

Echoes of defiance: The power of defiance in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

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Abstract- Meena Kandasamy's poetry is a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and the transformative potential. As a writer, activist, and social critic, Kandasamy's work grapples with the complexities of identity, oppression, and the ongoing struggle for justice. Her poetic oeuvre, which encompasses themes of feminism, caste, and anti-colonial resistance, has garnered critical acclaim and established her as a leading voice in contemporary Indian literature. Kandasamy's poems serve as a rallying cry, giving voice to the marginalized and challenging the status quo with a fiery determination. (Plys, 2020) At the heart of Kandasamy's poetry lies a deep commitment to resistance and a refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice. Her poems are imbued with a sense of urgency, calling upon readers to confront the realities of sexism, casteism, and the legacy of colonialism that continue to shape the socio political landscape of India. Drawing inspiration from the rich tradition of resistance poetry in South Asia, Kandasamy's work echoes the defiant spirit of her literary predecessors, such as Kamala Das, who used their art as a means of challenging patriarchal norms and asserting their agency. (Sofia, 2014) As Kamala Das' poetry aimed to "voice a universal womanhood" and explore the complexities of female identity, Kandasamy's work similarly grapples with the lived experiences of women, particularly those from marginalized communities. (Sofia, 2014).

Key Words: female identity, casteism, injustice etc.

INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy's poetry is a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and the transformative potential. As a writer, activist, and social critic, Kandasamy's work grapples with the complexities of identity, oppression, and the ongoing struggle for justice. Her poetic oeuvre, which encompasses themes of feminism, caste, and anti-colonial resistance, has garnered critical acclaim and established her as a

leading voice in contemporary Indian literature. Kandasamy's poems serve as a rallying cry, giving voice to the marginalized and challenging the status quo with a fiery determination. (Plys, 2020) At the heart of Kandasamy's poetry lies a deep commitment to resistance and a refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice. Her poems are imbued with a sense of urgency, calling upon readers to confront the realities of sexism, casteism, and the legacy of colonialism that continue to shape the socio political landscape of India. Drawing inspiration from the rich tradition of resistance poetry in South Asia, Kandasamy's work echoes the defiant spirit of her literary predecessors, such as Kamala Das, who used their art as a means of challenging patriarchal norms and asserting their agency. (Sofia, 2014) As Kamala Das' poetry aimed to "voice a universal womanhood" and explore the complexities of female identity, Kandasamy's work similarly grapples with the lived experiences of women, particularly those from marginalized communities. (Sofia, 2014).

Through her poetic writings, Kandasamy subverts dominant narratives and creates a space for the marginalized to be heard. Her poems skillfully weave together personal narratives and political commentary, creating a captivating tapestry of defiance that resonates across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Plys, 2020). The power of Kandasamy's poetry lies in its ability to transcend the boundaries of the page and become a catalyst for social change. Her words reverberate with a sense of urgency, calling upon readers to confront the realities of injustice and to engage in the ongoing struggle for a more equitable and just society.

She uses her poetry as a means of violent resistance against the nationally ingrained and prevalent system of caste which enables dominant caste people to

subjugate the non-dominant caste persons. The title of her first anthology *Touch* reiterates the most inhuman of stigmas attached to Dalits – their very touch being considered polluting. Kandasamy's poem *Touch* voices her sentiments towards the predicament of her community set by the starkly biased and hypocritical Hindu Brahmanical system: In her poem *aggression*, Meena kandasamy portrays resistance as a powerful force that emerges from suppressed silence and culminates in transformative action. She depicts resistance in form of silence

Ours is a silence that waits.

Endlessly waits (*Touch 38*)

A form of silence not as passivity but as a deliberate act of restraint, a gathering of strength before eruption. This waiting implies a conscious choice, a refusal to immediately react, suggesting a strategic approach to resistance. The lines "And then, unable to bear it any further, it breaks into wails" acknowledge the emotional toll of oppression and the eventual breaking point where silence becomes unsustainable. The concluding line, "Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting," reframes aggression not as violence but as a proactive and assertive force for change. In this context, aggression represents the refusal to be silenced, the courage to challenge oppressive structures, and the determination to fight for justice. It becomes a tool for dismantling systems of oppression and creating a more equitable society. Through these lines, Kandasamy portrays resistance as a dynamic process that begins with silence, evolves through emotional expression, and culminates in transformative action. She redefines aggression as a positive force, essential for challenging injustice and achieving liberation. This poem aligns with Kandasamy's broader body of work, which consistently champions resistance and social justice

In her another poem *Dignity*, she directly addresses as sons of oppressors caste disrupting traditional power dynamics of the system. This direct address confronts the oppressors with their inherited privilege and challenges the legitimacy of their claims to superiority. The poem drips with irony, particularly in the repeated use of "virtuous" to describe the oppressor castes. This ironic tone exposes the hypocrisy of a

system that claims moral superiority while perpetuating injustice and discrimination. The reference to "incurable sickness of your minds" further underscores the deeply ingrained nature of caste prejudice.

But, don't suppress

our rightful share of dignity. It

might even prove helpful

If you ever learnt

That virtue

Though inherited

Was nothing beyond (*Touch 43*)

The central message of the poem is the assertion of dignity for the oppressed. The line "But, don't suppress our rightful share of dignity" is a powerful declaration of self-worth and a demand for recognition and respect. This assertion of dignity challenges the very foundation of the caste system, which seeks to deny dignity to those deemed "lower" in the hierarchy. Through these strategies, Kandasamy's "Dignity" becomes a powerful act of resistance, challenging the oppressive caste system, asserting the inherent dignity of marginalized communities, and calling for a more just and equitable society.

In "Ekalaiyan," Meena Kandasamy reimagines the mythical figure of Ekalavya to explore themes of resistance against oppressive authority and the resilience of marginalized communities. Ekalavya, a tribal boy denied discipleship by the guru Dronacharya, becomes a symbol of marginalized communities denied access to knowledge and power. Kandasamy reclaims this figure, transforming him from a victim of injustice into an emblem of resistance. The traditional narrative of Ekalavya focuses on his devotion and sacrifice. Kandasamy subverts this narrative, emphasizing his potential for resistance and rebellion. The lines "You can do a lot of things / With your left hand" suggest that even in the face of oppression, there are alternative paths to power and agency. The lines "You don't need your right thumb, /

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb" highlight the potential for resistance outside traditional power structures. Ekalavya's severed thumb, a symbol of his disempowerment in the traditional narrative, becomes a symbol of his potential for armed resistance in Kandasamy's reimagining. Through this reimagining of Ekalavya, Kandasamy's poem becomes a powerful act of resistance, challenging oppressive structures, celebrating the resilience of marginalized communities, and offering a vision of alternative forms of power.

In "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985," Meena Kandasamy portrays the multifaceted nature of resistance, highlighting both acts of defiance. The "bold Dalit lady" who "dares to question injustice" embodies the initial spark of resistance. Her action, though seemingly small—hitting forth with her pot—represents a refusal to accept the status quo and a challenge to the established order. The poem criticizes the "self-seeking politicians" who fail to address the root causes of the injustice and instead seek expedient solutions. The reference to Gandhi's advice that Harijans should leave the village if they don't get water further exposes the failure of leadership to challenge the caste system and protect the rights of marginalized communities. While the exodus of Dalits might appear as surrender, Kandasamy frames it as another form of resistance. By leaving the village, the Dalits refuse to be subjected to further humiliation and violence. Their departure becomes an act of self-preservation and a rejection of the oppressive system. By giving voice to the experiences of the Dalits and exposing the injustices they face, Kandasamy's poem itself becomes an act of resistance. The poem serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of those who struggle against oppression and a call for social change.

The poem highlights the tragic consequences of caste-based discrimination and the urgent need for social justice. In "Maariamamma," Meena Kandasamy employs a complex interplay of reverence, challenge, and accusation to express resistance against the perceived abandonment of the marginalized by their traditional deities. The poem begins with an acknowledgment of the reasons why upper-caste gods and goddesses do not frequent the streets and slums of the marginalized. This understanding highlights the social and spatial segregation enforced by the caste system and the

inherent purity-pollution dichotomy that underlies it. The lines "our poverty would soil their hearts and our labor corrupt their souls" expose the hypocrisy of the upper-caste deities and their aversion to the realities of the marginalized. The poem shifts its focus to Maariamamma, a goddess traditionally associated with marginalized communities. The direct address, "Maariamamma, when you are still getting those roosters and goats, why have you stopped coming to our doors?", expresses a sense of betrayal and abandonment. The question challenges the goddess's continued absence despite receiving offerings, suggesting a transactional relationship that has been broken. The lines "Maari, our girl, when did you join their gang?" express a sense of betrayal and the feeling that Maariamamma has abandoned her own people to align with the upper-caste deities. This accusation highlights the perceived complicity of the goddess in perpetuating the marginalization of her own devotees. The act of questioning Maariamamma and accusing her of betrayal can be interpreted as a form of resistance. By challenging the goddess's actions and demanding an explanation, the speaker reclaims agency and refuses to accept the status quo of divine abandonment. The poem itself becomes an act of resistance by giving voice to the grievances of the marginalized and challenging the perceived indifference of both upper-caste and traditional deities. By expressing these feelings of abandonment and betrayal, Kandasamy's poem disrupts the traditional power dynamics between the divine and the devotee.

In "Shame," Meena Kandasamy portrays resistance not through direct confrontation but through the lens of a victim's tragic response to a horrific crime. The poem highlights the systemic nature of oppression and the devastating consequences of societal indifference. The lines "Public's prying eyes segregate her—the victim. But, the criminals have already mainstreamed—Their Caste is a classic shield" (*Touch* 58) expose the societal indifference and complicity that perpetuate such crimes. The victim is further marginalized by the public gaze, while the perpetrators are shielded by their caste status. This highlights the systemic nature of oppression and the failure of society to protect the vulnerable. The victim's search for "a definite solution, and an elusive purification" can be interpreted as an act of resistance, albeit a tragic one. Faced with the unbearable weight of shame and

societal indifference, she seeks agency through the "tests of fire." While her action ultimately leads to her death, it represents a desperate attempt to reclaim control and find a way to cope with the trauma she has endured. By giving voice to the victim's experience and exposing the societal failures that contribute to such tragedies, Kandasamy's poem itself becomes an act of resistance. The poem serves as a powerful indictment of the caste system, the normalization of violence, and the indifference of society towards the suffering of marginalized communities. The victim's attempt to purify herself through fire subverts traditional purity narratives often associated with upper-caste practices. By reclaiming this act, Kandasamy challenges the very notion of purity and exposes the hypocrisy of a system that perpetuates such violence while simultaneously upholding notions of ritual purity.

Through this tragic portrayal, Kandasamy's poem highlights the complex and often desperate forms that resistance can take in the face of overwhelming oppression. In "Mascara," Meena Kandasamy portrays a complex and layered resistance through the act of applying mascara by a sex worker preparing for another act of violation. The poem connects personal trauma with historical oppression, creating a powerful statement of defiance and resilience. The poem challenges both societal and divine indifference to the sex worker's plight. The lines "Empty consolations soothe violated bodies" (*Touch 128*) critique the superficial comfort offered by society, while the lines "Fighting her case, Providence lost his pride. Her helplessness doesn't Seduce the Gods" (*Touch 129*) expresses the futility of seeking divine intervention. This challenge to both earthly and heavenly powers represents a form of resistance against the structures that perpetuate her suffering.

The final lines, "When she dons the mascara / The Heavens have heard her whisper, Kali, you wear this too," (*Touch 129*) exposes a powerful act of identification with the goddess Kali, a symbol of feminine power and destruction. By invoking Kali, the sex worker finds strength and solidarity in a shared identity of defiance and resistance. The idea that "Cosmetics were once... War paints" transforms the act of applying mascara into a symbolic act of preparing for battle. This metaphor imbues the

seemingly mundane act with a sense of power and resistance, suggesting that even in the face of overwhelming oppression, the sex worker finds ways to fight back and assert her agency. Through these interwoven layers of meaning, Kandasamy's poem portrays resistance as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both personal acts of defiance and a broader challenge to historical and systemic oppression. The poem's power lies in its ability to give voice to the silenced and to transform an act of vulnerability into a powerful statement of resilience.

CONCLUSION

Kandasamy through diverse forms of resistance which is through her poetry offers a powerful critique of patriarchal structures and celebrates the resilience and agency of women who challenge these norms. Her work serves as a call for empowerment and a reimagining of traditional narratives that have historically marginalized and silenced women's voices. These poems confront the oppressive forces of caste and gender, giving voice to the marginalized and challenging the dominant narratives. "Mascara" and "Mariamma" specifically address the experiences of Dalit women, exposing the violence and discrimination they face. "Eklaivian" subverts the traditional narrative of Ekalavya's sacrifice, highlighting his resilience and challenging the oppressive guru-shishya dynamic. Similarly, "Dignity" emphasizes the inherent worth and dignity of those who have been historically marginalized. The poems do not shy away from depicting the harsh realities of violence and injustice. "Liquid Tragedy: Karmic Cycle" confronts the brutal murder of Dalits, exposing the systemic nature of caste-based violence and demanding accountability.

By reimagining mythological and historical figures, Kandasamy challenges dominant narratives and offers alternative perspectives. This act of rewriting history and mythology is a powerful form of resistance, reclaiming the past and shaping a more inclusive future. In conclusion, Kandasamy's poems serve as powerful acts of resistance, challenging caste discrimination, patriarchal oppression, and other forms of social injustice

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