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An Introduction to Meena Kandasamy: An Emerging Voice in the Dalit Women's Writing

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“Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy’s anthology of verse” wrote Kamala Das in the forward to Kandasamy’s first anthology of poems Touch. Meena Kandasamy is an emerging name in the Dalit literary scenario. With its pre-occupations with the issues of caste system and violence meted out on the Dalits it is primarily a literature of resistance. With the growing translations of works by Dalit writers from regional languages into English, Dalit literature is gaining international recognition.

Even though the aesthetics of Dalit Literature is recognized internationally it has failed to adequately acknowledge the Dalit women’s issues. It is in this context that the name of Meena Kandasamy becomes important. She was born in 1984 in Chennai as the first daughter of two University Professors. Even before completing the first three decades of her life she plunged into writing. Her literary outputs were not some sweet ruminations of a romantic youth nor was it a nostalgic lament for a lost lover as is usually expected of her age. But her first anthology of poems breathed fire. A flame strong enough to burn all the age old superstitions and customs around which she was nurtured into a woman.

Meena Kandasamy’s writings prove that to be a female writer and a Dalit female writer is not one and the same. Tamil Dalit women are triply victimized, and the new generation of Dalit woman are not ready to accept this forced social inequality. They want the whole world to hear of their plight. They want to retaliate. They are aware of the society which only controls them by pretending to agree to all their demands. They are not fighting for a place in the old age stifling tradition. They want to rebuild this pretence of a respectable tradition. Referring to her anxiety of living in this unkind society Kamala Das says,

“Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps religion, Meena carries as her twin self her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive”.

She knows that this tradition is too narrow to contain the variety of her experiences and a paraphernalia of her imaginations. So she wants to follow a tradition of militant Dalit literature.

Meena Kandasamy hailed as the “first Indian woman writer writing Dalit poetry in English belongs to a long tradition of militant Dalit Literature” that not only focuses on the multifaceted atrocities faced by Dalits along with their material and ideological paradigms, but also articulates the need for active resistance. In the process her poetry both in Touch and in the aptly titled Ms. Militancy offers a re-evaluation of our supposed “national culture” and the icons of our supposed “national history”.....

..... Functioning according to her own analogy as a guirilla without guns, her poetry not only offers a stringent critique of casteist ideologies but also excavates those abysmal crevices of our “imagined community” whose depths are inhabited by countless subalternized communities.

Kandasamy’s polemical disagreement with the established myths, tradition and history are seen in the preface to her second collection of poems Ms. Militancy reading ‘Should you Take Offence’

You are the repressed Rama from whom I run away repeatedly.
You are the Indra busy causing bloodshed. You are Brahma
fucking up my fates. You are Manu robbing me of my right to
live and learn and choose. You are the sage Gautama turning
your wife to stone. You are Adi Sankara driving me to death.
You are all the men for whom I would never moan, never
mourn. You are the concience of this Hindu society.

Indian epic stories like Mahabarata and Ramayana haven’t caused any improvement in the lives of women she says. It has long been since it stayed the same. Times and people have changed but the myths have not. To the new woman’s’ horror the Sita and the Draupadi are still quoted by people. Women are forcefully made to adopt them as guiding stars. But a very simple and obvious question arises – how does it match when Sita and Draupadi remain the same and the males in these myths are replaced by rapists like Govindachamy.

Hence she retorts thus,

I am no atheist – I allow everyone an existence. It is just that I struggle, with any story that has stayed the same way for far too

long. So my Mahabarata moves to Las Vegas; my Ramayana is retold in three different ways. I am unconventional but when I choose to, I can carry tradition that is why I am Mira, Andal and Akka Mahadevi all at once, spreading myself out like a feast, inviting the gods to enter my womb. I am also Karaikkal Ammaiyar suspected of infidelity for being ravishingly beautiful. Like each of these women, I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to stay alive.

Some of Kandasamy's poems even though convey a sense of ease and familiarity most of them share a sinister lament for change. These poems are jarring for an audience who knows where she comes from. But they are at loss of words once they go through the history of her times. In spite of their awareness of the social hierarchies people still exclaim as if unaware "do such systems still exist? To such a heartless question her poems are a silent reply.

Society has always been harsh to people who refused to follow, and Kandasamy's case is no different. In spite of the harsh criticisms meted out to her second collection of poems Ms. Militancy, she stands firm. She agrees that her language is dark and explosive.

My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths. My lines are feverish with the heat of the bodies you banish in your Manusmriti and Kamasutra. Tamil woman that I am, I do not spare the ageist, classicist, sexist Tholkappium either. The criticism that I embark on like your codification and like my cunt is beyond all culture.

Her poems do try to dislodge the myths that claim female mind and body. After all a little explosion is essential to crumble the age old superstitions.

Kandasamy's preface to the second collection of poems Ms. Militancy makes it evident that she expected such criticism and she clearly answers them,

Call me names if it comforts you. I no longer care. The scarlet letter is my monogram. I saw it on everything I wear. I tattoo it into permanence. I strive to be a slut in a world where all sex is sinful. I strive to be a shrew in a society that believes in suffering in silence. I strive to be sphinx; part woman part lioness, armed with all the lethal riddles.

These words do not suffice her as a response to the futile, heartless words of the critics and the institutions which pretend to unheed her cry for a change. So she continues,

come unriddle me. But be warned. I never falter in a flight.
And for worse, I reduce shamelessly.

She cannot bear the silence of the authorities. So she daringly challenges them to react. Her bold poems are a challenge to enter the battlefield for she is confident that once the war begins she can coax them into senses.

Thus we cannot but agree with Kamala Das's words of Kandasamy and wish her the same

I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision and wish her access to the magical brew of bliss and tears each true poet is forced to partake of day after day month after month, year after year....

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