

**INTERROGATING RELIGION AND HISTORY FOR  
DISMANTLING HINDU CULTURAL 'POLITICS': A STUDY OF  
THE SELECTED POEMS BY MEENA KANDASAMY**

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**Abstract**

*The poems of MeenaKandasamy are unmistakably marked by a spirit of anger and dissatisfaction with the existing Hindu/ Brahminical aesthetics because it is fraught with the 'politics' of misrepresentation, underrepresentation and marginalisation. From the time immemorial Dalit literature, though it possessed the basic humanistic and aesthetic values, had been subordinated to the mainstream Hindu/ Brahminic cultural and literary values. MeenaKandasamy, a young, belligerent poet from the Tamil Dalit community, interrogates the validity of the mainstream culture – especially its religion and history – which had devalued and dehumanized the status of the Dalits in India. The author concentrates on some selected poems from MeenaKandasamy's Touch (2006) and adopts the method of textual and inter-textual analysis and a close analysis of socio-historical factors to show how the poet strives to formulate an alternative discourse by dismantling the existing hierarchies and revealing the 'politics' of the elite Hindus through the interrogation of religion and history.*

**Keywords: MeenaKandasamy, Dalit, religion, history, protest.**

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Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change...

*Arjun Dangle, Poisoned Bread*

Dalits are not born as Dalits; rather they are made by the existing elite Hindu cultural and ideological conventions. Though the Dalits are known by the various nomenclatures by diverse persons and authorities, the word 'Dalit' is believed to have been derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal' which literally means broken or split or downtrodden or shattered. So the Dalits refer to those sections of the society which hierarchically belong to the lowest strata of a caste-ridden Hindu society. Hence, it is obvious why the Dalits are denied a voice, agency or even subjectivity from the time immemorial. The term 'Dalit' is therefore loaded with the connotations of derision, hatred and pollution. As Eleanor Zelliott writes: 'In the term and concept Dalit itself there is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the karma theory that justifies the caste hierarchy.'<sup>1</sup> (qtd. in Rakesh 216) Dalits are therefore the victims of social oppression, economic exploitation, cultural segregation by not only the predominant Hindu caste but by the State itself. Though the Indian Constitution, by virtue of its being an avowedly welfare state based on the socialistic principles of equality, justice and liberty, officially recognizes the dignity and equal status of the Dalits along with the people of the other communities; but actually what happens is that the upper-class members of the country occupy the state power to continue the saga of social discrimination in the name of democracy and socialism.

It is undeniable that the Dalits have been most brutally tortured and exploited in the physical and external spheres. They have been forced to practice all sorts of dirty jobs, physically strenuous and mentally humiliating activities as they belonged to the lowest stratum of the four-fold *varnashram* system prescribed by the Hindu law-giver Manu. But cultural and intellectual sorts of marginalization are much more subtle and harmful than the physical exploitation for a community, because the impact of physical exploitation is temporary but the impact of the cultural and intellectual domination are permanent. The Dalits have either been

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misrepresented or underrepresented by the elite Hindus/ Brahmins in the history. Since writing of history was a conscious project on the part of the upper-class Hindus, they purposefully underrepresented the contributions of the Dalits for the perpetuation of the hegemonic structure of the Indian society. The Dalits have simply been 'de-historicised'; there had hardly been any attempt to evaluate objectively the real contributions of the Dalits in the Indian history, which may bring out the historical 'subconscious' and reveal the 'politics' of the upper-class Hindu community. Thus 'history-within-history', 'nation-within-nation' is formed that remains silent to be revealed through the writings of the literary historians.

Religion is another most potent cultural weapon that destroys all other minor religious communities to establish the supremacy of the dominant religion. For example, the very concept of *varnashram* and 'Shudras' had been preached by the *Rig Veda*, the ancient religious text of the Aryans. In the *Purusukta* of *Rig Veda* we find the first reference of the caste system. The hymn describes:

*Brahmnoasyamukhamasit*

*BahuRajanayahkruta*

*UruTadasayaYadvaishya*

*PadabhyamSudro ajayat.*<sup>2</sup>

(X 90-12)

Dalits do not believe in Hindu God, Holy Books and other religious dogmas like Rebirth, Soul, Fate, Heaven etc. because these religious books and religious dogmas have collectively preached the message of separatism and these have made them slaves to the Hindus. So Mulk Raj Anand rightly says: 'The outcastes are crying against deaf gods, questioning God Brahman Himself. And their despair asserts itself in ringing triumphs of throwing off the yoke.'<sup>3</sup> (xiv) The Dalit writers are up in arms against the religious taboos and social injunctions that spread the seeds of social discrimination to herald the dawn of a new society based on fundamental human rights and dignity for the establishment of real democracy.

The Dalit writers are well aware of the fact that for the establishment of the democratic values in the Indian context what is urgently needed is the annihilation of the existing hierarchies that work as the most potent obstacle on their way to the realization of human dignity and equality in the society. It is in this way that the 'politics' of the upper-caste Hindus can be exposed at best. 'Politics' here obviously has been referred to in the negative sense to denote the mean and unjust manipulation of power for the achievement of some objectives. So Dalits are the victims of mean upper-caste Hindu 'politics'. But they do not passively receive their lot; they assert themselves by resisting to all sorts of corrosive influences and strive to revive the lost history. A special area of research, namely the Subaltern Studies headed by such renowned scholars like SumitSarkar, ParthaChatterjee, and many others, had developed to

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assess the contribution of the Dalits or the subalterns to the Indian national history or in other words, to revive the 'lost' history.

MeenaKandasamy's poems in *Touch* are an expression of anguish and trauma of a community that had been unjustly humiliated, exploited, excommunicated and marginalised for ages in the caste-ridden Hindu society. And hence, her poems are marked by a fiery spirit of protest and defiance. In fact, her poems are part of protest literature of the Dalits that faithfully mirrors the stark realities of the Dalit situation and becomes a potent weapon to bring about a change the universally degenerate conditions of the Dalits. As Limbale has put it, Dalit literature is 'purposive'; it is revolutionary, transformatory and liberational. To Kandasamy, artists or writers are the most vital agencies to bring about the regeneration of a stale society. She believes that the artists or writers must have some obligations to the society. She is not an advocate of 'art for art's sake' theory weaving the fictional tales by sitting on the ivory tower; rather, she is an advocate of 'art for life's sake' dogma, committed to the welfare of her society.

The very first poem in Kandasamy's volume *Touch* entitled 'Lines addressed to a warrior' is as much a castigation of the historical process of colonialism by the Europeans as by the upper-caste Hindus in the form of parody. Apparently, it is an open invitation to inaugurate the formal procedures of colonization; but in reality, Kandasamy launches an indirect attack to the colonizers who have exploited them by all means – physically, socially, economically, culturally and intellectually. The very tone of the poem is mocking as well as sarcastic as it revokes the pathetic history of colonial subjugation:

come.

colonize me.

creep into the hollows

of my landscape ...

ignore the sand-brown

of my skin ...

so script your stories here.<sup>4</sup> (13)

The poem also alludes to the sad story of Aryan invasion to India, which led to the defeat of the non-Aryans or the Indian aborigines to introduce a new history in the Indian subcontinent. The Dalits have subsequently been colonized by the Hindus and by the Europeans; but what is most stunning fact is that they have been more affected by the 'internal imperialism' of the Hindus than by the external domination of the British. The whole enterprise of the Hindu colonialism was directed at the domination of the mental universe of the Dalits through the 'under representation', so that the Dalits internalized their downtrodden status. This was a deliberate effort at silencing the Dalit voice by the hegemonic strategies which are savagely criticised by Kandasamy. In another very short poem 'Fleeting' the poet brings out the paradox of the Dalit

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conditions where the Dalits can remember the perennial curse of casteism even though they cannot remember their 'lost' history, because it has been entrenched so deeply in their psyche that the loss of so many generations cannot remove the black spot of history from their memory:

Our history is lost,

perhaps destroyed

And efforts at recollection

Entail in melancholy...

Caste perennially remains

a scheming bulldozer

Crushing only the Dalit –

And renewing, revoking our bitter past...

But when can we get to live our lives in retrospect?<sup>5</sup> (47)

So the Dalits are continually haunted by an urge to revive their glorious history by forgetting the pitiable phase of Hindu domination.

But in her attempt to formulate an alternative discourse through the criticism of Indian history Kandasamy directs her most savage castigation at the so-called 'father of the nation', Mahatma Gandhi in her Sylvia Plath –inspired but controversial poem 'Mohandas Karamchand'. The words of Albert Einstein which have been used as the epigraph of the poem are there more for mocking at the fabricated image of Gandhi among the Indian populace than for paying homage to the tradition that attributes Gandhi the status of a demi-god. The poem begins dramatically:

Who? Who? Who?

*Mahatma.* Sorry no.

*Truth.* Non-violence.

Stop it. Enough taboo.<sup>6</sup> (54)

The image of Gandhi as a preacher of the dogma of Non-violence is nothing but a 'trash'; and what she demands is a 'thorough review' of Gandhi. He dubbed the Dalits 'pariahs' or 'Harijans' which are similar to calling their names since he knew that 'Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go'. Then comes the most controversial but courageous declaration 'Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you'. This is how Kandasamy challenges the dominant historiography that silences the

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voice of the subalterns for establishing an authoritarian or hegemonic structure even within the periphery of the greatest democracy of the world.

Religion is another potent cultural force that took part in suppressing the Dalit community. The Hindu religious texts are composed by the Brahmins who continue their domination over the Dalits not only through the rituals but also through the sacredness of the 'holy' texts composed in Sanskrit language that is beyond the understanding of the Dalits. Hence the Hindu ritualistic religion and its corrupted practices are criticised with caustic remarks and mockery by the poet with the purpose of removing the age-old aura attached with the religion. The anthropomorphic imagination of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses by the Brahmins is ridiculed by Kandasamy in her poem 'The gods wake up':

Another worst things with the Gods is that

They sleep most of the time -

(they don't even dream).

If you happen to go near heaven:

It is a very noisy boring place.

And all that you get to hear there are -

Thirty three million synchronized godly snores.

(The Goddesses snore too)...

Also "Om" is now obsolete -

a kind of recurring mosquito buzz.

(Besides, Om is ©copyrighted).<sup>7</sup> (73)

For Kandasamy the concept of 'Dharma' is absurd and meaningless because 'Dharma is a bastard' and so also is the concept of justice. The Indian civilization is known through Hindu scripture which was earlier known as the Aryan scriptures, i.e., *Vedas, Upanishads, Samhitas, SmritisPuranas* and some other reliable sources. The Dalits have been refused the value of equality, freedom, fraternity and justice, have been made to lead an animal and inhuman existence in the name of god, religion, virtue and other means of bookish knowledge and so they have been the most miserable victims of humiliation from the time immemorial. Thus, for centuries, the Dalits had to follow the laws of Manu who divided the Hindu society into four hierarchical caste groups: Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras. Beyond this fourfold structure, there is a category of ati-shudras or 'dalits', which is forced to occupy the lowest position in this abhorrent social order. Manu had allotted all dirty works to the Dalits. They were leather workers, scavengers, sweepers etc. The high-caste Hindus always treated them as dirty, wrongdoers, sinful and worthless beings. So one of the chief reasons of why the

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Dalitshave so degrading a social position is the dictate of Manu. Manu, the Hindu law-giver is therefore the object of criticism in one of Kandasamy's poems 'Born of no placenta':

I will tell you what these old, sacred texts say

And I will begin at the beginning, here we go:

Manu was the progenitor of mankind.

But Manu didn't mean man (a downright absurd guess)...

Manu was Suyambhu: the self-existent

He was the father of the five tribes and the races of men...<sup>8</sup> (134)

The poem is a narrative one and through the rest of the poem the poet narrates the story of creation of the human race, and thus reveals and ridicules the absurdity of the Brahminic religious texts.

Criticism of mainstream history and the dominant Hindu religion is the persistent theme of Kandasamy. But this is done with an objective of eradication of the social injustice and inequality that dehumanise and dehistoricise the subalterns. Her poems are polemical by nature and are marked by a belligerent spirit of striking at the root of social evil for the establishment of a casteless, classless, socialistic country based on fundamental human values, cultural tolerance and spiritual enlightenment. Though the excessive concern for social justice and the theme of marginalisation occasionally mar the aesthetic qualities of her poems, still it can fairly be said that her poems succeed in creating a niche for themselves in Indian English literature as protest literature.

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