



## THE 'TOUCH' IS NOT SIMPLE: AN EXPLICATION OF MEENA KANDASAMY'S POEMS

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### ABSTRACT

*Touch* is the name of first poetry collection of Meena Kandasamy who makes her voice different through protests. She fights against the existing system which is against the marginalised that is women, Dalit, low caste etc. without any hesitations she exposes all the traumas and difficulties that encircled the life of common man as a result ineffective, corrupted, and unjust social structure. *'Touch'* encapsulates the aesthetics of pain, yes, but also a powerful aesthetics of protest. *Touch* has been increasingly identified as a political collection. It put forward the politics of the marginalised, outcaste and unprivileged. This article tries to explicate the politics of protest in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy.

**Keywords:** protest, politics, marginalised, Dalit, activist, patriarchy

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### INTRODUCTION

*Touch* is the most elementary of all sensations which a human being has bestowed with; even when in a meditative religious man closes his eyes, ears and nose, it is the sense of touch which keeps him connected with this world. This feeling of touch is perhaps the first of senses and no one can get rid of it.

The same feeling of touch is thought to be a taboo when it tries to transgress the compartmentalization of caste. Kandasamy describes it beautifully in her poem *Touch*.

Kamala Das says in her Forward to Meenakandasamy's poetry collection *Touch*.

"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. Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips. Older by nearly half a century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision . . ."

The word by a legendary figure in Indian poetry itself reveals the strength of her poetry. Dalit literature represents the harsh lived experiences of marginalized Dalit people. Dalit literature is basically a literature of resistance. As in the mainstream literary canon, it is necessary to be a woman to represent the experiences of women; it is also necessary to have women writers in other marginalized classes. Meena Kandasamy writes angrily, often eloquently, about the politics of the body and caste in contemporary Indian society. Necessarily, what she sees is different from the images we have constructed for ourselves. It was Ambedkar who said that "women are the gateways of the caste system". Kandasamy is intensely aware of how the female body is used as an instrument of control, by naming it, fixing it and locating it within a discourse whose concerns are very different.

### Poetry of Protest

Meena Kandasamy's poems in *Touch* have two main themes—love and caste oppression. She challenges caste restrictions through her comment

on the story of Ekalavya drawn from the Mahabharata. Eklavya, an outcaste, taught himself the art of archery and became so skilled an archer that he rivalled the supremacy of the Kshatriya prince Arjuna. The prince's guru, whom Eklavya considered a guru as well, then demanded and received Eklavya's right thumb as gurudakshina (fee for the teacher), thus ensuring he could not rival Arjuna. Kandasamy writes: 'You don't need your right thumb/ To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb''

Kandasamy regards her writing as a process of coming to terms with her identity: her "womanness, Tamilness and low/ outcasteness", labels that she wears with pride.. She knew, she says, that "my gender, language and castelessness were not anything that I had to be ashamed of... I wrote poetry very well aware of who I was. But I was also sure of how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be taken on my own terms... I wanted to be totally bare and intensely exposed to the world through my writings. I wanted it to be my rebellion against the world." It meant, she adds, consciously deciding that she wasn't interested in winning "acceptance, or admiration or awards. The categories into which Meena Kandasamy falls—Dalit and female—have put her among those Indian society has historically tended to oppress and marginalize the most.

Meena Kandasamy takes on Hindu myths in her politically-charged poetry. In her poems she addresses issues of caste and untouchability—something that stems from her being a Dalit, considered the lowest and most oppressed of India's castes and formerly known as "untouchables". She said she embraced her identity as a Dalit partly because there was no way of escaping it. "People will force that label on you so you might as well make the most of it," said Ms. Kandasamy. For Dalit women, oppression often means sexual subjugation too.

Ms. Kandasamy's poems are informed by a sense of gender relations that suggest being a woman in a largely patriarchal society is another form of being lower caste. "You don't have to be a Dalit—by being a woman the caste is in you," she said. In her poems, it's her identity as a woman that she engages with most explicitly. Ms. Kandasamy's

woman, like female figures in a lot of feminist literature, makes unbridled sexuality the main weapon of her social militancy.

The poems in *Touch* by Meena Kandasamy amplifies, illustrates, and carries on this struggle for power and autonomy by women poets. Apart from her expert use of language, she has a sincerity of feeling and an honesty of experience rarely encountered. For Meena Kandasamy, the young Tamil poetess, poetry is about empirical truth and experience and she writes and reflects from where she is:

We: their daughters,  
We: the daughters of their soil.  
We, mostly, write." ("Their Daughters')

Her poetry is at best of private sensibility. Her consciousness is firmly yoked to the world around her, a world characterised by ecstasy and pain, love and despair. Meena Kandasamy regards her poetic corpus as a process of coming to terms with her identity and consciousness. Her poetic self-gasps in darkness to search for her emotional root proclaiming it as her heritage. This becomes a source of vitality for the poet's journey. Kandasamy problematizes the sense of touch in her poem *Touch*.

But, you will never have known  
The touch—the taboo  
to your transcendence,  
when crystallized is caste  
was a paraphernalia of  
undeserving hate.

Kandasamy tries to prove the serenity of the touch which has been unnaturally transformed into a tabooed form when a "touchable" gets touched by an untouchable human being; the traditional Indian myth of impurity revives itself. The mere touch of a "classless" can create havoc in a caste Brahmin's world-order; everything becomes impure: water, dynasty, and even God. She explores a wide range of subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulation. Her poetry arises not out of reading and knowledge, but out of active engagement. *Touch* is rich with varied dexterity that explores the states of mind and genuine feminine sentiments.

Writing becomes a means of creating a place in the world; the use of the personal voice and

self-revelation are means of self-assertion. Meena's self-expressive poems permit forbidden or ignored emotions to be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling; she shows how an Indian woman poet can create a space for herself in the public world. Across time and space, the woman writer, especially the woman poet, is engaged in an ongoing dialectic with the dominant cultural hegemonies to negotiate a space for the creative woman, where authentic female experiences can be articulated freely. Meena's poems record the age-old class hierarchy in Indian society. Her poem, 'Becoming a Brahmin' records the sad plight of the so-called lower class people of Indian society:

- Step 1: Take a beautiful Sudra girl
- Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin
- Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child
- Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin
- Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times
- Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

Meena's poetic mode ranges from the meditative to sensuous where the metaphysical subtlety of arrivals and departures are ambivalent. A feature that impresses and ultimately convinces the readers is the poet's readiness to allow conflicting voices to be heard from all contending perspectives. Her poems pose a tension that reaches out to the reader, arousing in one a sense of need that will not be satisfied:

"What will you say of your feeling  
Living with a sister who terrorizes  
Even manic depressions out of your mind?  
(Sage in the Cubicle')

Kandasamy's poems portray such a dreadful picture of varied agonies experienced by Dalits that her poems seem as an encyclopaedia of painful inventories. Untouchable turns into touchable for upper caste when it fits their selfish deeds and lusty demands. As in the poem entitled "Narration" the lady narrates:

I'll weep to you about  
My landlord, and with  
My mature gestures—  
You will understand.  
The torn sari, disheveled hair  
Stifled cries and meek submission.

I was not an untouchable then.

In another poem entitled "Shame" the poet describes the fate of a gang-raped girl who fails to gain any kind of sympathy from the people because she was a Dalit. It is the victim who gets victimized time and again.

Public's prying eyes  
Segregate her—the victim.  
But, the criminals have  
Already mainstreamed—  
Their caste is a classic shield.

Kandasamy deliberately renews the loss of subaltern history. She suspects that Dalit history has been destroyed by their opportunist social rivals. She, not only laments the loss of history but also the remnants of the destroyed history, which have been used against the weak and thus perform the function of a definite boundary from which it is nearly impossible to make a way-out for a Dalit. Meena Kandasamy reiterates the scarcity of water for Dalits because they are barred to reach the sources of clean water. What they have to carry to their homes is the contaminated 'water' of "Buffalo Baths, Urine, [and] Bullshit". There are only two available options for any person of group to face the unlawful, tyrannical hardships; either to bear and wait for a natural change or to speak out in a revolutionary style. Kandasamy criticizes the silence of Dalits in an oblique way saying that

"Ours is a silence  
that waits. Endlessly waits.  
And then, unable to bear it  
any further, break into wails

There is always a haunting note of despondency marked in Meena's poetic lines. We may refer to her poem, 'Immanuel':

Now, if there be any mourning  
Let it be for our heroes  
Yet to die, fighting...

In the poem 'Take This for an Answering' Meena records her voice of protest;

You press me into answering  
When and why and where and how  
I could start to dislike you.

Meena Kandasamy writes poems that acknowledge duality. That suffering may live beside light, that anger may hold joy. Her language –

scathing, sensual, frustrated, as well as playful – reflects the coexistence of innumerable realities in contemporary India. Meena is wholly committed to poetry as action – a discourse that fearlessly uncovers and critically analyses what needs to change.

#### **CONCLUSION**

A woman in a Dalit community is a “Dalit among the Dalits” . In spite of being far more sidelined than men, Dalit women have also contributed sufficiently to Dalit literature. Dalit women poets feel strongly that Dalit woman issues have not been adequately represented in the mainstream. Condemned for centuries to a life of bondage, basic needs and questions of survival are still central for Dalit women.

To understand this ‘caste-gender mechanism’ is not as easy as it seems. The reality is that to be a female writer and a Dalit female writer is not one and the same. Some upper-caste feminist thinkers “...who feel that women of all communities and Dalits are both victimized and discriminated by the male chauvinists and therefore all women are Dalits! These intellectuals do not, for a moment, think of Dalits who are also women. In spite of their awareness that women are divided along caste and class lines, they comfortably draw the parity between ‘women’ and ‘Dalit’s’. Women Dalit writers like Meena Kandasamy makes voice of protest. She made her ‘Touch’ really burning to patriarchal high caste.

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