



Marginalized Image and Emotional Charge of Meenakandasamy's Poems: Touch and Militancy

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Abstract

A young Tamil poet from Chennai, Meena Kandasamy is a fiction writer, translator, and activist. Her two collections of poems *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) present the real pictures of the marginalized in Indian society. As a conscious artist with commitment she is grieved to see the age old in human social practices like untouchability based on caste system prevailing in our society. She expresses her anger against caste based discrimination which has crippled the dalits/marginalized to dehumanized state as they are subjected to humiliation and oppression. In “*We Will Rebuild Worlds*” Meena Kandasamy uses direct and passionate language by enhancing its emotional impact. She challenges the reader and elicits thought by using strong language and rhetorical questions such as “*What is the caste of sperm in India?*” and “*What is the cost of life in India?*” The language style in “*Elegy to My First Keyboard*” is informal, intimate, and emotionally charged. This paper attempts to explore and analyze the grievances of the marginalized communities raised in *Touch* by Meena Kandasamy. In her poem, *Marriamma* focus on poverty, oppression, injustice, caste annihilation, linguistic identity and pangs and predicaments of women. In one of the poems titled *In her poem ‘Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985’*, she lashes out at the act and attitude of the people of the higher caste by recapturing the massacre of Karamchedu, Andhra Pradesh in 1985, where many low caste men were killed and their women were raped by the upper caste people. In fact, Meena Kandasamy seeks equality, freedom and fraternity for the marginalized so that they can lead a life with pride and dignity in society

Keywords: poverty, oppression, injustice, caste annihilation

Introduction

Meena Kandasamy uses a variety of literary devices in “*Ms. Militancy*” to illustrate her themes of empowerment, rebellion, and resistance. The following noteworthy methods are included in the anthology. The anthology “*Touch*” by Meena Kandasamy delves deeply into topics like oppression, gender, and caste while utilizing a range of literary devices. She employs the following important

strategies such as free verse, imagery, symbolism, intertextuality, juxtaposition, irony and satire, repetition. Meena Kandasamy frequently expresses honest and unvarnished feelings through free verse. She is able to depart from conventional frameworks using this shape, which reflects the disorganized and fragmented experiences of her subjects. The anthology is full with vivid imagery that vividly depicts the hardships and difficulties that her



characters must confront. This makes the scenarios that are described easier for readers to see and experience. She uses symbols to allude to more general topics. To illustrate the nuanced dynamics of power and intimacy, consider how the act of touching itself takes on symbolic meaning as a sign of both violation and connection. She frequently makes allusions to other texts, both modern and classical, in order to establish a conversation between her poems and larger literary and cultural contexts. Including a variety of voices and viewpoints, frequently from marginalized people, offers a nuanced understanding of societal concerns. The realism and richness of the experiences depicted are improved by this method. Using specific words or motifs again helps to accentuate the main ideas and feelings while also giving important concepts and experiences a rhythmic focus. To show the conflict and inconsistencies within society, Meena Kandasamy contrasts various components, such as beauty and violence or tradition with modernity. She uses irony and satire to question ingrained beliefs and to call attention to social injustices and conventions.

Reflects of Images, Symbols and Language Style

Meena Kandasamy frequently employs monologues to offer her characters a voice, especially the women who defy social expectations. This method makes it possible to examine political and personal conflicts in great detail. To effectively portray the ideas of resistance and defiance, the poems are full of arresting, at times confrontational imagery. The sharp differences between oppression and liberty are frequently emphasized by the imagery. Meena Kandasamy uses allusions to literary, political, and historical literature, much like in *Touch*. By placing her work within a broader language of resistance and revolution, this strategy enhances the meaning of her work. She exposes the absurdities and contradictions in conventional conventions and politics by using satire and irony to criticize society systems. This method gives her observations on politics and gender a pointed edge. Talking about emphatic language, *Ms. Militancy* frequently uses direct, powerful, and unapologetic language, which conveys the speaker's militancy and assertiveness. The seriousness of the

subjects being discussed is emphasized by this manner. The anthology uses symbols to symbolize larger ideas of empowerment and battle. Examples of these symbols include references to weaponry, combat, and revolutionary characters.

To emphasize the intricacies and conflicts within the fight for empowerment, Meena Kandasamy juxtaposes various components, such as political and personal conflict or conventional roles and modern opposition. Regarding form and structure in *Ms. Militancy* her poetry frequently defies accepted forms, illustrating how customs and roles are subverted. This experimenting with structure fits along with the concepts of nonconformity and rebellion. The themes of militancy and resistance are given more depth and meaning when historical events, revolutionary individuals, or mythological allusions are used.

Together, these strategies strengthen the anthology's insightful analysis of activism, identity, and struggle against injustice. Meena Kandasamy employs an array of literary techniques in her poetry to augment its affective resonance and thematic complexity. The following are some important tools she regularly uses: Meena Kandasamy frequently uses metaphors to explain complicated concepts and make intricate parallels. For example, she discusses political and personal issues using metaphors associated with fighting or warfare. In her writing, similes, like metaphors, aid in evoking strong images and drawing links between disparate ideas. This tool works well for expressing complex feelings and experiences. Meena Kandasamy addressed the issues of power, oppression, and resistance in a more relevant and powerful way by imbuing inanimate objects or abstract notions with human attributes. These acoustic tricks are employed to highlight specific words or ideas and establish rhythm. They can heighten the poetry's emotional impact and add to its melodic quality. Enjambment, in which a poem's lines flow seamlessly into one another, gives the reading a sense of urgency and continuity. It frequently reflects the way her poems flow in terms of ideas and feelings. Meena Kandasamy's poetry is distinguished by its vivid imagery, which aids in creating vivid and



realistic pictures of the things she writes about. The reader may find the topics and feelings more relatable as a result of this visceral detail. Kandasamy employs irony to draw attention to the inconsistencies and injustices present in both individual experiences and society standards. This tool frequently gives her insights a critical edge. She uses words, phrases, or structures repeatedly to highlight important ideas and feelings, which strengthens the main points of her poetry. Meena Kandasamy emphasizes tensions and conflicts by arranging contrasting materials side by side, which deepens the theme of her work.

Symbols stand in for more comprehensive concepts and themes. In her poems, objects, actions, or elements frequently have deeper connotations pertaining to identity, resistance, and power. To create a complex intertextual environment that gives her poetry additional layers of significance, Meena Kandasamy regularly makes references to mythological characters, historical events, and other literary works. Exaggeration is employed to portray strong feelings or to make a more noticeable point about cultural standards and injustices. The writing techniques produce a potent and evocative style that highlights the themes of identity, resistance, and social critique in Meena Kandasamy's poetry. The readers identify 'The Rivers' Metaphor as 'Women'. In her poem "Celestial Celebrities" the main metaphor, which likens women to rivers, highlights their strength, fluidity, and the innate, frequently unpredictable parts of their conduct. The metaphor of rivers is especially effective since it implies that these women, like rivers, shape their surroundings by forcefully and determinedly carving out their routes. The notion that these rivers have been "exiled to earth" implies that the ladies have been banished from a heavenly domain, possibly as retribution for their disobedience, yet they have not diminished in strength on Earth.

The language style in "*Elegy to My First Keyboard*" is informal, intimate, and emotionally charged. The tone is conversational, as though the speaker is fondly reflecting on their relationship with the keyboard, almost like reminiscing about an old friend or lover.

Personification on the keyboard is treated as a sentiment being, capable of emotions and actions. The speaker addresses it as if it were a partner in a complex, emotional relationship, filled with love, frustration, and eventual parting. Expressions like "you made me fall in love"(Line 4) and "you misbehaved" capture this dynamic. The narrative flows in a spontaneous, unstructured way, especially in parts where the speaker's thoughts mirror the keyboard's dysfunction. The breakdown of punctuation when the space bar fails mirrors the speaker's frustration and the chaotic nature of their interaction, reflecting an inner monologue where thoughts come without filters.

There's a subtitle humor in the way the speaker describes the keyboard's malfunctions as if they were deliberate acts of rebellion, quirks in an otherwise affectionate relationship. The absurdity of battling broken space bars and rogue slashes contrasts with the narrator's genuine fondness for the device, creating a playful sense of irony. The speaker uses exaggerated language to heighten the emotional weight of the keyboard's breakdowns, making them feel like significant, almost tragic events. Phrases like "Not to love a strong woman was very demeaning on me" elevate the situation to the level of a romantic melodrama.

Discussing casual syntax and fragmentation, the poetic lines are often fragmented, mirroring the erratic functioning of the keyboard. Lines like "One night you repaired yourself. I never asked you how. Questions are prohibited in love affairs with me" show a casual, resigned attitude toward the ongoing dysfunction, emphasizing the speaker's acceptance of the situation.

To stay ahead of me, you would type on your own.I
don't know what these slashes meant
but they would come everytime I stopped to pause.
\\
When you knew this didn't excite me, you stopped.
(66)



In “*We Will Rebuild Worlds*” Meena Kandasamy uses direct and passionate language by enhancing its emotional impact. She challenges the reader and elicits thought by using strong language and rhetorical questions. Inquiries such as “What is the caste of sperm in India?” and “What is the cost of life in India?” force the reader to reflect on the systemic injustices that still exist in the country. The poem’s vocabulary exudes a sense of desperation and resolve due to its immediacy and intensity. The poet emphasizes the seriousness of the fight for justice and equality in his exhortation to “pay all that it takes / for the dangerous price of love.” (Lines 79)

We will rebuild worlds from shattered glass
and Remnants of holocausts
Once impaled for our faith
and trained to speak in
Voiceless whispers
we’ll implore you to produce
the list
From hallowed memories
of our people disgraced
as Outcasts
degraded as untouchable
at sixty-four feet
Denied a life and livelihood
and done to death
Touch(60)

Meena Kandasamy’s poem “*Sun in the Mouth*” employs a rich, multi-layered literary style that blends vivid imagery, philosophical references, and cultural allusions to explore the elusive nature of truth. The poem presents truth as something scorching, difficult to speak or comprehend, and laden with personal and cultural meaning. Kandasamy’s use of language and literary devices creates a dense, introspective meditation on the limitations of perception and the complexity of articulating truth.

Kandasamy opens the poem with a striking image—truth scorching the “pink open flesh of your mouth.” (Line 1) The sensory language is immediate and visceral, drawing the reader into the physical discomfort and pain of speaking the truth. The “pungent yellow taste” of truth emphasizes its harshness and bitterness, and this metaphor of tasting truth, combined with the burning sensation, underscores how difficult it is to speak honestly. This technique draws the reader into an intimate, bodily experience of truth.

The poet has employed philosophical and cultural Allusions. The poem is infused with references to philosophical ideas and cultural symbols, giving it an intellectual and reflective tone. Kandasamy draws on Plotinus’s assertion that “the eye would not be able to see the sun if it was itself not sun” to link perception with understanding, suggesting that only those who embody truth can recognize it. This line, along with the reference to the Egyptian symbol of the eye as the “sun in the mouth,” connects the sensory experience of seeing and speaking truth with ancient wisdom and philosophical inquiry.

The mention of the Cyclops and Argus from Greek mythology further develops the theme of limited perception. The Cyclops, with only one eye, is deprived of the “whole truth,” while Argus, with his many eyes, is still unable to escape his fate. These mythological references suggest that even with multiple perspectives, human understanding of truth remains limited and incomplete.

Meena Kandasamy interweaves mythology and local culture in this poem. She seamlessly weaves in local cultural references, particularly from Tamil mythology and history. The king of a Tamil temple city, desperate to know the truth about the scent of a woman’s hair, offers a thousand gold coins for it. This allusion points to how truth is commodified and valued, while the poor poet’s prayer to Shiva highlights the vulnerability of those who rely on faith and art to survive. By incorporating these Tamil cultural elements, Kandasamy connects universal themes of truth with her specific cultural heritage, grounding the poem in a rich tradition of storytelling.

The poem’s central metaphor of “the sun in the mouth” serves as a potent symbol for the burning and illuminating quality of truth. The sun, often associated with enlightenment and clarity, becomes something that scorches and burns in the poem, symbolizing the painful nature of truth-telling. The use of the mouth as the vehicle for this metaphor reinforces the idea that speech and articulation of truth are fraught with difficulty and discomfort. Additionally, Kandasamy plays with the symbol of eyes throughout the poem—the Cyclops, Argus, the king seeking truth—all of which reflect the idea that truth is something that must



be seen, perceived, and understood. Yet, even those with multiple eyes (multiple perspectives) are not guaranteed full access to the truth, suggesting the limits of human perception.

The poem has an open, flowing structure without strict adherence to rhyme or meter. This free verse style allows Kandasamy to explore complex ideas without being confined to rigid poetic forms. The lack of punctuation in some places adds to the poem's fluidity, encouraging the reader to move seamlessly from one idea to the next. This mirrors the poem's thematic focus on the difficulty of grasping truth, as the reader is taken on a continuous journey of thought without clear breaks or resolutions.

The tone of the poem is reflective, contemplative, and at times, tinged with a sense of futility or frustration. The speaker's musings on the limitations of truth, perception, and understanding convey a voice that is both philosophical and personal. The final lines, which shift to the king's quest for truth and the poet's prayer to Shiva, add a layer of irony. The commodification of truth contrasts with the poet's humble reliance on faith and art, suggesting that truth may be unattainable through wealth or power but perhaps accessible through spiritual or artistic means.

In "*Sun in the Mouth*", Meena Kandasamy's literary style is marked by rich, evocative imagery, philosophical depth, and a deft blending of mythological, cultural, and personal references. Her use of metaphor and symbolism—especially the central image of the sun—serves to explore the complexities and discomforts of truth-telling. By interweaving elements of global and local cultures, Kandasamy crafts a poem that resonates with universal questions about perception and the elusive nature of truth, while grounding it in her own cultural context.

The poem "Mohandas Karamchand" has striking and thought-provoking imagery. Visceral reactions are elicited by phrases like "spooky stick" and "your blood with mud was gooeey goo," which emphasize the poet's contempt for Gandhi's alleged failure and duplicity. The poet claims that Gandhi's nonviolent approach to addressing the harsh reality of caste oppression was ineffective, and the "spooky stick" is

a symbol for this. The poet's criticism of how Gandhi's image is portrayed in comparison to the harsh realities faced by underprivileged populations is highlighted by the imagery of Gandhi's "naked" body and "bloody" fate. The idealized perception of Gandhi's life and contributions is refuted by this depiction. The poem "Mariamma" has a dissatisfied and accusing tone. As they consider the hypocrisy of religious rituals and wonder about the deity's desertion, the speaker's displeasure is clear. This tone aids in expressing the betrayal that the ostracized community feels and the emotional impact of the deity's absence. The poem's format highlights the effects of the deity's exclusion on the individual and the community through direct address and rhetorical inquiries. It establishes a conversation between the speaker and the deity, emphasizing the spiritual and emotional alienation that the oppressed go through.

The poem's rich and frequently unsettling imagery captures the brutal reality of subjugation and bloodshed motivated by caste. Strong emotional reactions are elicited by descriptions such as "electrocuted children to instant death" and "shattered glass / and remnants of holocausts," which also emphasize the horrific nature of the events being described. Lava, fire, and storms are symbols that stand for the destructive force of oppression as well as the transformational potential of resistance. Storms and thunder suggest the strength of many voices speaking out against injustice, while fire and lava represent the raging wrath and possibility for change. The poem criticizes society's flimsy and hypocritical reactions to caste inequality. It denounces the "botoxed faces" and the "smiling promises of heaven" of people who uphold inequality under the pretext of kindness and goodness. The portrayal of people's "skins" by Meena Kandasamy, which alludes to caste, race, and class symbolically, draws attention to the performative and hypocritical aspects of social identities. The poet draws attention to the flimsiness of these identities and the necessity of facing the fundamental causes of oppression. In the future, the oppressed will reclaim their dignity and rewrite their stories, according to the poem. As a refrain, "It will begin" is said repeatedly, highlighting the urgency and



inevitability of revolutionary change. The revolution is portrayed as a spiritual awakening in addition to a physical one. It will begin with aspirations and ideals, take the form of deeds and group opposition, and eventually usher in a new era of equality and justice. The images of “hands in prayer” and “naked bodies held close together” represent cooperation and solidarity in the fight for change.

The way that Meena Kandasamy expresses rage in her poems suggests that younger women are more rebellious and less tolerant of the conditions of their lives. Kandasamy is a symbol of the fury as well as the Dalit women. Her poetry is grounded on reality, specifically the reality of her Dalit identity, but it also incorporates history. Since she is aware that English is still used in circles of power, she uses it as a vehicle to express her frustration. Think about the poem “Evil Spirits.” It is clear that Meena Kandasamy has a great command of the English language and is able to depict the inhumane treatment that the Dalit people have received and continue to get.

Evil Spirits

You are possessed.

Witch doctors believe in phantoms,
that cause your illness. But, driving out devils
can be challenging. Spirits are given away—
(Lines 1-5)

Since English was the language of “colonial power,” it is crucial to remember that its position has maintained in the elite’s circles even in independent India. Nonetheless, English has undergone many stages of reworking in 21st century India in accordance with the cultural quirks and shifting social ethos of the nation, allowing Indian writers to reach a worldwide audience. Given this, a critical examination of Meena Kandasamy’s selection of the English language as a means of expressing the Dalit cause is warranted.

Sure, the language is used skillfully to appeal to a broad audience given the background of “Evil Spirits.” It is also employed, though, in a way that parodies the entire caste-and language-based hegemonical structure. The concept of the social corpus and its disease is examined in “Evil Spirits.” The poem alludes to the long-standing maltreatment of Dalits by the higher castes and criticizes the custom

of using the “possessed” upper caste person as a scapegoat in order to ward off evil spirits. She makes reference to the Hindu custom that places the shudra’s misdeeds on the shoulders of the brahmin. The poet utilizes the severe wounds from beatings that the Dalits’ skin bears as a symbol of past acts of communal violence and as a tool for resistance. There is a strong undercurrent of mockery as the poet suggests that “evil spirits” live and breed within society itself through other people’s abuse of men and women. According to the Dalit perspective, people’s thoughts are the source of society’s flaws. When the poet states, “we rot away,” she is referring to both the ill body of Indian society and the Dalits’ quiet suffering. Therefore, both the harasser and the harassed are included in the metaphor of “evil spirits.”

It is clear from practically all of her poems that she is angry, as in “Evil Spirits.” Her blatantly aggressive and purposefully disruptive demeanor embodies the fighting spirit of the Dalit people. Let’s examine another poem by Kandasamy, “Fire,” to see how he once more employs the English language to tell the story of the Dalit people and to “answer back.”

Fire

Black satanic fumes
shroud the blank blue skies
in puffing jet black soot;
few flashy cameras record
glimpses of destruction
(for tomorrow’s papers) ... (Touch 1-6)

Meena Kandasamy’s poem “Prayers in the Bathroom, Overheard” uses a satirical and ironic tone to critique the intersection of religious faith, environmental degradation, and caste-based discrimination in India. The poem’s playful language and conversational style serve to highlight serious social issues, while the humor makes the critique more poignant. The most striking aspect of Kandasamy’s style in this poem is her use of satire. The learned man’s prayer, invoking sacred rivers during his bath, becomes a vehicle for exposing the environmental destruction and social hypocrisy underlying the rituals. The poem mocks the mechanical repetition of prayers and the hollow faith in these rituals, especially when



they are disconnected from reality. The satirical tone is evident when the “God of Bath-time Prayers” responds logically, pointing out the absurdity of the learned man’s invocation by mentioning the rivers’ actual polluted or dry state. Kandasamy also uses irony to critique both religious practices and the learned man’s obliviousness. For instance, the man invokes sacred rivers that are polluted, dammed, or inaccessible due to geopolitical boundaries. The irony reaches its height when the learned man, so caught up in his ritualistic faith, fails to realize that his actual water comes from a corporation, not the sacred rivers. His disillusionment is highlighted by his eventual reliance on deodorants rather than clean water, a metaphor for covering up deeper problems rather than addressing them.

The poem personifies God as a weary bureaucrat—“God-in-charge”—who is “too logical” and tired of answering mundane bath-time prayers. This portrayal of God as a worker on his first shift, struggling to explain the realities of river pollution and damming, adds to the poem’s humor and irony. By depicting God as an office employee, Kandasamy demystifies the divine, turning sacred rituals into bureaucratic exchanges, thereby critiquing the reduction of religious practices into mechanical, meaningless acts.

Kandasamy employs the use of sacred rivers such as Ganga, Jamuna, and Kaveri to symbolize the environmental crisis in India deeply. These rivers, which hold religious significance, are also among the most polluted and exploited water bodies due to industrial waste, dams, and political disputes. The poem juxtaposes religious reverence with environmental degradation, suggesting that blind faith in ritualistic purity disregards the tangible pollution of these revered rivers. The poem criticizes the continuation of religious rituals despite environmental destruction, highlighting the disconnection between faith and reality. The most impactful moment in the poem occurs when the educated man discovers that the operator of his water pump is an “untouchable,” causing him to forgo his bath and revealing his deep-

seated caste prejudice. Kandasamy utilizes this moment to expose the hypocrisy of the educated man’s faith. While he invokes divine rivers in his prayer for purity, he recoils from the idea of using water handled by an untouchable, illustrating the persistence of caste-based discrimination in everyday life.

The family’s choice to cease bathing altogether after this revelation further emphasizes the absurdity of their beliefs. Instead of addressing their prejudice or the water crisis, they turn to deodorants, a superficial solution that overlooks the underlying problem. This transition from faith in water and rivers to faith in deodorants is a satirical commentary on how the upper-caste elite evade addressing social and environmental issues, opting for cosmetic solutions instead. The poem’s conversational tone, straightforward language, and humorous exchanges between the educated man and God make it accessible while enhancing its satirical impact. The informal style also mirrors the absurdity of the situation, where sacred prayers and divine interventions are reduced to mundane, almost trivial exchanges.

Conclusion

Language is a powerful means of expressing feelings, allowing writers to traverse the literary world and reveal hidden realities. The majority of her writings, which are primarily a response to her being harassed and abused by the stereotypical world, are centered on feminism and the anti-caste campaign of erasing the Indian era. She has gained widespread recognition for her unrepentant actions against the caste system and sexism. Her opinions on caste discrimination from a feminist perspective, as a member of a marginalized nomadic tribe, are clear in her writings, social media posts, and magazine pieces. Meena Kandasamy’s all poems “Justice is...” is a powerful critique of the oppression and suppression of marginalized classes in Indian society. The poem explores themes of caste-based discrimination, the misinterpretation of religious concepts like dharma and karma, and the deep-seated injustice that flows from these beliefs. *Touch*, and *Miltancy* a potent collection by Meena



Kandasamy, addresses the intricate relationships between gender, caste, and language in modern-day India. Kandasamy challenges ingrained societal conventions with her bold, outspoken, and unabashedly political voice. She focuses on the subjugation of underprivileged populations, such as the Dalits. The poems in *Touch*, which frequently draw on historical events, personal experiences, and the reality faced by underprivileged people, use strong imagery and an honest emotional tone.

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