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Reclaiming Voice and Agency through Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

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Abstract

One of the leading voices of Indian English Literature, Meena Kandasamy is a candid activist, fierce poet, critically acclaimed novelist, and noteworthy translator of the current era. As a writer, she excels in the stark portrayal and deconstruction of caste and gender-based violence in contemporary Indian society. Her poetry reflects aggressive resistance towards oppressive hierarchy promoted by the champions of casteism and cultural supremacy. With her unique and raw style, she covers the shocking atrocities engineered against underprivileged beings in her poetic collections like Touch and Ms Militancy. She deftly examines sexual politics and unapologetically questions the norms of a male-dominated society. With blatant rawness, she dissects the power dynamics of patriarchy and challenges certain taboos & stereotypes about femininity. This paper examines how her poetry seeks to reclaim the voice and agency of the silenced and underprivileged women, destined to live on the fringes. It explores the fierce spirit of resistance in her discourse of subversion. It also traces how she reinterprets and dismantles the instruments of colonization and constructed dominance of the female body by the power institutions of patriarchy.

Key Words: *Resistance, Reclamation, Female Agency, Dominance, Subjugation, Reinterpretation, Patriarchy, Supremacy, Autonomy, Sexuality, Subversion*

One of the most celebrated authors of the current era, Meena Kandasamy is “known for her extremely polemical writing imbued with militant spirit and voice of dissent against casteist mindset and gender oppression” (Biswas). As a poet, she deftly examines sexual politics and unapologetically questions the norms of a male-dominated society. Besides the powerful exploration of Dalit identity, her poetry promotes gender and socio-economic equality. In one of her interviews, she speaks her take on the blatant expression of resistance and rawness in her poetry: -

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

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Yes. Poetry, it is raw. It is real. It is full of jagged edges. My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people (Kandasamy, Meena Kandasamy: *Angry Young Women Are Labelled Hysterics*).

Her poetry is predominantly fierce, unbridled, and deconstructive which seeks to make the patriarchal forces uncomfortable. Being an astringent sociological critique, it raises the question of women's identity and independence in a hegemonic society that wields its ideological power to control their desires, suppress their sexuality, and fix their gender roles. She proclaims, "I strive to be a shrew in a society that believes in suffering in silence. I strive to be a sphinx: part-woman, part-lioness, armed with all the lethal riddles" (Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy* 9). It also reinterprets and dismantles the instruments of their colonization and "constructed dominance" by the power institutions of chauvinist society. As a poet, she is a rebel who outpours her rage against Brahmanical supremacy in her "intensely inquisitive" style. In the preface of her anthology *Ms Militancy* entitled "Should you take offence...", she vociferously speaks her mind: -

I work to not only get back at you, I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me (8).

Meena Kandasamy uses the potent weapon of poetic resistance to go beyond the limitations of traditional narratives in the context of female sexuality and desires. Her poetry has expressed solidarity with socially ostracized groups like sex workers to reclaim their voices and agency. She challenges the stereotypical portrayal of such women that is often characterized by shame and stigma. She advocates achieving and realizing true independence by breaking the shackles and willfully violating the rules of misogynistic culture and tradition. She seeks to rewrite the feminine attributes, norms, and expectations with defying narratives of self-love and acceptance. Her poetry celebrates the power of the collective and advocates to fight against moral policing and societal constraints that render them objectified and invisible. Her bold poem entitled "Backstreet Girls" subverts the traditional notion of purity and pinpoints a need for a collective agency to shun passive victimhood and societal rejection. "The title of the poem implies a counter-attack and non-conformity to the cultural orthodoxy and traditional dogmas that condemn women as licentious" (Patni 43). The poem makes a powerful call to these marginalized and isolated women to wear the badge of defiance to reclaim their bodies and spirit of autonomy. On their path of self-discovery, these women cannot be controlled, silenced, and subjugated by the chauvinist forces: -

Tongues untied, we swallow suns.

Sure as slut, we strip random men.

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

Sleepless. There's stardust on our lids.

Naked. There's self-love on our minds.

And yes, my dears, we are all friends.

There will be no blood on our bridal beds.

We are not the ones you will choose for wives.

We are not the ones you can sentence for life (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 14).

Her poem "Celestial celebrities" flows with the same strain as it celebrates the spirit of autonomy and nonconformity to the androcentric models of feminineness. Her "wild", "unrestrained and indiscriminate" (16) women prefer sexual freedom over cultural orthodoxy and never care for the diktats of an androcentric society. Being uncontrollable and "fond of running off and running away" (16), they follow "the jagged, moody course they chose for themselves" (16). These guiltless women are the voice of resistance and represent the force of female agency in subverting the patriarchal culture and undermining its misogynistic traditions. The patriarchal forces are terrified of strong-minded and independent women who reject the traditional ideal of femininity. So, these "fallen women" are accused of deviation and transgression from the established path of patriarchy, hence, subject to alienation and expulsion from "heaven" – their true home.

The rivers here bear the names

Of fallen women exiled to earth

When the heavens found them

Too bloody hot to handle (16).

The poem "Firewalkers" provocatively employs the myth of Draupadi, referred to as Diety Maari. She is portrayed as a vengeful and fierce woman seeking justice for herself. "The goddess is presented here as an angry, violent, avenging woman, an idol of fearful femininity, synonymous to Kali" (Patni 40). She represents the force of retribution for collective oppression and unspeakable violence suffered by the women of underprivileged class. The poem gives voice to feminist rage and empowerment while challenging the narrative of the patriarchal forces through the subversion of traditional myths. The poem depicts Maari as a symbol of female resistance and defiance in a world inflicted with the menace of objectification and dehumanization.

Maari had a one-point goal. Maari had a manic soul.

Maari made her men wage war, with her rapist's blood

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

To drench her hair, and then, and then,
 As these stories, go, Maari with her heart of stone,
 Combed her hair with his left thighbone (22).

The title poem of the anthology “Ms Militancy” celebrates the spirit of militant feminism while referring to the tragic fate of Kannaki and her husband Kovalan, as depicted in the well-known Tamil epic Silapathikaram. Kannaki is left heartbroken and destitute when her beloved husband Kovalan forsakes her for a courtesan named Madhavi. She decides to wait for the return of her husband despite his unfaithfulness and adultery. In a few years, he returns to Kannaki and she forgives his betrayal without any qualms. Together, they move to Madurai, the capital city of Pandya Kingdom to rebuild their lives. But Kovalan is arrested with the false charge of stealing a jeweled anklet of the queen. He is executed by the order of the king without a fair trial. When Kannaki learns about this grave injustice, she raises her voice of protest to prove her husband’s innocence before the royal court and curses the ruthless king and his insensitive subject. Ultimately, the city of Madurai and its people have to suffer the retribution.

She stormed into the palace, flung her other anklet
 At the bloody throne. The royals too saw the red.
 The king died of shame, the queen died of shock.
 On the edge, Ms Militancy bayed for more blood.
 Vending vengeance, she made a bomb
 Of her left breast and blew up the blasted city.
 Long after that land had turned to ashes,
 The rest of her plucked breast bled (36).

Here, Kannaki, a submissive woman is transformed into a powerful voice of resistance who challenges the male-dominated society head-on. She “stands as an idol of a brave woman who fought against injustice courageously. Kandasamy posits her as a paragon of revolt she wishes to see in the female Dalit persona” (Patni 39). She represents the feminist spirit of resilience, anger, vengeance, revolution, and militancy, which seeks to dismantle patriarchal authority's power dynamics.

Employing the legend of Tamil saint-poet Karaikkal Ammayar from a different perspective, her poem “Dead woman walking” sardonically portrays abandoned women's lack of voice and agency in a hostile society. Despite being attractive and devoted, Karaikkal Ammayar was deserted by her merchant husband for a “fresh and formless wife” (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 17). So, she became a

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

mystic and devotee of Lord Shiva. “I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to god” (17). In this poem, the mythological figure of Karaikkal Ammayar represents the adversities of underprivileged women who are exploited by Brahmanical society through various means. These women are doomed to face the devastating impact of betrayal by their chauvinist counterparts. They are rendered destitute and considered “mad” by society. With the trauma of anxiety and rejection, they become psychologically dead and are doomed to meet the expectations of a hostile culture. Forced to swallow the misery of social ostracization and abandonment, they are tormented, subjugated, and exploited through a vicious cycle of oppression.

I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors,
 with faltering step, with felted, flying hair,
 with hallowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes,
 with welts on my wrists, with creasing skin,
 with seizures of speech and songs, with a single story
 between my sobbing, pendulous breasts (17)

Another remarkable poem “Jouissance” expresses radical outrage while alluding to the myth of Ahilya being turned into stone by the curse of her husband Gautam Rishi. It talks about how the hegemony of patriarchy denies women agency and freedom of expression. Jouissance is a French term associated with the post-modernist theories propagated by Lacan, Barthes, and Kristeva, which means “orgasm”, and “total joy or ecstasy”. The poem retaliates to the power structures and simultaneously subverts the objectified and passive representation of women in the male-controlled discourse of female sexuality. It questions sexual politics related to the punishment for transgression. It exposes the discriminatory standards of a patriarchal society in the context of sexual pleasure. Meena Kandasamy challenges the patriarchal control over women’s desires and the colonization of their bodies.

An angry philosopher froze
 His philandering wife: passivity
 As punishment for promiscuity.
 Rendered senseless, set in stone.,
 She stared in unceasing surprise
 As her sage husband toured
 The world with his treatises on

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

What pleasure meant to women
 And a powerpoint presentation
 That showed close-up photos
 Of her fixed phantom face (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 26).

The poem “A Cunning Stunt” describes how the women are subserviently identified with their bodies. It exposes sexual politics and the “gendered language”. It explores the relationship between the relegation of the female body and the language of the man-dominated world. The language of the androcentric society does not consider them beyond their genitals. They are offensively described through their body parts. In a hegemonic setup, they are taken as being mere playthings in the hands of wanton men to gratify their sexual desires. Meena Kandasamy unabashedly attacks the androcentric ideals and various connotations & signifiers attached to the “vagina” in a hegemonic culture.

And with his first thrust it also
 becomes a place of rest, repository,
 Cunt now becomes seat,
 abode, home, lair, nest, stable (11).

Women’s sexuality is discussed and represented only in fragmentations from a masculine viewpoint. It is the men who control female bodies as they are meant only for sexual pleasure and reproduction. Meena Kandasamy “discusses how a woman is used by androcentric society as an object to maintain the interests of family, race, stock and caste and how her sexuality is constrained for the interests of men. The poem is an example to show the androcentric process of naming of women’s body for its benefits” (K.M. 267). Women are denied agency and control over their physical selves. They are subjected to humiliation, exploitation, and subjugation by the power structures. Their anatomy is merely an object of focalization for the male gaze.

and he opens my legs wider
 and shoves more and shoves
 harder and I am torn apart
 To contain the meanings of
 family, race, stock, and caste (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 11).

The poem “Nailed” reflects fierce resistance against women’s oppression in a patriarchal setup. It exposes how male-centered society desperately tries to silence and control the feminist voices

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

speaking for the subalterns. Citing the examples of mythological figures like Kulamaayi, Kali, and Durga, the poet narrates how men are intimidated by independent and activist women, especially when they start claiming their space and speaking about the violence & injustice in a male-controlled society. Their autonomy and dissent are deemed as a threat to the Brahmanical power structures and traditional gender-frames. The androcentric society always aspires to take control over their labor, body, and sexuality. Denial of agency and voice is sought through violence and victimization.

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...

They were relatively low-risk, so most other women were locked up at home (37).

The poem "Once my silence held you spellbound" portrays the marginalization and othering of women whose harassment, estrangement, exploitation, and sufferings do not deserve to be discussed by the first-world feminist discourse. These women must be from the Dalit, Adivasi, black, and other underprivileged sections who are treated as outsiders, so, not suitable for feminist empathy. These outcast women do not feature in the progressive and mainstream intellectual space of resistance. Their identities are erased and their sufferings are diluted. They suffer devaluation and exclusion in the hands of the "manipulating machinery" of patriarchy. They are rendered voiceless and invisible by the power structures. This poem seeks to question and dismantle the privileged feminist discourse that denies space, voice, and agency to the subalterns. Meena Kandasamy advocates the establishment of alternative feminist discourse and cultural poetics for these marginalized women that will subvert the hegemonic traditions of patriarchal culture nourished by forces of Brahminism.

You wouldn't discuss me because my suffering

Was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough.

Enough. Now I am theoretical enough.

I am theatrical enough.

I have learnt all these big words.

I can use them with abandon.

I can misuse them. I can refuse them (39).

In *Ms Militancy*, Meena Kandasamy employs a strategy of challenging and disapproving of the conventional ideals of femininity by interpreting Indian myths from an alternative point of view. She fiercely attacks the patriarchal notions of purity, chastity, maternity, sexuality, and the sanctity of marriage. With an aggressive style, she presents the counter-narrative for mythical falsehood related to

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

Kali, Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Ahilya, Shooparnkha, and other goddesses and saints. She offensively questions the traditional narratives of their subjugation and sublimation, as propagated by the canonical texts and “mainstream media representations” (Roy). She assertively criticizes the “image of the good woman as a docile figure whose sexuality is tamed, overpowered and eclipsed by conjugal fidelity” (Roy). In “Passion becomes piety”, she presents the reinterpretation of the myth of Andal who was the 19th-century Vaishnava saint and a poet of the Bhakti Movement from south India. “Andal’s devotion is so deep that she asks to be married to Ranganatha, a form of Vishnu at Srirangam when she grows up. Upon marriage, she merges completely with her beloved deity, leaving no traces behind” (Kannan). Meena Kandasamy questions her elevation and sublimation through marriage as she considers it a kind of “murder” and “execution” of female sexuality and autonomy. Under the façade of spirituality, this marriage is a punishment for her unchecked love, potent sexuality, and moral transgression, as ensured by the champions of patriarchy.

They sent her packing to spend time with him

Murder as marriage, execution consummation (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 42).

Poems like “Big Brother: An epic in eighteen episodes”, “Traitor”, “Princess-in-exile” and “Random access man” provide alternative interpretations of Ramayana and Mahabharata from a radical standpoint. Meena Kandasamy challenges the traditionally romantic images of its major characters like Rama, Pandavas, Sita, Draupadi, and Lakshmana and the demonized representation of Ravana, and Shooparnkha. Yudhishtir is portrayed as a “gaming guy” with no trace of dharma in his character and his wife Draupadi as “a stripper queen”. Kandasamy’s modern-day Shooparnkha is delineated as a sexually victimized widow who is “ordered to exist in erasures” (58) by the patriarchal society. She is kept as a mistress by two married men named Aman and Xman, residing in the north. She is humiliated, tortured, disfigured, and asexualized by these two men when she seeks to assert her agency.

The married man, the taller one, smelt something fishy.

Bigamy and a phobia of bickering wives made him plot.

He crafted it with gags, cuffs, chains, knives, harnesses.

Flattened, her protrusions torn away: ears, nose, breasts.

they told the world she was sharp-clawed

long-nosed, big-buddha-eared, pot-bellied, cross-eyed,

with a potato-peeler voice, and a neck that grew at night (58).

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

Meena Kandasamy seeks to subvert and dismantle the patriarchal concept of ideal femininity, purity, and submissiveness as represented by the symbol of Sita. She contests the devaluation of the female body and the denial of agency to women by patriarchal institutions. Rooted in radical feminism, these poems shatter the discourse of androcentric morality and sexuality as propagated by the texts of mainstream media. Sita is portrayed as a free, autonomous, and self-conscious woman in her alternative version. Her character is marked with defiant sexuality and a strong sense of emancipation.

Scorned, she sought refuge in spirituality,

And was carried away by a new-age guru

With saffron clothes and caramel words.

Years later, her husband won her back

But by then, she was adept at walkouts,

She had perfected the vanishing act (Kandasamy, Ms Militancy 45).

To conclude, Meena Kandasamy appears as an angry voice of radical feminism in her discourse of resistance and subversion. In all her poems, she fearlessly attacks and resists the power dynamics of patriarchal society. The “fiercely biased view of patriarchy which has hitherto silenced women from expressing their stark resentment towards prevalent ideologies is challenged by each of Kandasamy’s female protagonists in the poems of Ms. Militancy” (Jacob). She blasts traditionally cherished notions of chastity, purity, morality, and ideals of femininity. To expose and subvert the traditional images and discriminatory tales of feminine submissiveness passivity and subordination, she presents equally powerful images of women’s emancipation and deliverance. She also “subverts the mythical representation of women by crushing the veil of veneration and pseudo honor bestowed upon them and contests the air of godliness and piousness associated with Sita and Draupadi” (Gurwara). For every patriarchal narrative of controlling women’s bodies in the name of the diktats of scriptures and ancient myths, she gives a counter-narrative supported by the re-readings and re-interpretation of the mainstream cultural texts that undermine the agency, autonomy, and sexuality of underprivileged women. In one of her interviews, she acknowledges that: -

...the idea of women being passive receptacles of men’s passion happens to be the normative idea of sex in our culture – it becomes important for women to claim autonomy over their bodies, to talk about their pleasure, to talk about their rights. When oppression seems to be built on the edifice of controlling women’s bodies, I think dismantling oppression has to begin there too (Kandasamy, Interview: Meena Kandasamy on Writing About Marital Violence).

Author Name: SASHI BHUSHAN

Received Date: 23.07.2024

Publication Date: 31.07.2024

While seeking to dismantle the apparatus of oppression, her poetry insists upon the flamboyant assertion of female agency and sexuality. It aspires to bring an alternative discourse against the “normalized hegemonic discourses” (K.M. 333). Her verse provides a voice to the silenced women destined to live on the fringes. It chronicles their anxieties, sufferings, and exploitation. Questioning the notion of cultural supremacy propagated by the champions of patriarchy, she chooses to take a stand for the “gendered subalterns” with enviable intensity. She uses her poetry as a means of violent resistance and protest against the deeply ingrained system of gender discrimination, deprivation, and subjugation. Her poems target the hostile and hypocritical society that enables the perpetrators to victimize underprivileged women with impunity. The uniqueness and strength of poetry lie in the deconstruction and reconstruction of mainstream literary texts and myths. Her portrayal of female figures symbolizes a kind of feminist revolt. Thus, “active resistance or revolutionary activism is the core theme of Kandasamy’s raw and outrightly unbridled poetry” (Jacob).

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