and control become the necessary associates to produce a docile body and control its labor (10).

Objectification is a strategy adopted by upper-castes and elites to silence the voices of Dalits. Therefore, Kandasamy in the poem "Backstreet Girls" skillfully dramatizes and arouses sisterhood, a sense of solidarity within the Dalit community to free themselves from the vicious bond of domesticity and drudgery. She declares to the moral police vociferously:

Tongues untied, we swallow suns.  
Sure, as sluts, we strip random men.  
Sleepless. There's stardust on our lids.  
Naked. There's self-love on our minds.  
And yes, my dears, we are all friends (Lines 8-12).

Kandasamy's boisterous and guiltless assertion of irrepressible sexual freedom is evident in the words like: 'slut', 'bitch', 'witch', 'shrew'. The words admonish the conformist behaviour expected of a woman to be regarded as suitable for marriage. The title of the poem implies a counter-attack and non-conformity to the cultural orthodoxy and traditional dogmas that condemns women as licentious. Kandasamy on asked about her views on sexual freedom says:

The idea of women being passive receptacles of men's passion happens to be the normative idea of sex in our culture – it becomes important for women to claim autonomy over their bodies, to talk about their pleasure, to talk about their rights. When oppression seems to be built on the edifice of controlling women's bodies, I think dismantling oppression has to begin there too (Kandasamy *The Wire*).

The poet's association with *Dalit Magazine* (as the editor) and *Dalit Panthers of India* gave her experiences of what it means to be a woman in a caste-ridden nation. She observed



that, for defining oppression, the only reliable, methodological tool is experience and so her experiences and awareness of the oppression of caste showcased in language and culminated in poetry that does not come out of mere reading but active engagement.

Kandasamy's uncompromising and caustic poems openly challenge timely-honoured traditions. All through the pages, the readers are hooked to the words and images, metaphors and humour, sarcasm, and puns that shock and provoke them to re-think and re-conceptualize the hierarchies and power structure at work in contemporary society. Her poems characterize those women who are in search of their identity and treading on the path of self-discovery at every step claiming their agency and attaining subjectivity. They are advancing from the idea of old-womanhood to the new-womanhood crushing under their feet the ordeals of cultural banish that have for long abandoned and condemned them. Her poems protest while manifesting rejection, defiance, indifference and creating redefining behavioural codes for women.

We owe to Kamala Das, to be the first Indian woman poet who subverted the hierarchical power structures and gendered codes of identities in her poems; candidly examining the play of patriarchy and sexism. Kamala Das in the 'Foreword Of the poem anthology *Touch* (2006) praised her saying that:

The young courage of the poet in aesthetically cutting the slice of protest into the fabric of 'Indianness' and taking initiative in shouldering the responsibility of 'retelling' the grounded narratives and "the unkind myths of casts and perhaps of religion... dark cynicism of youth... Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips... (7).

The novelty of her poems lies in the fact that in many of her poems an undercurrent of autobiographical tone is evident. In fact, the 'I' in her poems is an indication of personal element whereas at other times the use of 'We' and 'Our' shows a sense of solidarity. Hence, her poems are a miss-mash of personal and collective, personal and political, modern and mythical. Her poems establish her as a unified subject, assertive and self-motivated being who has enabled the lodging of voices of the subjugated, oppressed and marginalized women in her own voice. This act of hers strikes a parallel with the third phase of feminism postulated by Elaine Showalter i.e. Gynocriticism. And is well asserted in the last line of the poem "The belt-bomb girl's suicide note" that: "Where there is no tale-bearers, strife ceases" (Line 13). Arnab Bhattacharya maintains that:

...it is language which projects the subjects' knowing selves onto the speaking selves, making the subjective identity articulable in terms of differences, and also mapping out the areas of possible and impossible negotiations (116).

In sum, Meena Kandasamy is unabashedly angry in her works as she goes about deconstructing the stereotypical narrative of women being meek and submissive. Her re-interpretation of myth focused primarily on women's experiences, their personhood and their

right to lead a life or to connect with a life of nobility and dignity. She celebrates being vocal about the female body and shows resistance through her poems. Her poetry eventuate her wish to revitalize the third world women and to cajole them to give wings to their dreams, desires, choices, independent views and to stand to speak for themselves by ensuing rebellion against patriarchal chauvinism and class system. Almost two decades of twenty-first century have passed, an era where the gender systems are changing so, we need to change our perspectives. What women want in this age is that Eve should be celebrated as a saviour and not as a sinner to be subdued under humiliation.

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