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Aesthetics of Dalit Literature with Special Reference to Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have attempted to look at the question in respect of aesthetics of a work of art. The critics of literature and literary reviewers have always been seen in discussion about the question as to what constitutes the literariness of a literary work. Many theories have been formulated since the birth of literature and such theories gave rise to several rules and perceptions which can be called as literary aesthetics. In the ancient times it was opined that literature and art fulfil important ethical roles. They provide models for correct behaviour and provoked tender emotions. It was believed that the moral feelings stirred by the literary works make people to plunge in to good action. However, Corollyn Burdet opines that the supporters of aestheticism disagreed with this and they claimed that art was about elevation of taste and pursuit of beauty and taste and beauty were considered as guiding principles for life by the aesthetes. Form was given importance in aestheticism. In this backdrop, Indian mainstream critics and litterateurs have denied considering Dalit literature as literature saying that Dalit writings lack the qualities of literature. Some have even gone so far as to ask whether Dalit writing is literature. Several allegations were raised such as there are no aesthetic elements and poetic qualities in Dalit writings. This article focuses on the question as to what constitutes aesthetics for Dalit writers and how Dalit writers like Kandasamy present an alternative aesthetics which does not confirm with conventional perceptions of aesthetics. Selected poems of Meena Kandasamy are read here to understand the aesthetic conceptions of Dalit literature.

Introduction

Dalit literature is a movement for Dalit writers. For them, writing a poem or producing a work of art is not just concerned about creativity or talent. It is seen as a vehicle to convey their experiences of sorrow, pain, anger and to ask questions. It has questions posed to prevailing knowledge system and hegemonic structures that relegated untouchables to inhuman status. Dalit literature is not concerned with Rasas

which are the key characteristics of Indian aesthetics. The classical rules of literature laid out in Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*, a Sanskrit text on dramaturgy, and other books in Sanskrit written by Brahmin scholars have dealt only with the life of Savarna people. Most of the literary works produced by the Savarna writers were on the lines of rules set by such ancient texts embedded with the ideologies of Brahminical knowledge. The Varna system which divided people as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra is based on the maxim of Purusasukta of Rig-Veda. According to this division, Brahmans are born from the mouth of primal being and Kshatriya's from arms, Vaishyas from thighs and Shudras from feet. Untouchables are not positioned under any Varna because they are thought as born as a result of violation of varna system. The position of Shudras and untouchables in the society was of servitude to the people belonging to upper castes. In this way Brahmins institutionalised their superiority and anybody who did not fit in to their rules were castrated. Kandasamy re-reads, reinterprets and questions such Brahminical ideologies in her poems.

Literature review: Dalit writers' standpoint on Dalit aesthetics

This research paper seeks to look for the formulations of Dalit literature and its aesthetics. The religion, culture, literature and all aspects of social life were on the lines of the discourses of Brahminical superiority and inferiority notions. The discourses of Dharma (religion) and Moksha (salvation) formed a major part of Indian Mainstream literature. Pointing out this, Raj Kumar in his *Dalit Literature and Criticism* observes that Dalit writers have called the existing canon of literature as 'Hindu Literature' (67). A large space of mainstream writing was meant for the stories related to kings, queens, princes, princesses and the priests. According to the Hindu Holy Scriptures, Sudras were not entitled to indulge in religious practices and seek salvation. They were represented as demonic and exotic inferior beings. In reply to the opinion of Kusumavati Deshpande in *Pasang* that it is difficult to find an articulate voice and be technically skilled for Dalits as they are deprived of all samskara (3) and to the opinion of N.S. Phadke in *Pratibha Vilas* that "the kinds of contexts and contexts and events that are needed to add colour to a novel are not found in Dalits lives" (quoted in *Towards an aesthetics of Dalit Literature*-109), Limbale points out that it is their middle class mentality that Deshpande cannot find culture and Phadke could not see impressive contexts and events in Dalit Literature. Limbale observes how Dalit literature is criticized as the outpourings of pain and anger and as manifested in 'artlessness' (108). Taking the role of spokespersons for Dalit writers he remarked in defence of Dalit literature that "Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analysed from a sociological perspective focused on social values [rather] than on beauty. An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writers' fundamental role, and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers" (19). *Jootan* by Valmiki is an autobiography and it can be said that it is a favourite genre for many Dalit writers. P. Revathi and M.R. Bindu refer to the quote made by Valmiki thus: "Das's defence of the genre, that Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers" (1).

In "Low Born-Hybrid castes and their Origin and Development" C. L. Solankar observes "During performing Shraddha deed, on the Brahmin, the eyes of a Chandala, village pig, cock, dog etc., should not be cast. In the four Varnas and

Antyavasayins (untouchables), a person of the low caste if condemns a person of a high class, then he must pay extra much fine and if a person of high class condemns a person of a low class, he must pay less fine" (863). These factors raise a question that when a Shudra is not entitled to the rights and rituals practiced by the mainstream people, how then he can be told to follow the mainstream literary tradition? Hence, it can be noticed that the Dalit writers reject the rule making literary tradition of mainstream writers in favour of the humanitarian causes that comprise the interests of Dalit people. Instead of glorifying the stories of some kings, queens, beauty and sublimity, Dalit writers focus on the experiences of marginalised people and untouchables. Afro-American movements have given impetus to Dalit literary movement. Raising voice for the humanitarian causes can be taken as the motto of Dalit literature. In this research article, Kandasamy's poems have been read focusing on the questions of aesthetics, identity and uniqueness. If it is asked as to why a separate consideration called Dalit aesthetics is needed then it can be noted that the literature which was produced until the emergence of subaltern literature portrayed the social, political and religious life of only few privileged sections of society as literature used to be written by only upper caste people.

The Etymology of the Word Dalit:

In *Dalit Literature and Criticism*, the etymology of the word 'Dalit' has been defined as derived from the Sanskrit word 'Dal'. The meaning of the word 'Dal' is crack, split, broken, or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed, and destroyed. The word also means the broken, the torn, and downtrodden, crushed, scattered, and exploited people (3). Aastha Gulati, in the article "Dalit: the word, the sentiment, and a 200-year-old history" outlines that an activist by name Pankaj Meshram had filed a public interest litigation in the Bombay High Court seeking to use the constitutional term 'Scheduled Caste' instead of 'Dalit'. In this article, Anand Teltumbde has been mentioned as telling to *The Quint* that Jyotirao Phule first used the word Dalit. The word Harijan was used by Gandhiji but it was rejected by Dalit thinkers and revolutionaries. *The Quint* quotes Ramachandra Guha saying: "In truth, Gandhi's own earlier coinage, 'suppressed classes' explicitly targeted social discrimination, whereas 'Harijan' euphemized it". *The Quint* quotes the description of Dr. Eleanor Zelliot, in her paper understanding Dr B.R. Ambedkar: "Dalit became a self-chosen term in 1972 when a group of Bombay youths organized the 'Dalit panthers', in an effort to encourage the militancy of the American 'black panthers'. Like the word 'black' in the USA, it was used proudly.

Rage and protest: the aesthetic elements in Meena Kandasamy's poems

Kandasamy is one of the Dalit writers who attempted to spread light on such aspect of Dalit life which found no representation in the mainstream literature. Untouchables in her poetry are represented neither as sympathetic beings nor as inferior human beings. Her approach is on locating the factors which lead to the inferior status of Dalit people. She has published two collections of poetry titled *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*. Her book *Gypsy Goddess* is about a caste atrocity occurred in Kilvenmani. *When I Hit You* is her auto-fiction that tells the story of a woman which is relatable to many women in the Indian society. Her poems speak about the ways in which Brahminical supremacy was established and discuss the strategies used by the

Brahmins in establishing the caste system and patriarchal ideologies. One such poem by her is "Becoming a Brahmin" from *Touch* discusses how caste system was constructed. She presents an "Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin" (1). Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra 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. (3-8) In the poem she ridicules the caste system by treating it lightly. Here, one can refer to the observation made by C. L. Sonkar in his "Low Born-High Castes and Their Origin and Development" on caste promotion and caste demotion. He mentions that in the Dharmashastras, there is a mention of the ways in which caste promotion and caste demotion can happen. According to this, if a Brahmin accepts to do a business of a Shudra and if his son continues that business and if this continues for five generations, then, his caste will be demoted to that of Shudra on the basis of business. The above quoted poem from Kandasamy seems to be ridiculing such arrangement made in the Dharmashastras.

The poem criticizes how women is used as an object in the patriarchal society for safeguarding its own interests. Women are used as key to the door of caste as portrayed in this poem as marriage plays a dominant role in preserving or dismantling caste. Endogamy forms a great part in the caste system. Inter marriages within the noble families, within a financial oligarchy, within the ancestral families and within the social, religious, racial or geographical groups is a commonly seen phenomenon throughout the world. It's not just seen among upper castes but also visible as practicing among lower caste people. Paul Rosas in his "Caste and Class in India" observes "groups tend to develop social customs which distinguish it from others. Finally, the breaking of the fundamental principles of all these groups leads to punishment and ostracism which makes the victim an "outcaste." All this has been general since primitive tribal times" (143). According to Paul, caste has remained by practicing endogamy where "common caste customs and ceremonies, as well as caste inter dining, indicate a common ancestry" (144). Dr. Ambedkar in his "Rise and Fall of Hindu Women" outlines succinctly about the relationship between the caste and structures of gender stating that women are the gateways to caste system (48). If Ambedkar's model is emphasized, it appears that the top-down hierarchy of caste system operates among Dalits also and woman are not allowed to make decisions on their sexuality.

Detestation towards Gandhiji's approach to caste

Further, the poet criticises the Mahatma Gandhiji in "Becoming a Brahmin" by sarcastically addressing him as the father of the nation. There is a reference to the speech given by Gandhiji on 20.09.1947 about his methods for bringing changes in the caste system. Kandasamy ironically calls Gandhiji as the Father of Nation. Her light tone seems to be questioning the reader as to how someone who sees woman as a mere puppet in the hands of patriarchal society can be accepted as the Mahatma.

Algorithm advocated by Father of the Nation at Tirupur. / Documented by Periyar on 20.09.1947. / Algorithm for converting aperiya into a Brahmin / awaiting another Father of the Nation / to produce this Algorithm. / (Inconvenience caused due to inadvertent delay / is sincerely regretted. (10-16)

This reference to Gandhiji's speech seems to be criticizing how woman is treated as a mere object even by Gandhiji who is venerated as Mahatma throughout the world. The poem is a criticism of the speech of Gandhiji delivered on 20th September, 1947 at Tirupur documented by Periyar. Her anger with Gandhiji are also voiced in poem "Liquid Tragedy" and other poems. They are discussed in later part of this article.

Fight and revolution the literary emotions in Kandasamy's poetry

Her poem "Fire" (46) from *Touch* describes violence on Dalits. It refers to the caste related violence occurred and occurring in India in various forms since ages. It targets the hegemony of upper caste which has the support of State authorities and institutions.

Our huts are burning—/ Regular huts in proper rows. / Dry thatches (conspirator-in-crime) / Feed the flames as we rush out / Shrieking-crying-moaning / Open mouthed hysterical curses / And as if in an answer- / When the blazing work is done / Fire engines arrive / Deliberately late. (7-16)

In the poem there is a sarcastic take on the violence seen in both the past and present India. This poem is referring to several such incidents like Kilvenmani. It records the indifferent attitude of the privileged world towards atrocities inflicted on downtrodden people. The word 'deliberately' should be noted as the poet criticizes the authorities and opines that State and dominant sections of society have colluded together and established a hegemony which makes Dalits unable to find solution to the violence on Dalits.

This double catastrophe projected in sights / and shrieks evokes... / No response.

Those above are (mostly): / Indifferent bastards. (25-29)

There is a tone of complaint in the poem that the whole system is indifferent to the sufferings of people at lower strata. In the poem the poet says that whenever a Dalit person is put to public ordeal, the political leaders will come up with mere slogans like they will stand with the victim. In such situations, the media sees only a catchy headline for their channel or newspaper. This poem can be considered as an example to the perspective of a Dalit writer towards the mainstream structures:

"Few flashy cameras record / Glimpses of destruction /(For tomorrow's papers)" (4-6)

These lines from "Fire" show how the world responds to the atrocity on Dalits and sarcastically attacks the hypocrisy of power structures. It opines that whenever violence against Dalit people occur the doctors see a medical emergency. Beyond this nothing is offered because incidents like these are taking place irrespective of the presence of a bulk of leaders who say that they stand with the victims. The line "the press sees a headline and photo feature" (7) from the poem "One-eyed" also observes the attitude of media to violence on Dalit people. The poem "One-eyed" (41) from *Ms Militancy* describes the response of the world on the heinous violence inflicted on downtrodden people. It is also a brief analysis of the history of Dalits life. The words like 'pot' 'water' and 'parched throat' refer to the struggle of Dalits even for basic needs of life which were under the control of upper caste people. The line, "the school sees a potential embarrassment" (6) tries to say that the school, instead of standing with the victim, blames the victim for involving in an incident. And, particularly this poem speaks about a tragic incident that may have occurred due to Dalits claiming their rights on drinking water as the following line describes "the price for a taste of

that touchable water” (10). The poet sarcastically uses the word touchable water connotating the dichotomy created between inanimate things also on caste terms. The poem talks about a little girl called Dhanam who feels thirsty and drinks water from a pot with her ‘clumsy hand’. The untouchable girl gets punished for drinking the ‘touchable water’.

“Dhanam sees a world torn in half. / Her left eye, lid open but light slapped away, /

The price for a taste of that touchable water” (8-10)

These lines show the physical torture that Dalits endured for touching even an inanimate thing belonging to upper caste people. Dhanam gets slapped for drinking water and she loses her one eye for tasting the water belonging to touchable people. Here, one can remember a similar incident occurred in Karamachedu around drinking water issue. The poem “Liquid Tragedy: Karamachedu 1985” (52) from *Touch* recaptures the massacre in Karamachedu which took place in 1985 in Andhra Pradesh. The upper caste men (Kammas) killed six lower caste men (Madiga) and raped Madiga women. The infamous massacre took place when a Madiga women protested against the upper caste men for washing off the buffaloes in the pond which was used for drinking water by the Madigas. In this poem Kandasamy questions as to whether it is right to silence the voices of the lower caste people and she questions the non-violence movement of Gandhiji opining that it was the lower cast people who had to bear the brunt of such movements and upper caste people reaped its fruits. In the poem “Mohandas Karamchand” she calls Gandhi as fraud: “Bapu, bapu, you fraud, we hate you” (29). She questions Gandhiji’s approach to caste practices and rejects to accept him as the Mahatma in the lines, “Who? Who? Who? Mahatma ...truth non-violence. Stop it enough taboo” (1-4).

Thus, the aesthetics of Dalit writers involves a focus on the real issues occurred and occurring in society and Dalit writers do not indulge in making rules on writing any genre of literature. Instead, they question the rules set for writing of literary work which is difficult to follow for a person who has led life in miserable conditions. To mentions few such instances, one can see that Kandasamy poems refer to some such caste violence activities. The news report “Reward announced on 17 accused in hut burning case” by Omar Rashid gives a note on the incident of several huts being burnt. The huts were belonging to a Dalit community in Jaunpur. They were set ablaze after two groups clashed over a minor incident. In another Massacre that took place in 1996, a mob executed a Massacre taking the life of 21 people. Eleven women, six children and three infants were among the dead. This incident had taken place in Bathani Tola in central Bihar. The Patna High Court acquitted 23 men who were convicted of the gruesome murders. The court cited the reason of defective evidence for acquitting the convicts. Such real incidents are given expressions in her poems.

Her poem “Rape Nation” speaks about the Hathras rape case. The poem narrates how the house of victim was barricaded while setting the body of victim to fire denying the family the rites of final rites. In the she has observed how the Indian Sanatana Dharma has produced a rape tolerant culture. “Dalits cannot rule, they cannot rage, or/ even mourn. / this has happened before, this will happen again” (7-10). The poem refers to the discourse of Sati and the modern versions of Sati. It also refers to the patriarchal perceptions about women ordained by Manu in Manusmriti in the following lines:

“Manu said once, so his regiment repeat / Today: / All women are harlots, all women are base; / All women seek is sex, all they shall have is / Rape” / Manu gives men a licence plate, such Rape / Mandate” (21-27).

Her poems constantly address the issues of caste violence. In her lecture “No One Killed the Dalits” questioned the patterns of acquittals in the cases of caste atrocities on Dalits. Her book *The Gypsy Goddess* is based on the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968.

Rage against judicial system:

The Hindu reports her pointing out that the court judgements in atrocity cases are as merciless as the massacres and victim blaming, dismissal of evidence of witnesses and denial of caste element and case element and reducing of the entire case to compensation as if Dalits can be purchased, form a large part of judgement. She calls this denial of justice to Dalits as systematic and compares it to genocidal hate. She has referred to the burning of two Dalit children in Faridabad and 2002 carnage in Gujrat. “Paper Tigers” is the term she uses to refer to judicial commissioners. She points out that the bourgeois democratic State is functioning only to protect the interests of ruling class. These perspectives find way in her writing and what one can witness in all these references is the concern of Kandasamy about the point that the fate of the cases of massacres would have been different if the civil society had raised its voice against the acquittals in cases like Kilvenmani. Her rage against judicial system can be in her poems like “Rape Nation” wherein she condemns Sanatana Dharma calling it the only law of the land that’s in force and also calls it as a victim blaming slut template. Here, she has referred to the victim blaming discourse which always holds women as responsible for the unending rape incidents.

There is a re-interpretation of the spiritual values of Hindutva in the poem “Rape Nation” and in the poem “Moksha” as well. The perceptions around Dharma, Artha, and Kama, the key elements of Vedas, are reinterpreted in the poem ‘Moksha’. Re-interpretation, subversion and delineation of the ancient mythological texts are the key features in her poems. Her works look at the identity questions like experiences of alienation, despair and marginalization. Her poems are a memoir representing the stories of Dalit people.

Re-reading of mythological texts:

The innumerable truths of the Dalit world which had been choked and rendered to remain in darkness, gets unveiled in Dalit literature and Kandasamy observes how Dalits were made to remain unaware of any knowledge which can lead them towards equality. The poem “Ekalaivan” (44) from *Touch* by Kandasamy is about the mythical character Ekalavya. She condemns how a Guru who has to lead the students towards light denies knowledge to Dalits. The story of Ekalaivan is presented by her as an instance to convey how untouchables were denied opportunities and how they could never reach the mainstream structures. Similarly, her poems like “princess in exile,” “Random access men,” and “Traitor” etc., have re-interpreted the portrayal of mythological women characters. Sita in “Random access men” is not portrayed as a submissive woman, instead, she has been portrayed as someone who crossed the ‘Lakshman Rekha’ purposefully. In “Traitor” Surpanakha has been portrayed as someone who is used and cheated by Rama and Lakshman.

The lines from the preface of Ms. Militancy show Meena Kandasamy’s female

characters as militants and not as docile conventional women.

“My Kali kills. / My Draupadi Strips. / My Sita climbs on a stranger’s lap. / All my women Militate. / They brave bombs they belittle kings. / They take on the Sun. / They take after me” (8).

This excerpt from the poetry collection *Ms Militancy* by Meena Kandasamy investigates the politics of history and culture.

Conclusion:

Dalit literature is revolutionary and literature is a weapon through which they have tried to bring social awareness. Questioning, subversion, interpretation etc., are the main features of Dalit writings. The ideas and ideals of classical Brahmanical literature and the conventional theories of aesthetics are rejected in their works. In Meena Kandasamy’s writings also, it can be observed that she considers the caste hierarchy as the fundamental reason for the subaltern class to remain under the clutches of hierarchy of power and silently suffer the exploitation. In the poetry collections *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*, her characters stage a protest against their exploiter. The poems discussed in this article are taken from the said poetry collections. The youthful characters in her poems raise a rebellion against the unequal system of the society. Her poems are revolutionary and imagination hardly has place in them. Real social issues are the major concerns in Dalit writings and Meena Kandasamy’s poems address social issues and not any fantasy story.

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