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## Meena Kandasamy's Narrative Experiments: A Literary Dissent

Ms. Riyanka P. Thakur<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Mustajeeb A. Khan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Scholar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar Maharashtra

<sup>2</sup>Professor & Head, Department of English, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (M.S.)

### ABSTRACT:

There are various debates on every subject and everything existing as well as non-existing. There are agreements, disagreements, contradictions, interrogations, about any and every issue. An agreement by majority becomes eventually a belief, rule or norm. Still, there are voices of disagreements which are publicly expressed. This disagreement of sentiment or opinion or set of beliefs especially from the majority is called dissent. The article examines the dissent built through narrative experiments of Meena Kandasamy. To resist an institution's beliefs, one has to resist the structure on which those beliefs stand. Kandasamy's works disagree with upper-caste patriarchal beliefs, norms and ideas. Hence, she also rejects the aesthetics which are product of these ruling ideas and builds counter narratives. Present research article highlights the elements in her narratives which resist the structure as well as ideology of Brahminical patriarchy.

**Key Words:** dissent, patriarchy, caste, technique, narrative, feminism, *dalit* etc.

### Introduction

Meena Kandasamy's work is closely related with ongoing debates about social justice, representation, and resistance against oppressive structures. While commenting on these perspectives, she creates a chain of dissent. Dissent refers to the expression or holding of opinions that differ from those officially or commonly accepted. It can manifest in various forms, such as verbal disagreement, protests, or noncompliance, particularly when challenging established authority, norms, or power structures. At its core, dissent is a rejection or questioning of the status quo, whether in response to perceived injustices, inequalities, or oppressive systems. Foucault views dissent as a form of resistance to power relations. In his work *Society Must Be Defended* (2003) he argues that dissent arises out of the struggle against the normalization of power and that it can be an expression of subjugated knowledge and practices that challenge dominant narratives. Judith Butler in *Prearious Life* (2004), considers dissent not only as a form of political resistance but also as an act that challenges the foundational norms of what is deemed acceptable in society. Dissent here is not only about political protest but also about the ethical responsibility toward others whose lives are marginalized or excluded. Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, discusses dissent in terms of cultural hegemony. For Gramsci, dissent is a form of resistance against the ideological control of the ruling class. It is expressed through counter-hegemonic practices that seek to challenge the dominant culture.

In literature, aesthetics of mainstream literature become standard for all. As far as Indian literature is concerned it is controlled by *Savarnas*. However, issues dealt under these 'standard norms' are concerns of bourgeois and it is far away from marginalised class's issues. Hence, Dalit authors of postmodern world like Meena Kandasamy are experimenting with this aesthetics to find their expression through literature. They also, finely illuminate Ranciere's analysis of the *literary as a realm of "dissensus" that can disturb and redefine systems of divisions and hierarchies of the aesthetic-political sphere* (158). As Raj Gauthaman said, *Dalit literatures should challenge in content and form received Indian literary norms. The content should shock by focusing on a subject matter, the lifestyles of Dalits, which by definition stands outside of caste-proprieties. Furthermore, Dalit writing should disrupt received modern upper caste language proprieties which maintain the dominance of the latter by marginalizing the language of Dalits as vulgar and obscene* (98). Alternative narratives and parallel narrative styles can help to represent agony of downtrodden. *Subjugated societies can, however, challenge established patterns of writing by generating their own aesthetics and narrative practises if literature embodies the ideals of the group in which the narrative resides. According to certain critics, this occurs when what is deemed to have 'literary value' is rewritten in order to make visible what is considered to be other manifestations of agony.* (512-531) Meena Kandasamy's writing is a literary rebellion expected by Gauthaman. Her writing is not merely a refuge for marginalized voices but a fierce weapon aimed at patriarchal and casteist structures. Her technical and narrative styles reflect this aggression, utilizing sharp language, fragmented narratives, and mythological retellings to dismantle oppressive norms. *Language thus becomes a weapon of resistance for the female writers and the way through which they assert authority on their narratives.* (Soukai 8) Kandasamy's work does not seek to comfort but to confront, challenging readers to engage with difficult truths through an unapologetically militant lens.

Kandasamy's technical choices are integral to the aggressive tone of her work. In *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) Kandasamy employs experimental narrative techniques, blending historical fiction with aggressive journalistic storytelling. The novel, based on the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968, uses a confrontational tone to force readers into the harsh realities of caste-based violence. Kandasamy challenges the reader's comfort by breaking the fourth

wall, questioning the ethics of storytelling itself. By rejecting traditional storytelling, she critiques how history and literature often sanitize or trivialize violence against marginalized communities. *Anyone could at some point, object to this narrative because it alternates between leading the characters and leading the audience. The story, working hard to break the stranglehold of narrative, does not dabble in anything beyond agriculture. All of fiction's artifacts used in this novel—lining, holing, filling, mixing, staking, topping, weeding, watering, manuring, threshing, winnowing—are borrowed from a peasant's paradise. Here, stories grow like haphazard weeds. Here, ideas flow like rain through leaky thatched roofs.* (24) The fragmented, multi-voiced narrative captures the disjointed, painful experience of caste-based violence. She deliberately avoids specific characters, around whom the story will revolve. Protagonist is absent here. Rather pain is the protagonist which drive the narrative of this novel. Kandasamy's approach demands active engagement from the reader, compelling them to confront not just the content of the story but also their expectations of literature and history. *Are you still hunting around for the one-line synopsis and the sixty second sound bite? Do you want me to compress this tragedy to fit into Twitter? How does even one enter this heart of darkness?* (21)

Her fragmented style, especially in *When I Hit You* (2017) reflects the disintegration of the self under abuse and oppression. The narrative's non-linear progression and abrupt shifts in tone create a disorienting effect, mirroring the protagonist's trauma and the violence of silence imposed on survivors. In her novels she continuously uses camera-eye descriptions.

*Lights, camera, action.*

*Rolling, rolling, role-playing.*

*Ext. It is early evening. She stands at the threshold of the house, waiting for him. Her right shoulder against the door frame. The gaze into the distance. The restlessness captured in her left foot tracing circles on the floor. On an impulse, she decides to step forward and walks out of their garden and waits for him on the street. There is an element of nervous excitement about her that renders even her plainness becoming. She hesitates. She is still. She moves again, afraid to be spotted on the street, afraid of staying there, she retraces her steps hurriedly and waits for him by the door. She takes the same position as before. Leaning on the frame. Staring at the garden. When she spots his quick, wiry figure against the horizon, she runs obediently to him. Not a real run, but a semi-run that would meet his approval. Most importantly, not a run where her breasts jounce and jiggle as if to proclaim their existence.*

*She stretches up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek and they walk back together, shutting the door behind them.* (18)

Through such narrations she shows the mechanic relationship between husband and wife. The lack of emotional connect in their relationship. The woman's every move is dictated by an unspoken but deeply ingrained fear, her agency limited to what fits within his expectations.

In her third novel which she titled *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) she has used a technique invented by surrealists of Paris. She has separated page from its margin. The main page develops fictional incident in the lives of Maya and Karim whereas the margins of these pages unfold the writer's comments on her own creative development, her own experiences, and political horrors in her native country India. What inspired her to experiment with this book in her own words, *This project started as a reaction to the reception of my second novel, When I Hit You: A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife. I had been frank and forthcoming in telling the world that the book drew upon my own experience within a violent, abusive marriage. I was also clear, as an artist, that the book was constructed as a novel, a work of auto-fiction. ... By describing it offhandedly and repeatedly as memoir, some reviewers were sidestepping the entire artistic edifice on which the book stood, and were instead solely defining me by my experience: raped Indian woman, beaten-up wife.* (IX) By narrating her as *raped Indian woman, beaten-up wife* 'they' eventually rejects her claim as an author. Hence, she embarks to cautiously detach herself from her writing which reflects in her next book, *Exquisite Cadavers*.

Here is an example from the book:

<p>So, I give Maya everyday concerns. I make her relatable to the British readers. I steal a little of every Englishwoman I see to build this composite. Amy Sarah Claire Naomi Gill Lucy Allison and god yes god Kate. They are not easiest tribe to spy upon and take notes, so, to supplement my theft, I borrow some books of pop-anthropology.</p>	<p>In the fantastically linear and pre-programmed version of her life, a child does not exist, and a thought on a contingency plan have not been mapped out thoroughly. Strangely- in a manner that fills her with surprise and self-loathing – seems excited by the idea of becoming a mother.</p>
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(70)

In the preface to *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) Kandasamy says, *I hoped to confine myself to the margins and allow the story to progress purely in tandem with the ideas and templets I had chosen.*

*The experiment was also a means of escape, a desperate attempt to use the ruse of storytelling to distract myself from an intricate political reality.* (X)

Here, she highlights the deliberate structure of the novel—one that exists in a dual space, balancing fiction and reality, creativity and lived experience. The phrase "confine myself to the margins" suggests her conscious decision to operate from the periphery, both structurally (by writing the novel with a fragmented form) and thematically (by engaging with marginalized perspectives).

Her poetic voice, described by Anjum Hassan as a revelation, oscillates between the desperation of darkness and the light of active rebellion. Hassan remarks, *Meena Kandasamy is a feisty new entrant into the duck pool called Indian English Poetry* (2007). This point aims to analyze the narrative strategies and linguistic styles employed by Kandasamy in her celebrated poetry collections. According to Kandasamy, a woman's silence must be shattered through an outpouring of speech. This perspective positions her narratives in a space of militancy, where she takes delight in challenging and dismantling illusions that deprive women of their freedom to live, learn, and make choices. In the poem titled 'Nailed' she writes: *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.* (37) Again, experimenting with metre, rhyme as well as paragraphs and spacing she has put her poem into images to create the best effect. 'The Seven Stages' from *Tomorrow Someone Will Arrest You* and 'Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985' published in the poetry collection *Touch* exemplifies this very well:

*Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit*

*Drinking Water for the Dalits*

*The very same Pond.*

*Practise for eons.*

*A bold Dalit lady*

*dares to question injustice.*

*Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation*

*is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.*

*Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly*

*consult History—"If there was a way out then,*

*there shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with*

*Esteemed Father of our Nation. His Samaadhi speaks:*

*If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them*

*set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example*

*is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories*

*Dalits exit—weary of the persecution*

*And wander all over the nation.*

*Again, a Dalit Exodus.*

*Total Surrender.*

Karamchedu means a pot carried by *rishis* which is supposed have holy water in it. This water was considered as pious and used to purify ordinary people. Kandasamy has used it as the title of this poem as well as written it in such a way to create the image of *Karamchedu*. She criticizes atrocities against Dalits India through this poem. This poem starkly captures the deep-seated oppression and cyclical violence against Dalits, centering on the fundamental injustice of their exclusion from basic necessities like drinking water. The imagery of "Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit" juxtaposes the impurity imposed on Dalits with the very source of their drinking water, emphasizing the grotesque reality of caste discrimination. The shared pond—used by both animals and Dalits—becomes a symbol of the systemic dehumanization they face.

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## Conclusion

To encapsulate, Meena Kandasamy's aggressive narrative style is not an act of rebellion for the sake of it but a deliberate artistic choice to unsettle and provoke. Her technical and narrative strategies are crafted to leave a lasting impact, pushing readers to confront the harsh realities of caste, gender, and societal norms. By analyzing her work through this lens, we understand that Kandasamy's aggression is not just in her stories but in the very bones of her storytelling. By creating alternative narratives with experimental approach employs the dissent Kandasamy intend to whirl at her critics. Dalit experiences are far away from upper-caste conscience, hence, cannot be confined in 'mainstream aesthetics' which fails to acknowledge caste discrimination and exploitation in the society. Kandasamy is, with her postmodernist expression, trying to revive resistance through Dalit literature.

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