

Ethnic Concern and Gender Disparity in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's debut novel The Gypsy Goddess, published in 2014, brings out the traumatic experience behind the massacre of Kilvenmani which was the result of collective struggle for freedom by Dalit agricultural labourers community at Tanjore district in Tamilnadu. Her novel projects the undying will and incessant struggle of the marginalized for freedom and their relentless resistance against oppression. This paper attempts to discuss the prevailing problem of the marginalized and delineates the doubly marginalized Dalit women also. The paper focuses on the ethnic concern of the writer with special attention on the gruesome treatment of Dalit women. The existing caste oppression and Dalit's brave resistance with resilience are discussed in this paper. The paper analyzes the pervading national consciousness in Meena Kandasamy's novel The Gypsy Goddess, who through her writing tries to bring out the issues and challenges of Dalit, prevailing in pre and post India and thus create awareness to the nation.

Keywords: Dalit, Doubly Marginalized, Caste Oppression, Resistance, Resilience, National Consciousness

Meena Kandasamy, hailing from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, is a noted woman writer, who raises her voice for the oppressed. She starts her literary career with the publication of *Touch*, a poetry collection in 2006. She extends her contribution to literature as a creative writer, translator, and essayist. Her works speak loud on the drudgery of casteism and gender disparity. She exposes her national consciousness by being an activist. Most of her works carry the theme of caste and untouchability, bringing out the anger in the hearts of the marginalized. Meena's critically acclaimed debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) narrates the horrific Kilvenmani massacre in Tanjore district in 1968. The writer in her work deals with Dalit consciousness and also expresses her concern for Dalit women. Meena Kandasamy tries to bring out the double oppression faced by Dalit women; firstly race and secondly patriarchy. The writer spotlights the pathetic condition of the downtrodden women who are caught in the political fight and suppressed under patriarchal domination. The Dalit women, similar to other women, are subjected to patriarchal oppression, enduring all kinds of subjugation.

Caste inequality, being one of the most popular subjects, is often discussed by many Indian writers as Meena Kandasamy in her. *The Gypsy Goddess*. The issue of marginalization and the oppression of Dalit women in their community is also dealt in par with caste inequality

in her work. She focuses on the sexual politics that is gender disparity along with caste inequality. The contemporary women writers strive to strike hard on the existing patriarchal system when gender, caste, sex, class, and race are the major factors supporting it.

The aim of feminism is establishing equal economic, political, and social rights. Simon de Beauvoir states that all culture and tradition try to present women as inferior and are not capable of serious thoughts or actions. Great writers, philosophers, legislators, and scientists strive hard to project that women's subordinate position is beneficial for earth. Beauvoir's opinion is reflected in the novel *The Gypsy Goddess*. It delineates the struggles and resilience of the Dalit women, who encounter patriarchal anarchy and social injustice. The pathetic condition of Indian women is rightly pictured by Nadakurthy Swaroop Rani, a Dalit poet, in her poem "Puzzling Verses for Married Women." She writes:

**You can withstand the fire of the mother-in-law,
you can bear quarrels with sister-in-law,
but dealing with a deceitful husband
is like a severed nerve that refuses to heal.**

.....
**being born a woman is the first issue,
how does one solve this issue? (37)**

The question raised by the poet has been answered by Kandasamy when the Dalit women starts advocating themselves for their needs. The Dalit women are degraded not only by the upper class people but also by their own men. Sara Sindhu Thomas in her essay "Witnessing and Experiencing Dalitness: In Defence of Dalit Women's Testimonios", rightly points out how Dalit writers clearly brings out the real condition of Dalit women: "They have dared to bring the open ugly truths: the all- pervading casteism in society and the sexism exercised within and outside their community" (251). Meena Kandasamy, in her novel, exposes how power dynamics plays a pivotal role in sculpting the lives of the female gender. The marginalized women confront various forms of assaults to gain control over women's lives and bodies. They are subjected to sexual assault, within their community and wider society. They are not considered as a marginalized while being raped by the upper class.

The narration of the old woman Maayi's biography permeated sexual violence and women subjugation in the society. Chinnamma's daughter who has just turned fourteen, has been raped violently by the upper class rapist. The writer states, "Dragged from her grandmother's home at the outskirts of the town, the fourteen-year-old girl heard nothing but her own screams through the night; the landlord-rapists did not stop, nor did they dignify her with a single word" (34). The pathetic condition of the marginalized girl is "Sources in Nagapattinam confirm that no case was filed" (34). This is the power of the dynamics and name of the victim has been veiled under this upper class societal oppression. The sexual violence has been extended to the girl when she meets Sannasi, a wandering witch doctor. Meena Kandasamy registers sexual abuse thus: "Sannasi's priesthood ended when she offered him the wondrous pleasure of her breasts" (35). The treatment of the fourteen-year-old- girl personifies the gender-based violence and subjugation of the marginalized.

Dalit women are doubly marginalized. Upper class people suppressed them as they belong to Dalit community and Dalit men subjugate them for being women. They are the victim of double oppression in the society. Baby Kamble, a Dalit writer registers this in her book entitled *Jinna Amuche*.

This book has been translated into English by Maya Pandit. She states, "If the Mahar community is the Other for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the Other for the Mahar women" (XV). Kandasamy in her novel *The Gypsy Goddess* spotlights the sufferings undergone by the doubly victimised Dalit women.

In this novel Kandasamy registers the clash between the landlords – represented by Gopalakrishna Naidu and the agricultural labourers of Kilvenmani. The intervention of the Communist Party, who stands with the labourers has become inevitable. The clash between the landlords and the agricultural labourers deviate to caste problem – that is, landlords belonging to the upper caste and the labourers belonging to the lower caste. This caste discrimination executes horrific Kilvenmani massacre.

Kandasamy questions the upper caste dominance and their monopoly in the treatment of Dalit labourers. Dalits are constantly fighting for their identity by resisting the dominance of the elite. They want to reinvent their miserable past into vibrant colourful future. They, especially women, strive hard in attaining their goal. In her novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kandasamy envisions the necessity of Dalit resilience in the perspective of Dalit woman Maayi. She joins with the communist Party to avenge her husband's mysterious death after his involvement in the protest against caste discrimination. The women in the novel protest for their rights; claiming equal wages, breaks during work-time to take care of their babies: "...like when they demanded daily wages instead of the weekly wage for women. Or when they demanded their right to take breaks to attend to their infants, because babies left under the shade of trees cried to their death in their makeshift sari cradles,..." (75).

Dalit women, most of the time fight for their community. Kandasamy quotes many incidents in her novel to highlight their ethnic concern:

They once smashed pots to protest their poor wages, ... once they went to the fields to harvest in the middle of the night, saying that they alone would harvest the crops they sowed, and that the landlords had no business employing outside labour. They are arrested for such transgression, and because the police are such a benevolent force, they arrest the infants too. (75)

Dalit women are punished by the landlords as well as the police. The landlords punish them by making them almost naked and tying them to trees and whip them in front of the villagers. The police punish the women, "...by making them kneel and walk a few miles on their knees..." (76). But all these punishments act as a fuel for fire in them. They rise again with more strength than before to stand for their rights. When the Kilvenmani people are in the verge, whether to stick to the red flag or surrender to the landlords, they hold a meeting. The writer states: "But, this time, the men did not do most of the talking" (116). Starting with Sundaram, who narrates, how her husband has been freed after being captivated by the landlords for three days, being continued by Thangamma, Pattu, Paapa etc., Kilvenmani women conclude 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).

The writer stresses the patriarchal domination, that is, women are generally not allowed to express their opinion in the meeting in spite of their physical presence. But Meena Kandasamy gives voice for the Dalit women here by registering the event where Dalit women are allowed to take a right decision. Dalit women have been doubly marginalized by upper class landlords and Dalit men whereas Dalit women endured everything patiently.

The aftermath of the horrific massacre is voiced through Maayi. "Maayi told him that Letchumi was not alone. Everyone in Kilvenmani carried the ghosts of their dead" (199).

The abnormal actions of Arumugam's daughter terrifies everyone and in order to pacify and bring her back to reality, Maayi has been summoned.

As an elderly woman, Maayi's attention is needed. Her concern to save her community is expressed strongly:

Maayi sees how the anger keeps the people together, injects them with life, provides them a reason to live, pushes them into action. Sometimes, the rage borders on madness.

She can see it everywhere, just as she can see the sorrow and the sudden emptiness. She does not want that rage to turn inwards. She does not want the sorrow to eat up the men and the women and the teenagers and the children (202).

Maayi tries to bring back her near and dear ones from the trauma of the horrific massacre. She wants them to keep their rage with them to keep them alive in order to take revenge on their enemies. It is their duty to transfer this massacre to the next generation.

Every woman in the village suffer a lot. Fragile woman like Muniyan's wife succumbed to the traumatic experience and let it swallow them. "Living the nightmare. She had wandered very far away from this kind of sleep" (205). No one is dare enough to follow her on her sleep walking nights.

On the contrary Thangamma survives for the sake of her village. She wants to lift her village to a better position and thus she acts hopefully. Her approach is more positive and never allows any traumatic events to dominate her. She acts boldly:

Whenever a journalist sauntered into Kilvenmani, she joined the others and spoke about what happened and she felt ... She spoke of kerosene Govinda pulling at her clothes and how she fought back fiercely ... she never cried so they listened to her and asked her more questions with the hope that she would start weeping and they could go back with a story how strong women crumbled. She never cried in front of them (204).

Women's strong convictions, bringing back their village to normalcy, is explicitly registered by the writer to show their ethnic concern. Though they have been doubly marginalized, their strength has been remained untouched. The writer establishes how Dalit women start to express and fight for their views, needs, desires, and dreams independently rather than expecting a savior to rescue them from patriarchal domination and racial discrimination.

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