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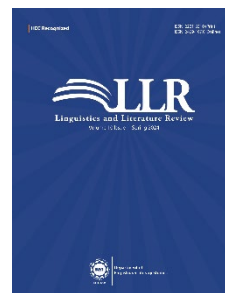
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Voices of Defiance: Unveiling Dalit Consciousness in Meena Kandasamy's Selected Poems

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Abstract

The paper aims to examine the caste-based racism rooted in Hindu society that perpetuates Dalit agony while also exploring the emergence of resistance through a critical analysis of Meena Kandasamy's selected poems. The poems are taken from Kandasamy's poetry collection *Touch*, and include 'Another Paradise Lost', 'Shame', 'Liquid Tragedy', 'Prayers', 'We Will Rebuild the Worlds', and 'Dignity'. Kandasamy's poetry criticizes how doctrines of Hinduism, specifically the notion of Karma, have traditionally rationalized the caste system by marginalizing individuals and depriving them of basic human rights. Using the qualitative research approach, the paper employs textual and contextual analysis to examine how Kandasamy's poetry depicts the terrible realities faced by the Dalit community, exposing how oppressive institutions are rooted and sustained through religious and cultural customs. The poems under analysis portray the various sufferings of Dalit individuals, mainly focused on women, which are backed by the religious doctrine of Karma. Furthermore, these poems document the emergence of a collective resilience, particularly among Dalit women, who emerge as key actors in the struggle against casteism. The study aims to understand how Kandasamy portrays the fury and resistance of Dalits, reflecting a shift from painful suffering to active rejection of the discriminatory beliefs of religion and tradition. Through the idea of Dalit consciousness, the paper seeks to examine the evolution of Dalit identity, focusing on how literature can serve as both an expression of resistance, rejection of unjustifiable doctrines, and a demand to the disintegration of established societal hierarchies.

Keywords: Dalit consciousness, Dalit literature, discrimination, Meena Kandasamy, touch

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Introduction

Casteism has deep historical roots in an Indian society, where hierarchal divisions perpetuated by the religious notion of ‘Karma’ have impacted social and political life for centuries. Hinduism’s ‘Varna’ system splits society into various social classes and places Dalits at the lowest of this inflexible hierarchy, where they have endured centuries of alienation, exploitation, and contempt. These layers of bigotry have deprived Dalits of basic human rights, opportunities, and a sense of identity, as Ambedkar (1989) states, “One of the harshest forms of hierarchical social structure that human society has ever experienced is caste-based institutions” (p. 22). However, in recent decades, Dalit consciousness has become an effective resistance, constantly challenging these inequalities and transforming their place in Indian society.

Literature has played a key role in enhancing the Dalit voices, illuminating the bleak reality of caste-based discrimination promoting the need for social reform. One such voice belongs to Meena Kandasamy, a well-known Dalit literary author and social activist. The themes of casteism, social exclusion, and gender inequality feature in her writings, notably her poetry. In her most famous collection of poems *Touch*, Kandasamy criticizes religious beliefs of casteism, along with portraying the sufferings of her community, and resistance. Karthika (2024) states, “She uses language as a means of resistance and proclaims a revolution through poetry. To Kandasamy, a real poet can never escape his/her politics” (p. 3). Kandasamy’s *Touch* is a collection of eighty short and long poems and is regarded as a new groundwork for opposition and insurrection literature. Representing her community, her poems depict the anger towards the ‘Varna’ system of their religion, along with physical and psychological pains, while illustrating the shift in Dalit identity, from ignorance to a strong opposition of social injustice.

The paper aims to critically analyze Kandasamy’s selected poems from *Touch* through the perspective of Dalit consciousness. Dalit consciousness symbolizes the pursuit of fundamental rights and dignity among the members of an untouchable class of Indian society, as well as the quest for individuality on both personal as well as social levels. The poems selected for analysis include, ‘Another Paradise Lost’, ‘Liquid Tragedy’, ‘Prayers’, ‘Shame’, ‘Dignity’, and ‘We Will Rebuild the Worlds’. Kandasamy’s poetry is chosen for this paper because she is a member of the Dalit

community, who bluntly rejects the caste notions of religion and recollects the real events of the miseries endured by members of her community. The research seeks to address the following research questions.

- How does Meena Kandasamy portray religion as the root cause of caste-based discrimination in her poetry?
- How does Meena Kandasamy depict the sufferings of Dalits, articulating her resistance to social injustice, while envisioning hope for a more equitable future through her poetry?

The significance of the research lies in its exploration of how poetry serves as a mode for marginalized communities to proclaim their identities and recover their narratives. It explores the evolving form of Dalit resilience in contemporary India through a critical analysis of Kandasamy's selected poems. Kandasamy's poetry not only exposes the brutalities of the caste system but also glorifies the emergence of a strong Dalit identity that resists these deeply ingrained societal norms. Moreover, the research contributes to understanding challenges and oppression brought about by caste, race, and class differences, motivating individuals to advocate for underprivileged communities and promote equality.

Literature Review

The intersection of identity, caste, and defiance has been extensively studied in postcolonial and Dalit literature, where the struggles of underprivileged communities are frequently discussed. Meena Kandasamy's literary works play a vital role in conveying the complexity of Dalit identity, caste suppression, and the emergence of resilience.

The caste system, which is profoundly embedded in the religious doctrines of Hinduism, has long been a cause of conflict and marginalization in Indian society. Gopal Guru (2009) has extensively studied the socio-political consequences of the caste system, stressing the ways through which Hinduism's ideological foundation, particularly the doctrine of 'Karma' legitimizes caste-based discrimination. Guru (2009) says that caste hierarchies shape both individual identities as well as social relationships, subjecting Dalits to systemic alienation and dehumanization (p. 45). Guru perceived oppressive systems such as caste, and Brahmanism as manifestations of a brutal 'survival of fittest' attitude that merged well with the ideas of self-serving individualism, and neo-liberalism. Like the

Hobbesian self looks to cultivate and preserve itself through the *Leviathan*, or, in Nietzschean terms, through the *Übermensch* as noted by Guru (2009), “Brahmin hood for Guru seeks to secure itself through *Sanskritization*” (p. 51). The practical, self-serving nature of Brahmin hood rejects the struggle of a lower class to have a principle of equality.

Dalit literature, as a critical counter-narrative has developed to be an effective means for illustrating the collective psychology of a community whose voice has been silenced. Kandasamy’s literary works evoke resistance by depicting both the distress of oppression and the power found in the opposition. Several Indian female writers are making significant gains in English literature as Sangeetha et al. (2022) argue, “Indian female authors are introducing readers to domestic Indian issues along with incorporating intense feminist perspectives” (p. 342). Writing enables marginalized individuals to establish their identities by articulating themselves honestly and claiming their independence. M. Kandasamy (personal communication, 12 November, 2015) says, “The first powerful tool used by the weak is language, which can cause conflict, expose flaws, and force people to pick sides. It is an essential tool for interaction and communication”. Poets like Kandasamy have taken a chance of inventing a female language through poetry to create their unique voice. Sarangi (2011) argues that Kandasamy’s self-expressive poetry offers expressions to overlooked or suppressed emotions, giving a voice to genuine feelings. Sangeetha et al. (2022) claim that In her writings, Kandasamy challenges traditional portrayals of historical figures by questioning the belief that Draupadi and Sita were virgins and purely pious. Kandasamy reimagines these historical female characters not as ‘gendered subalterns’ but frames them as rebels and free thinkers. Because of this change, they are now seen as fresh voices from the periphery of society, where language is always changing. It portrays the collective psyche of a class whose opinions and emotions have been silenced for most of history.

Critics suggest that various approaches have been designed to evaluate the aesthetic value of literature composed by authors across the globe. Soumya (2021) addresses the issue regarding the aesthetic value of literature in her studies by pointing out the poetry of Kandasamy. Well-known Indian scholars and intellectuals have rejected Dalit literature as literature, arguing that Dalit works are not of a literary standard (Soumya, 2021, p. 518). Soumya (2021) rejects the claim by asserting that the poetry

of Kandasamy incorporates themes of rebellion and fury which are aesthetic in their sense. Outlining the reasons why Dalit literature is deemed unaesthetic and criticising scholars who claim so, Gupta (2022) states, “Rather than praising the legends of ancient emperors, queens, beauty, and glory, Dalit writers concentrate on the lives of abused individuals and untouchables” (*New York Times*). Kandasamy rarely makes use of imagination in her poetry, as Dalit literature tends to address contemporary social issues. Das maintains that Kandasamy sees the evolution of her poetry as a way towards accepting self, which she proudly defines as her ‘womanness, tamilness, and outcasteness’ (n.d). Kandasamy has a sociological perspective on what it means to be a woman in a society that is obsessed with casteism and social division.

While scholars have analyzed the contributions Meena Kandasamy makes to Dalit literature in terms of caste, gender, violence, and other forms of socio-political resistance, most of the research approaches her work either from the broad lens of oppression or aesthetic critique. A stark, uncharted gap exists regarding the context and the corpus of Kandasamy's poetry, particularly her dismantling of Hindu doctrines of Karma and Varna as systems of ideological caste oppression. Additionally, there is little focus on the developing of a poetic discourse from the perspective of a female, voicing a collective Dalit identity. This gap is addressed in the present study by conducting a close reading of selected poems from *Touch*, focusing on how Kandasamy constructs and defends her identity and integrates dignity that is reserved for upper caste individuals in the hierarchically ordered Indian society.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employs the method of qualitative research to critically analyze the selected poems of Meena Kandasamy. This method allows for an in-depth analysis of emotions and experiences expressed in Kandasamy's poems. The research adopts the approach of textual and contextual analysis of selected poems, which is quite well-suited for literary studies, as it enables the critical reading of the text, providing both explicit as well as implicit connotations.

Source of Data

Kandasamy's poetry collection *Touch* acts as a primary source of data for the paper. Six poems illustrating different dimensions have been selected, which include 'Another Paradise Lost', 'Prayers', 'Dignity', 'Liquid Tragedy', 'Shame', and 'We Will Rebuild the World'. These poems are selected because they illustrate religion as the prime cause of caste discrimination, the sufferings endured by the Dalits, and the evolution of resistance. Moreover, secondary sources such as research articles, books, electronic sources, interviews, websites, and blogs have also been consulted to enhance comprehension about class division, Dalit identity, and literature and to support the analysis with external opinions and frameworks.

Data Collection

The data for this research is collected through purposive sampling and focuses on a close reading of selected poems from Meena Kandasamy's poetry collection, *Touch* (2006). The selected poems—Another Paradise Lost, Prayers, Dignity, Liquid Tragedy, Shame, and We Will Rebuild the World—are chosen for their explicit engagement with themes of caste-based oppression, resistance, and identity reconstruction, particularly from a Dalit and feminist perspective. These poems serve as the primary data for both textual and contextual analysis.

In addition to the primary texts, secondary data is gathered from scholarly articles, books, interviews, and credible digital platforms that provide critical insights into Dalit literature, postcolonial theory, caste discrimination, and Kandasamy's literary activism. These sources are essential for contextualizing the poems and enhancing the theoretical foundation of the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive framework by utilizing theoretical perspectives from postcolonial studies to analyze themes of casteism, identity, and resistance in Meena Kandasamy's poetry. By drawing on key concepts, the study places Kandasamy's work within broader discourses of marginality and social justice, with textual analysis as the primary methodological approach. Although primarily grounded in critiquing Western attitudes, postcolonial theory provides a fundamental foundation for exploring Dalit voices' marginalization in Indian society. Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her essay "Can Subaltern Speak?" discusses how

colonial systems maintain social and cultural hierarchies, a concept relevant to examining casteism in India. Spivak's idea of 'Subaltern' is particularly relevant because it addresses communities and groups that are politically, socially, and geographically outside mainstream power structures (Spivak, 1988, p. 283). Dalits are often relegated to subaltern status, with limited social, political, and economic power. Spivak (1988) raises concerns about the ability of subalterns to 'speak' or about the systematic silencing of their voices in discourse, which aligns with Kandasamy's effort to give Dalit voices a platform through poetry.

Building on Spivak's concept of the subaltern, this study explores how Meena Kandasamy's poetry actively challenges the silencing mechanisms that have historically excluded Dalit voices from mainstream discourse. Spivak states, "The subaltern cannot speak" (1988, p. 287), implying that marginalized groups are systematically denied the ability to represent themselves within existing power structures. Kandasamy's poetry directly counters this silence by creating a literary space where Dalit identity, suffering, and resistance are not only expressed but take center stage. Her bold tone and unwavering depiction of caste violence push back against what Spivak terms the "epistemic violence" (1988, p. 280) of colonial and upper-caste narratives, which often distort or ignore subaltern experiences. Therefore, Kandasamy's work can be viewed as an intervention that challenges Spivak's assertion—not to disprove it, but to show how art can serve as a platform for the subaltern to begin to be heard, even if being fully understood within dominant frameworks remains elusive.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on publicly available literary texts and scholarly sources, thus involving no human participants. All materials are properly cited to maintain academic integrity and prevent plagiarism. The research addresses themes of caste and marginalization with cultural sensitivity and respect, ensuring that Dalit voices are represented ethically and accurately.

Data Analysis

Religious Doctrine Promoting Caste-Based Discrimination

Religion has greatly shaped and influenced human societies for ages. Hinduism with its doctrine of 'Karma' has played a significant role in legitimizing and sustaining caste-based hierarchies. Spivak's (1988) concept of 'Subaltern' can be conflated to comprehend Kandasamy's voice

as a representation of marginalized untouchables, whose protest and resistance are systematically silenced by the dominant social and theological structures. Gupta (2000) says, “The social stratification reflects a particular sort of discrimination that is hierarchical, normalized, and essentially justified by Hindu religious doctrine” (p. 144). This concept is central in Kandasamy’s *Touch* as many poems depict that casteism is not a sociological construction, but rather divinely sanctioned. She reflects on the fact that theological framework is used to preserve the interests of dominating classes, establishing a system in which questioning casteism is considered blasphemous. Kandasamy highlights this notion in her poem ‘Another Paradise Lost’, which, though, adapts idea from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, reframes it through the lens of Hinduism to illustrate the agony of caste oppression. The poetess creates a serpent figure in the poem that narrates the story of disobedience and consequent punishment, exemplifying Dalit consciousness rejecting caste-based discrimination. Spivak famously asks, “Can subaltern speak?” (p. 283). The snake formerly, a noble king, cherished in both earthly and divine realms, was exiled from paradise for questioning casteism before gods and advocating for equality. Casteism perpetuates a form of internal colonialism where the repressed are conditioned to acknowledge their subjugation as divinely ordained. Colonialism goes beyond simply enslaving individuals and eliminating all thought and meaning from their psyche. By a kind of perverted knowledge, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it (Fanon, 1963, p. 210). The transformation of the monarch into a vile creature in the form of a serpent for daring to question systematic caste discrimination mirrors that protest against oppressive structures, which often results in dehumanization.

Kandasamy critically portrays how any initiative to defy the caste system is treated with violent suppression, preserving the unyielding hold of religiously sanctioned social inequality, as maintained by Spivak (1988), “Subaltern cannot speak” (p.283). According to Spivak (1988), epistemic violence and discrimination operate through the erasure of alternative knowledge systems that may challenge its legitimacy. The system of control is depicted in the following lines, “I wanted to know why caste was there, why people suffered because of their karmas / I asked them what would happen if a high-born did manual work just like low-born” (Kandasamy, 2006, Lines 56–58). Through the voice of the serpent, Kandasamy represents the Dalit community, directly criticizing the logic of caste

division and seeking accountability from the divine. The questioning of 'Karma' and 'Casteism' by the serpent illustrates an attempt to disrupt the dominant epistemic framework that legitimizes inequality. These lines not only call into doubt the religious doctrine of casteism but also highlight how these teachings degrade lower-caste individuals by depriving them of opportunities based on their birth. Kandasamy's employment of inquiry format is significant because it illustrates the aggressiveness of Dalit voices who refuse to accept the religious theory of caste division. However, punishment represents the harsh suppression of such counter-narratives as Foucault (1976) maintains that 'power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away' (p. 94). Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. The caste system, as illustrated by Kandasamy is maintained by knowledge control and anyone who challenges it is labeled as blasphemous, and is punished, ensuring the dominance of upper-caste ideologies.

Kandasamy offers a powerful critique of religious doctrine that perpetuates caste prejudice, portraying a society in which caste-based duties are assigned at birth rather than based on merit or ability. Through the voice of the serpent, Kandasamy pleads to the Gods for equality, contemplating about duties being determined by birth status – a critique that exposes the rigidity of the upper caste in perceiving their privileged duties as natural rights. Spivak's (1990) notion of strategic essentialism can comprehend the serpent's voice as an illustration of resistance by the Dalit community. Ambedkar states, "The class system ultimately fosters merely non-social groupings, but the caste system generates social groups which are anti-social" (qtd. in Hiwrale, 2020, p. 84). The snake challenges the divine authority and asks why caste even exists and why people suffer because of their 'Karma' as in lines, "I wanted to know why people suffer because of their karmas / The Gods plotted against me decided that I was trouble / I was cursed to turn into a vile snake" (Kandasamy, 2006, Lines 56–63). These lines highlight how questioning caste orthodoxy and demand for equality is perceived as rebellion and inexpressible sin in the eyes of Hindu Gods as Spivak (1990) argues, "I think it's absolutely on the target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism.... But strategically we cannot" (p. 11). Spivak critiques essentialism for oversimplifying identities but argues that oppressed groups may temporarily adopt a collective identity to fight injustice effectively. As though, the individual identity of the

serpent is erased, but its collective voice serves as a strategic way to challenge the dominant ideology of caste-based segregation.

Kandasamy enhances her critique by presenting the separation in worship settings in the poem 'Prayers', with the portrayal of separate temples for each caste, emphasizing the social alienation of Dalits. Spivak (1988) says that the "subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic" (p. 104), highlighting that Dalits are constructed as 'other' within the caste system. Untouchables are not merely excluded from the physical spaces but also from the symbolic representation of divinity as "the very concept of representation is complicit with the project of domination" (Spivak, 1999, p. 255). As Kandasamy (2006) writes in 'Prayers', "He drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple / Sadly, of an Upper-caste God" (Lines 5-8). She alludes that caste hierarchy has even penetrated sacred places, with the Dalit community being banned from temples reserved for the upper caste groups of the Hindus. Arora (2020) says, "Hinduism not only decides on people's occupations based on Karma, but it also splits individuals in all aspects of life" (p. 357). Kandasamy's poems 'Another Paradise Lost' and 'Prayers', confronts the caste doctrine front on, revealing its role in sustaining injustice, under the pretext of spiritual authority. She inquires about the validity of such beliefs of a religion that bind an entire community to enslavement, ultimately arguing that such beliefs are inherently faulty because they contradict the very basic principle of equality and justice. Iqbal (2024) argues, "Other" must construct herself as an autonomous (speaking) subject by destabilizing those discourses that produced her" (p. 5). By portraying casteism as a phenomenon sanctioned by religion, Kandasamy encourages members of its community to recognize prejudice, defy such teachings, and invite society to rethink critically to form a system offering equality, justice, and freedom.

Sufferings Endured by Dalit Community

Spivak (1988) challenges the vagueness of Guha's definition of subalternity in an Indian context, asking whether it includes Muslims, Adivasis, Dalits, and impoverished classes. For millennia, Dalits have endured severe marginalization with caste prejudice transforming into institutionalized violence. Mahto (2015) argues, "Despite decades of independence, social equality remains elusive, leaving the disadvantaged to live a non-existent life" (p. 13–14). Kandasamy's poetry becomes an

effective medium for exposing the harsh realities of casteism by portraying the sufferings of Dalits. In the poem, 'Liquid Tragedy', Kandasamy recounts the Karamchedu Massacre of 1985 in Andhra Pradesh, in which six men of the Dalit community were brutally murdered, and three Dalit women were raped by the members of some upper caste. Through her lines, "Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit / Drinking Water for the Dalits / The very same Pond" (Kandasamy, [2006](#), Lines 1–3), Kandasamy conveys the contempt of upper caste for Dalits, whom they regard as unworthy of even basic common resources. Spivak's ([1999](#)) concept of epistemic violence "the violence done to the ways of knowing and being of the subaltern", is reflected here, as Dalits not only have restricted access to necessary resources but also are subjugated to the system that refuses to recognize their agony and humanity, "rendering them invisible or illegitimate within dominant discourses" (p. 255). It illustrates a deeply rooted dehumanization, in which caste hierarchy not only allows for violence but also determines who is deemed deserving of basic human necessities like clean water. The symbolic weight of water in these lines cannot be ignored, as the consumption of Dalit drinkable water to wash buffalos of the upper caste depicts the caste supremacy's unrestricted power, converting the basic necessity of life into a symbol of shame and exclusion. Can one imagine that the untouchables are bound to drink water from a pond where the upper caste men wash their buffaloes and these buffaloes urinate and release dung? But it's true in a caste-ridden Indian society (Mahto, [2015](#), p. 14). It also reveals how physical resources are weaponized to sustain rigid social orders that punish Dalits just for being participants of a hierarchy that locates them at the bottom.

Kandasamy's recount of the real-life Karamchedu incident enhances the examination of caste-based crimes, and her preference to compose poetry based on real events serves as a plea to be aware of the continuing implications of casteism. The scale of caste violence is further supported by the National Commission report, which recorded, a "Total of 98,349 occurrences of crimes against lower casts including 1660 killings and 2814 sexual assaults between the period of 1994 to 1996" (Hanchinamani, [2001](#), p. 15). This alarming figure highlights the continued brutality against Dalits, illustrating a social framework that permits violence to occur under the guise of religious doctrines and cultural norms. The incident of Karamchedu occurred because of the protest of Dalits against the immoral act of washing upper caste buffalos in the freshwater pond which was designated for Dalits.

The protest resulted in a tragic outcome in the form of brutal murders and rapes. Foucault's (1976) concept of biopower “the regulation of subjects through an explosion of various techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and control of population” (p. 140) is evident here as societal elites regulate the lives of Dalits through exclusion and violence, perpetuating their continued subjugation. Kandasamy (2006) further elaborates as,

A Bold Dalit lady dares
to question injustice.
Hits forth with her pot.
Her indignation
Is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes
Killings.... (Lines 5–9).

These lines vividly highlight the fact that though individuals of the Dalit community, particularly women dare to protest, it results in severe misery. As Rathi (2019) says, “Kandasamy in her writings outlines how authoritarian institutions focused on race, ethnicity, status, and gender continue to persist in contemporary Indian democracy” (p. 164). Kandasamy's poem questions whether it is moral to oppress those only protesting for their basic rights. Pointing towards the system, it critiques that despite India claiming the world's largest democracy, untouchables are suffering in the guise of religion and tradition. Kandasamy in her poem ‘Prayers’ portrays misery in the form of punishment. To chant prayers is the exclusive privilege of the upper castes and the Dalits die, due to devotion (Karthika, 2024). Her recounting of a fatal misery of an elderly Dalit man who accidentally enters the temple designated for the upper caste underscores the injustice as composed in lines, “An irked Rajput surged forth / and smote the untouchable with an iron rode / The warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate encroachment” (Kandasamy, 2006, Lines 14–16). These lines reveal the disturbing reality of casteism; to the member of an upper caste, the life of an untouchable is so worthless that they could be punished to death even for entering their temple, as Karthika (2024) maintains, “caste is one of the most ludicrous forms of discrimination and that casteism is a legitimate psychological disorder” (p. 4).

While all women face the constraints of patriarchy, Dalit women have to experience additional suffering because of their caste. Spivak (1988)

discusses the dual marginalization of subaltern women as noted, “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (p. 287). Kandasamy exposes the vulnerability of the women of her community to sexual violence in her poem ‘Shame’. As Kandasamy ([2006](#)) writes,

Pubic’s prying eyes

Segregate her – the victim

But the criminals have

Already mainstreamed

Their caste in a classical shield (Lines 1–9).

Kandasamy recounts the traumatic experience of a young Dalit girl who was subjected to mass rape by the men of the upper caste as Karthika ([2024](#)) notes, “a crime that her assailants did not care because of their status of caste, which shielded them from legal penalties”(p. 5) The girl traumatized by both rape and social disgrace, eventually commits suicide, as Soumya ([2021](#)) notes, “Dalit literature uncovers countless realities about the Dalit world, that have been suppressed and compelled to remain concealed” (p. 524). Even after enduring the assault, the girl is further marginalized, as society isolates her rather than holding the perpetrators accountable. This aligns with Spivak’s assertion that subaltern women do not have the space to narrate their suffering—their voices are erased, and their agency is denied. The girl’s suicide in *Shame* underscores Spivak’s argument that the subaltern woman is so deeply submerged in layers of oppression that she is effectively silenced, unable to seek justice or tell her own story, as noted by Mahto ([2015](#)) “The perennial oppression dehumanizes the downtrodden and transforms them into non-existent state” (p. 14). Kandasamy urges readers to acknowledge the ugly legacy of casteism that continues to plague modern Indian culture by depicting tragedies such as the Karamchedu massacre in ‘Liquid Tragedy’, violent intolerance in ‘Prayers’, and sexual assault in ‘Shame’.

These poems recount the past tragedies inflicted upon Dalits and critique the social systems that allow them to occur. Her poems convey that caste-based discrimination remains a powerful force, influencing social standards and punishing any attempts to defy or break free from these limitations. Kandasamy not only witnesses these social horrors, but also

criticizes a culture that maintains caste hierarchy, untouchability, gender inequality, and cultural imperialism.

Dalits' Reaction and Aspiration for a Better Future

Recognizing the extensively rooted inequalities and injustices within religion and society, the Dalit community has eventually come together to challenge discrimination, Spivak ([1990](#)) maintains “it’s absolutely on the target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism... but strategically we cannot” (p. 11), the idea that while essentialism (the belief that certain groups have fixed, inherent traits) is philosophically flawed and politically dangerous, marginalized groups may sometimes need to temporarily adopt simplified or unified identities to fight oppression or gain visibility in public discourse. This means that while essentialism (the idea that a group has a fixed identity) is theoretically problematic, marginalized communities may need to temporarily adopt a collective identity to resist oppression effectively. Dalit activists, in their distinct ways, have expressed their support for the rights of their community, and Kandasamy does so through the art of literature. Soumya ([2021](#)) argues, “Dalit writing is rebellious, and literature has been used as a tool to raise social awareness” (p. 525). Kandasamy in her poetry, harshly criticizes caste inequality and the unbearable sufferings of outcasts in Indian society. Her poems reject and criticize the rigid doctrine of ‘Karma’ that prevents untouchables from having basic human rights. Sangeetha et al. ([2022](#)) quote Kandasamy's comment about her poetry, “My poetry screams in agony, sobs irrationally, is open, and yells in wrath. My poems recall sacrifice and have a bloody odor. My poetry not only draws awareness for my community but also to my individuals” (p. 344). In the poem ‘We Will Rebuild the Worlds’, Kandasamy imagines a future in which untouchables overcome their subjugation and reconstruct their lives on their terms. Kandasamy ([2006](#)) writes the verse of defiance as,

We will learn how to fight.

With substantial spontaneity

So now upon a future time

There will be a revolution. (Lines 40–43)

These lines resonate with her hope that the time for Dalits to seize control of their destiny has arrived and she underlines the importance of

opposing casteism. Furthermore, she criticizes the failure of government initiatives taken to reduce caste discrimination, as Rathi (2019) states that the Indian government develops and implements social projects on paper but struggles to put them into action (p. 166). She warns the government and society to act against social injustices or face the possibility of an uprising which is slowly progressing in the collective psychology of the Dalit community. Resistance is further intensified in ‘Another Paradise Lost’ in which the poet defies the doctrine of ‘Karma’ by clearly mentioning it as rubbish. As in lines, “the snake said to me / Karma the whole stuff that follows it is just bunkum” (Kandasamy, 2006, Lines 24–25). The belief in ‘Karma’ is mentioned as rubbish, and it portrays the courage of the poet to defy religious notion that brings suffering to humanity.

Aside from her fierce resistance, Kandasamy being loyal to her community extends an appeal to the educated upper class and encourages them to show empathy toward untouchables. This appeal reflects a dual approach in her activism as she aims to alter the established views of people at the top of society, while continuously promoting Dalit empowerment. Kandasamy understands the fact that deeply rooted social and religious prejudices cannot be dismissed at once, so she opts for a strategy that balances her call for resistance with a plea for empathy. In her poem, ‘Dignity’, the poet conveys this emotion, asking the privileged to recognize and respect the inherent worth of all individuals as Kandasamy (2006) writes,

We will even let you wallow
in the rare happiness
that hierarchy provides
But don’t suppress
our rightful share of dignity (Lines 13–17).

Kandasamy recognizes that hierarchy surely provides satisfaction to the privileged people, but she insists that this must not come at the cost of Dalit dignity. She calls for compassion, requesting that respect and appreciation be allowed within the limitations of caste division. These lines reveal that radical shifts in rigid beliefs require empathy, patience, and gradual change. Though the Dalit community, which is gradually moving towards resistance can fight for its rights, transformation is also needed from the upper caste

to avoid a bloody revolution. Kandasamy's poetry calls not only for resistance but also for shared humanity, in which dignity and self-respect can prosper even across cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

The analysis of the selected poems from Meena Kandasamy's *Touch* underscores her powerful and transformative contribution to Dalit literature, marking a significant intervention in the discourse on caste, resistance, and identity. Kandasamy's strong and vivid poetry gives voice to the untouchables of India, opposing religious doctrines that maintain caste-based divisions. The paper concludes that the religious doctrine of 'Varna' in Hinduism plays a crucial role in perpetuating and maintaining caste hierarchy within Indian society. This system has empowered the upper caste to seize control of social as well as administrative domains while exploiting outcasts. Kandasamy's poems illustrate caste-based discrimination in every aspect of life, from basic resources to social places. Furthermore, it exposes the painful experiences of the Dalit community in the form of murders, rapes, and humiliation. Kandasamy's poetry not only exposes the inhumane treatment of Dalits for centuries but also gives voice to their resilience, determination, and emerging consciousness. The poetry of Kandasamy presents the collective psychology of the Dalit community, questioning the deeply rooted caste hierarchies. There is an articulation of exclusion, misery, resistance, and hope in these selected poems. Kandasamy's poetry is more than a critique; it is a declaration of dignity and an appeal for change, showing the emergence of self-awareness and strength among Dalits who seek a world free of divisions based on birth status. Her voice evolves into a collective cry for change, capturing the defiance and aspiration of a community that is ready to shape its destiny without being restricted by religion and tradition. Kandasamy's daring statements place Dalit literature as a transforming force in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice in modern India.

This study opens avenues for further exploration of how Dalit literature functions as a vehicle for resistance, identity reconstruction, and socio-political awareness. Future research could examine the reception and impact of Dalit feminist voices like Kandasamy's on contemporary Indian society and literature. Comparative studies with other marginalized literatures, both within and beyond India, could deepen our understanding of intersectional oppression and resistance. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches

incorporating sociology, gender studies, and political theory may offer richer perspectives on the evolving discourse of caste and cultural transformation.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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