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Deconstructing Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Poems

Dr. Meghraj N. Pawar

Associate Professor, Department of English, KRM Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nanded, MS, India.

ABSTRACT

This research provides a comprehensive critical intervention into the poetic works of Meena Kandasamy. It positions her as a fundamental figure in the decolonisation of contemporary Indian literature. The paper focuses on selected poems from *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010)—specifically the poems *Ms Militancy*, *Princess-in-Exile*, *Backstreet Girls*, and *Aggression*. This study interrogates the volatile intersections of Brahmanical patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and gendered subalternity. The central problem is the historical erasure and disciplining of the Dalit female subject within both the classical Indian epic tradition and the mainstream (Savarna-centric) feminist movement. Through the theoretical lens of Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory, as articulated by Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru, this paper argues that Kandasamy uses "linguistic militancy" and "revisionist mythmaking" to dismantle the archetypal images of the silent, enduring woman (the Pativrata). The analysis is divided into four thematic movements. First, it explores the transfiguration of the Tamil icon Kannagi into a modern revolutionary agent, where the female body is reclaimed as a site of bodily resistance. Second, it deconstructs the Sita myth, reframing the "divine" exile as a systemic domestic displacement. Third, it maps the "backstreets" of the urban landscape to validate the lives of disreputable subaltern women who exist outside the "sanctum sanctorum" of ritual purity. Finally, it defends *Aggression* not as a psychological pathology, but as a rational, political manifesto for survival. By synthesising post-colonial theory with Intersectional Dalit Feminism, this research concludes that Kandasamy's poetry performs an "epistemic insurrection." She

moves beyond the traditional "victim narrative" to establish a radical new archetype: the Anti-Heroine. This work contributes to the field by demonstrating how subaltern literature uses the English language, the tool of the former coloniser, to deconstruct internal colonial structures of caste, ultimately proposing a new, defiant literature of liberation that demands agency over empathy.

Keywords: *Dalit Feminism, Revisionist Mythmaking, Caste, Subalternity, Post-colonial Poetry*

FULL PAPER

Meena Kandasamy stands as a formidable voice in contemporary Indian poetry, particularly noted for her unapologetic synthesis of anti-caste activism and feminist critique. Born in 1984 into a Tamil household, Kandasamy's literary trajectory began at the advanced age of seventeen. Her debut collection, *Touch* (2006), featuring a foreword by the iconic Kamala Das, signalled the arrival of a poet who refused the "genteel" constraints of Indian English verse. With the publication of *Ms Militancy* in 2010, Kandasamy solidified her position as a provocateur. As noted in *The Hindu*, her work functions as a necessary disruption: "As a woman Dalit poet, Meena Kandasamy writes angrily, often eloquently, about the politics of the body and caste... what she sees is different from the images we have constructed for ourselves." Her poetry acts as a corrective to the historical erasure of Dalit women, focusing on the intersections of caste, gender, sexuality, and linguistic identity. This erasure, as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have argued in their landmark anthology, is inseparable from larger structures of power that have historically denied marginalised women the right to self-representation (Tharu and Lalita 39).

Central to Kandasamy's project is the rejection of the "docile victim" figure. In her interview with James Kidd, she elucidates the structural nature of the violence she critiques: "The landlord thinks he is going to discipline the Dalits... Violence becomes an action for the general good, to teach. It isn't an issue of anger management or power." This paper argues that Kandasamy's poetry is the counter-action to this "disciplining," replacing forced silence with radical noise. Such violence, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has shown, is systemic rather than incidental—part of the machinery through which the subaltern is prevented from speaking on her own terms (Spivak 271).

The Transformation of Kannagi in *Ms Militancy*

In the title poem, *Ms Militancy*, Kandasamy engages in what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision"—the act of looking back at traditional texts with a critical, feminist eye (Rich 18). The poem is a radical reimagining of the Tamil epic *Silappatikaram*. In the classical narrative, the protagonist Kannagi is the embodiment of the Pativrata (chaste wife), whose divine rage at her husband's unjust execution leads to the burning

of Madurai. The ideology of the Pativrata, as Uma Chakravarti has demonstrated in her foundational study of Brahmanical patriarchy, was institutionalised precisely to control women's sexuality and secure caste purity, functioning as the lowest level of patriarchal operation—one that required women to internalise chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood (Chakravarti 582). Kandasamy, however, strips Kannagi of her "chaste" justification and transforms her into "Ms Militancy," a contemporary agent of vengeance. Unlike her epic predecessor, Ms Militancy does not seek judicial recourse from a monarch; she recognises the system itself as the architect of her suffering. The imagery of the "plucked breast" is particularly significant:

*Vending vengeance, she made a bomb.
of her left breast and blew
up the blasted city
Long after that land had turned to ashes,
The rest of her plucked breast bled.*

Here, the breast—traditionally a symbol of nurturing motherhood or eroticized beauty—is literalized as a weapon. By flinging it, the protagonist rejects the biological and social roles assigned to women by Brahmanical patriarchy. The "beautiful, bigoted city" serves as a metaphor for a society that maintains aesthetic "purity" through the systemic exclusion of the marginalised. Through this explosion, Kandasamy suggests that liberation requires the destruction of the existing social order rather than a mere seat at its table.

Sita and the Logic of Reason in Princess-in-Exile

In *Princess-in-Exile*, Kandasamy turns her attention to the *Ramayana*, deconstructing the most universal symbol of Indian womanhood: Sita. Traditionally celebrated for her endurance during her abduction by Ravana and her subsequent Agni Pariksha (ordeal by fire), Sita represents the ultimate patriarchal ideal of loyalty. Kandasamy reframes Sita's life as a sequence of displacements. From her father's house to the forest, and from the forest to Lanka, Sita is a woman in perpetual journey, denied a home of her own. The poet introduces a "new age guru," a symbolic representation of modern logic and scientific reason, to guide this contemporary Sita.

The modern Sita is "adept at walkout." She no longer seeks endorsement through the Agni Pariksha; she understands that the "whispers" of a bigoted society are more destructive than fire. While the mythological Sita returned to the womb of the Mother Earth (an act of erasure), Kandasamy's protagonist chooses to live on the earth, independent of male protection. This transition from "weak submissive" to "independent agent" marks a shift in Dalit feminist discourse from endurance to exit—a movement that Sharmila Rege identifies as central to the Dalit feminist standpoint, which views the act of women claiming their own lives and experiences as an emancipatory and politically necessary epistemological rupture (Rege WS-44).

The Politics of the Street in Backstreet Girls

Backstreet Girls represents a shift from mythological archetypes to the primordial reality of the urban subaltern. The poem is a direct assault on "moral policing" and the Brahmanical obsession with ritual purity. Kandasamy intentionally employs derogatory epithets—"sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews"—to reclaim them as badges of rebellion. The use of the first-person collective "We" establishes a sense of sisterhood that is explicitly non-Savarna and non-elite. These women exist outside the "sanctum sanctorum" of respectable society:

*There will be no blood on our bridal beds.
We are not the ones you will choose for wives.
We are not the / ones you can sentence for life.*

By rejecting the "blood on the bridal bed," Kandasamy attacks the cult of virginity. The Backstreet Girls are not "wife material" because they cannot be "sentenced for life" within the domestic prison of marriage. They are honest because they live without the hypocritical mask of modesty. This poem highlights the intersectionality of her work: it is not just about being a woman, but about being a woman whose class and caste status have already placed her outside the "protection" of patriarchy. In this sense, the poem directly engages with what Anupama Rao describes as the challenge posed by Dalit-bahujan feminists, who go beyond arguing that Indian feminism is incomplete and exclusive, and instead demand a fundamental rethinking of the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with Dalit women's "difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics (Rao 1–2). Furthermore, as Gopal Guru's influential analysis of the distinctiveness of Dalit women's political articulations has argued, this insistence on speaking from a position outside mainstream feminist frameworks is not merely a matter of identity politics, but a structural necessity born of double marginalisation within both the women's movement and the Dalit movement (Guru 2548).

Aggression as a Political Manifesto

Published originally in *Touch* (2006), "Aggression" explores the psychological toll of silence. In traditional Indian ethics, silence is advertised as a woman's greatest ornament. Kandasamy identifies this silence as a weapon of the oppressor:

*Ours is a silence
that waits, endlessly waits
and then, unable to bear it
any further
It breaks into wails.*

The poem suggests that when silence becomes unbearable, it must transform into "Aggression." Kandasamy reframes this not as a negative trait, but as "the best kind of troubleshooting." For the marginalised, anger is a survival strategy. It is the "spark of life" that prevents the "slow death" of submission. In an academic sense, "Aggression" can be read as a Dalit feminist standpoint manifesto. It argues that the

rage of the marginalised woman is a rational response to a world that has stolen her past and restricted her future. By defending the right to be "hysterical" or "mad," Kandasamy validates the emotional labour of resistance. This insistence on anger as a form of political consciousness resonates powerfully with what Adrienne Rich identified as the necessary condition for women's creative and political liberation: the recognition that women's victimisation and anger are real, with real sources embedded everywhere in the environment and built into the structure of thought itself (Rich 23).

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's poetry serves as a vital bridge between literature and activism. Through "Ms Militancy," "Princess-in-Exile," "Backstreet Girls," and "Aggression," she constructs a comprehensive critique of the Brahmanical patriarchal state. She replaces the "Sita" model of suffering with a "Militant" model of agency. Her work demonstrates that for the Dalit woman, the act of writing is itself an act of war. By "writing back" to the epics and "shouting back" at the moral police, Kandasamy ensures that the subaltern is no longer a silent object of study, but a vocal, aggressive, and independent subject of history. Her legacy lies in her ability to turn the "scars and stretch marks" of the marginalised into a new, defiant literature of liberation.

Meena Kandasamy's *Ms Militancy* and *Touch* represent a transformative milestone in Indian English poetry. It functions as a vital bridge between aesthetic innovation and radical activism. By deconstructing the foundational myths of the Indian nation-state, Kandasamy performs an epistemic shift. It replaces the passive "Sita" archetype of enduring silence with a "Militant" model of subaltern agency. This research has confirmed that her "modernising mythmaking" is not merely a literary exercise but a political necessity. It dismantles the Brahmanical patriarchal state's reliance on the "purity" of the female subject. Through the lens of Bodily Resistance, the poet reclaims the "scars and stretch marks" of the marginalised body. It transforms from an object of caste-based "pollution" into a potent weapon of war. By "writing back" to the epics and "shouting back" at the moral police in the language of the global elite, Kandasamy ensures that the Dalit woman is no longer a silent object of anthropological study, but a vocal, aggressive, and independent subject of history. In so doing, she answers, on her own radical terms, the question that has haunted postcolonial theory since Spivak first posed it: can the subaltern speak? In Kandasamy's poetry, she does not merely speak—she detonates. Ultimately, her legacy lies in her ability to turn historical trauma into a rebellious literature of liberation. It proves that the act of writing is the first step in burning down the "bigoted city" to envision a more just, inclusive world.

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