



Literature as Liberation: Caste, Gender, and the Ethics of Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian literature has evolved enough to facilitate the intellectual dialogue of social justice, it is thereby confronts the conventional force that institutionlize caste, patriarchy, and structural violence. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) exemplify the ideational shift through their account of personal trauma exposing its impact on society, thereby converting it into political critique. Thanthai Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's assertion that "Caste is the greatest enemy of humanity" (Periyar) is resonated in the personal accounts of the authors Meena and Sujatha. While Meena testifies the intimate violence of marriage and ideological patriarchy, Sujatha exposes generations of Dalit struggle and inherent caste oppression, labor exploitation, and political disillusionment. This article, as a resistance literature, intend to call for actions against institutional violence, hegemonic forces, and envisions social justice rooted in dignity, equality, and self-respect.

Keywords: social justice, caste oppression, gender violence, dalit autobiography, periyar, meena kandasamy, sujatha gidla

Introduction

Indian writing in English has always been the space for questions on inequality since its inception, but in recent decades, the literature seems to have hosted an intense exploration of narratives authored by writers from marginalized communities. Such narratives challenge the dominant cultural narratives that facilitate caste violence, gendered oppression, and structural injustice. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, both published in 2017, stand as texts that feature within this convention and tradition.

Both narratives reveal the lived realities of oppression in the domestic spaces of contemporary India. Kandasamy's novel presents a harrowing account of abuse within the systemic violence attuned to marriage, exposing how patriarchy administers it through emotional, sexual, and ideological violence. Gidla, on the other hand, recounts the multigenerational Dalit family history that reveals an enduring systemic oppression and exclusion despite political movements, education, and migration. Although they differ in form, these texts affirm Periyar's rationalist critique of caste and



reinstate Ambedkar's advocacy for social justice that confronts structural inequality.

Autobiographical practices can be productive in that process as the subject, articulating problems of identity and identification, struggles against coercive calls to a "universal humanity." For the marginalized woman, autobiographical language may serve as a coinage that purchases entry into the social and discursive economy (Smith and Watson 22).

Autobiographies, along with many other literary forms, have become a distinguished form that channels marginalized voices to achieve autonomy. They not only provide agency to the affected but also engage them in confronting hegemonic histories. Both Kandasamy and Gidla's autobiographies facilitate social intervention. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that life narratives enable writers to "claim authority over experience in contexts that deny them legitimacy" (Smith and Watson 4). In *When I Hit You*, the act of narration itself becomes resistance. Writing enables the narrator to survive, remember, and reclaim autonomy. In *Ants Among Elephants*, autobiography expands into collective memory, reconstructing Dalit history excluded from official narratives. These texts directly challenge Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 287). Here, the subaltern speaks with clarity, anger, and historical consciousness.

Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* exposes marriage as a socially sanctioned space of violence. The narrator's husband uses ideological language, including Marxism, revolution, and intellectual superiority, to justify control and abuse. This reveals a disturbing contradiction between progressive politics and regressive gender practice. The narrator's body becomes a site of surveillance and punishment. Feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege argue that domestic violence must be understood as structural rather than private (Rege 132). Kandasamy's narrative aligns with this argument by showing how cultural expectations of silence, obedience, and sacrifice normalise abuse. The novel thus critiques not only individual men but

also the patriarchal system that protects them.

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* offers a sweeping account of caste oppression across generations. The memoir documents how Gidla's Dalit family experiences untouchability, landlessness, and labor exploitation despite participation in political movements and access to education. The title itself symbolizes the disproportionate suffering of Dalits' small lives crushed by massive social structures.

Gidla's narrative powerfully illustrates Ambedkar's assertion that caste is a system of graded inequality sustained through social, economic, and cultural mechanisms (Ambedkar 14). Despite constitutional promises of equality, caste continues to shape life chances. Gidla's work exposes the myth of post-caste India and underscores the persistence of structural injustice. Thanthai Periyar's ideas provide a crucial ideological framework for reading both texts. His uncompromising opposition to caste, religion, and patriarchy emphasized rationalism, self-respect, and social equality. Periyar's declaration that "caste is the greatest enemy of humanity" (Periyar) finds literary expression in both Kandasamy's and Gidla's narratives.

Kandasamy's rejection of marital obedience and Gidla's refusal to romanticize political movements reflect Periyar's insistence on questioning all forms of authority. Both texts align with Periyar's belief that liberation must begin with the rejection of oppressive traditions, even when they are culturally normalized or politically justified.

In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. If power were never anything but repressive, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault 119).



Silence operates as a tool of oppression in both works. In *When I Hit You*, silence is imposed through isolation, fear, and gaslighting. Breaking that silence through writing becomes an act of defiance. In *Ants Among Elephants*, silence is historical—the erasure of Dalit lives from national narratives. Michel Foucault argues that power operates through control of discourse (Foucault 93). By narrating what has been silenced, both authors disrupt dominant histories and reclaim discursive space. Their narratives expose how silence sustains injustice and how voice becomes a form of resistance.

Both texts critique education and political ideology as incomplete tools of liberation. In Kandasamy's narrative, intellectualism becomes a means of domination. In Gidla's memoir, leftist movements promise equality but often reproduce caste hierarchies. Dalit scholars, including Gopal Guru, argue that class-based politics in India often marginalize caste realities (Guru 17). Both works reinforce this critique by demonstrating that social justice requires simultaneous attention to caste, gender, and class.

The body holds a central symbolic role in both narratives. Kandasamy's narrator experiences her body as a site of pain, surveillance, and resistance, while Gidla's family members endure bodies broken by labor, hunger, and violence. Elaine Scarry contends that pain functions as a mechanism through which power is enforced and normalized (Scarry 27). By emphasizing bodily suffering, both texts resist abstraction and compel readers to confront the material consequences of injustice. The body thus becomes a political text, bearing the marks of social inequality. *When I Hit You* is intense and intimate, whereas *Ants Among Elephants* is expansive and historical. Together, these works demonstrate the versatility of autobiographical writing as social critique. Kandasamy exposes micro-level gendered violence, while Gidla reveals macro-level caste oppression. Their convergence lies in the shared assertion that personal suffering is inseparable from structural injustice.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* are powerful interventions in contemporary Indian literature and the discourse on social justice. By transforming lived experience into narrative resistance, both authors expose systems of caste and patriarchy that continue to shape Indian society. Rooted in the rationalist legacy of Periyar and the emancipatory vision of Ambedkar, these texts reaffirm literature's capacity to challenge injustice, reclaim dignity, and imagine ethical futures grounded in equality and self-respect.

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