Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 3, January 2015
Pp. 11-17

Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*: An Articulation of the Voice of the Marginalized

*–Mohan Lal Mahto**

Abstract

A young Tamil poet from Chennai, Meena Kandasamy is a fiction writer, translator, and activist. Her two collections of poems *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) present the real pictures of the marginalized in Indian society. As a conscious artist with commitment she is grieved to see the age old in human social practices like untouchability based on caste system prevailing in our society.

She expresses her anger against caste based discrimination which has crippled the dalits/marginalized to dehumanized state as they are subjected to humiliation and oppression. In other words, her works focus on poverty, oppression, injustice, caste annihilation, linguistic identity and pangs and predicaments of women. This paper attempts to explore and analyze the grievances of the marginalized communities raised in *Touch* by Meena Kandasamy. In one of the poems titled 'Ekalaivan' she takes up the episode of the *Mahabharata* where Dronacharya declines to train Ekalavya because of his birth in a lower caste rather than Kshatriya. In another poem 'Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985', she lashes out at the act and attitude of the people of the higher caste by recapturing the massacre of Karamchedu, Andhra Pradesh in 1985, where many low caste men were killed and their women were raped by the upper caste people. In fact, Meena Kandasamy seeks equality, freedom and fraternity for the marginalized so that they can lead a life with pride and dignity in society.

Keywords: Verna system, Untouchability, Dalits, Caste annihilation, Oppression, Equality, Freedom, Injustice.

Born in 1984, Meena Kandasamy is a young Tamil poet, fiction writer, translator, and activist. Her first collection of poems titled *Touch* which includes 84 poems was published in August, 2006 with a foreword by the famous poet Kamala Das, who gives high appreciation for this anthology. Kamala Das remarks, "Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology." (*Touch* 7) She also adds, "Older by half a

* *Assistant Professor of English, Sindri College, Sindri, Dhanbad (Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag Jharkhand).*

century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision and wish her access to the magical brew of bliss and tears each true poet is forced to partake of day after day, month after month, year after year…." (*Touch* 7). The second collection of poems titled *Ms Militancy* was published in 2010. However, her works have appeared in different reputed journals of the country and abroad such as *The Little Magazine*, *Kavaya Bharati*, *Indian Literature*, *Poetry International Web*, *Muse India, Quarterly Literary Review, The New Indian Express* etc. Truly, discrimination based on caste line has crippled the dalits/marginalized to dehumanized state as they are subjected to discrimination, humiliation and oppression. Meena Kandasamy expresses her anger against caste based oppression and is determined to combat the social evils through her literary creations. Her works focus on oppression, pangs and predicaments of dalit women, and caste annihilation. In other words, she attacks rampant social evils like injustice, atrocities, inequality, violation of human rights, etc. This paper attempts to explore the pains and predicaments of the marginalized communities as presented in *Touch* and also analyze their grievances raised in it. The poems of *Touch* are divided into seven groups: *Bring him up to worship you*, *Touch*, *and some spice*, *To that more congenial spot*, *Lines of control*, *Slander in a slaughterhouse*, and *Their Daughters.* The second part of *Touch* is dedicated to the issues of the marginalized/dalit communities of our society.

Casteism is an old social evil which is used to subjugate the lower stratum of the hierarchal social structure of Indian society and to uphold discrimination as well as gain unfair advantage over the 'others', marginalized. Earlier varna system was based on *karma*, but later on, it began to be identified by birth. Thus an individual's identity is determined by caste and not by *karma.* The marginalized groups of India such as dalits or untouchables, Adivasis, and nomadic tribes were made to lead dehumanized and degraded lives. They have been denied the basic fundamental rights by the stratified rigid caste system. They are expected to lead mean life, doing inferior and menial works like sweeping, cleaning working in fields etc. and remain servile to the privileged class. It is observed that their habitats are away from the people who are in the centre. In *Touch* Meena Kandasamy focuses on the sufferings, frustration, humiliation, suppression, anguish and revolt of the ill-fated marginalized sections of our society.

In her poem 'Another Paradise Lost: The Hindu Way', she presents a story of a serpent and her conversation with it. The serpent narrates that once it was a monarch held with honour on the earth and in the heaven, too. He raised questions before gods in heaven about the caste system and the division of jobs on the earth, and advocated for equality, freedom and fraternity. He was branded rebel. For this act, he was cursed and as a punishment thrown on earth to wander because gods living in heavenly abode do want hierarchy of vernas to continue on earth. Any advocacy to dismantle this system is also unbearable to them. Thus the serpent discloses:

> I wanted to know why
> caste was there, why people suffered because of
> their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned
> sages there. I asked what would happen if a

high born did manual work just like the low-born.
I worried about the division of labour, this disparity
in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel
pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. (56-63)

Even gods and sages divide human beings into the rich and the poor, upper caste and untouchables, and spread hatred among human beings.

In another poem 'Eklaivan', she takes up the episode of the *Mahabharata,* where Ekalavya was debarred from the art of archery by the great Guru Dronacharya, and had to pay a heavy price for being a tribe- man of so-called low caste. He possessed the noblest soul and the exemplary character. He parted with his thumb only to gratify the will of a guru who had not taught him rather humiliated him by debarring from learning archery. His right thumb was amputated just because he would not become better archer than a boy of upper caste. The poem runs thus:

You can do a lot of things
With your left hand.
Besides, fascist Dronacharya's warrant
Left handed treatment.
Also
You don't need your right thumb
To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb. (1-9)

The poet raises a question—Was Droncharya just amputating Eklavya's right thumb? In fact, his biasness is disclosed. His decision was affected by verna system.

In 'Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985' Meena Kandasamy recaptures the in famous massacre of Karamchedu which took place on July 17 in 1985 in Andhra Pradesh where six Madiga (lower caste) men were killed and three Madiga women were raped by the Kammas (upper caste men). The massacre ensued when a Madiga woman protested against the washing of buffaloes by the Kammas in the pond whose water the Madigas drank. Here the poet writes:

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit
Drinking Water for the Dalits
The very same Pond.
Practice for eons.
A Bold Dalit lady
dares to question injustice.
Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation
Is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.
Killings….. (1-9)

Kandasamy raises another question before us- Is it justified to silence the voices of the marginalized for raising genuine demands? Instead of taking sincere and justified steps to address their genuine grievances they are treated brutally and suppressed by might. Through this poem the poetess represents the authority of the privileged, and their age old scornful attitude towards the deprived. It seems ridiculous that in spite of

passing decades of independence, the dream of social equality is still unachieved and the deprived are forced to lead a non-existence life. Can one imagine that the untouchables are bound to drink water of 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. Madiga men were killed and women were raped because they were socially and economically weak, they were powerless. One need not be surprised knowing this incident, as such kind of incident is common occurrence in our society.

The perennial oppression dehumanizes the down trodden and transforms them into non-existent state. It not only affects physically, but also psychologically. In her poem 'Fleeting', she mentions that we may lose our history, orbe destroyed, and our memories may perish from our mind, but caste imprint is perennial. The tag of caste is an unfailing weapon for the upper castes to dominate over the deprived. Her indignation against this social evilis revealed in this poem:

> And fleeting memories are perishable—
> Imagery showcase stuff having expiry dates,
> Caste perennially remains
> a scheming bulldozer
> Crushing Dalits—
> And renewing, revoking our bitter past. (1-6)

The divisive society divides even gods and prohibits entrance of untouchables in the shrines or abodes of deities meant for the upper castes. Offering prayers by dalits at their temple is unpardonable crime and severe punishments are in store for this kind of offence. Meena Kandasamy castigates such acts and attitudes and this brutal practice in the poem titled 'Prayers'. She delineates how amarginalized is thrashed to death for committing this crime. The weak person suffering from typhoid for ten days goes near the temple of an upper caste man to offer prayers and seeks God's blessings for recovery from the fever, but he is caught and killed. She presents the experiences which are true but unpleasant as it consists of the cruelty of man against his fellow human beings. Thus she writes:

> He drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple.
> Sadly, of an Upper caste God.
> Away from the temple, he bends in supplication. (7-9)
> .....
> An irked Rajput surged forth
> and smote the untouchable with an iron rode.
> The warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate encroachment. (14-16)

The poet questions as well as challenges the age-old caste system and rigid society which prohibits inter-caste relationship, particularly between the higher and the lower. Violation of the caste boundary results in brutal punishments for the involved persons. In the poem titled 'We will rebuild worlds' she mentions how exemplary punishments are given to them who dare cross caste lines.

But the crimes of passion/
Our passion/your crimes

Poured poison, and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/
Or hanged them in public/because a man and a woman
Dared to love

And you wanted/to teach /other boys and other girls/the
lessons of /how to/whom to/ when to/where to/continue
their caste lines. (16-23)

In this poem she narrates how the downtrodden have been harassed and brutally treated and massacred since time immemorial. She speaks with determination that time has come now and these deprived people will no longer live in their mercy and build their fortune by own. She gives a clarion call that they will give appropriate fight against the atrocities unleashed upon them on the name of caste.

So/now/upon future time/
There will be a revolution. (42-43)

These lines recall poetic lines by a famous dalit poet J.V. Pawar who also calls upon for revolution:

These twisted fists won't loosen now
The coming revolution won't wait for you.
We have endured enough; no more endurance mow. (ADL 143)

In 'Dignity', she calls upon the privileged men to be sympathetic and considerate towards the oppressed class. She believes in dignity and equality of all. She wishes they would not deprive due share of the oppressed, maintaining their own dignity and faith. But in warning note she tells them not to suppress the marginalized without any rhyme and reason, and deny their dignity.

You stick to your faith
the incurable sickness
of your minds,
We don't stop you from continuing
to tend centuries
of cultivate superegos.
We will even let you wallow
in the rare happiness
that hierarchy provides
But don't suppress
our rightful share of dignity. (7-18)

In caste governed patriarchal Indian society, dalit/untouchable women are doubly exploited being dalit and women. They endure the maltreatment, oppression and untouchability from the upper caste, while they are thrashed at home by their husbands. Sometimes their fathers and brothers torture them. Thus they are double victims.

They are stripped naked, molested, raped, assaulted and burnt for no rational reason except for the caste they belong to. They are taken for sexual gratification. It is their fate to bear threats of rape and violence from the hands of the privileged. At home they are put in pitiable condition too. Meena Kandasamy is pained to see the miserable condition of the women of weaker communities. In her poem 'Narration' she depicts the heart rendering cries of the oppressed woman who is exploited by her landlord. The very shadow of an untouchable is supposed to pollute the upper castes, but they are not polluted while molesting a dalit girl or woman.

I'll weep to you about
My landlord, and with
My mature gestures—
You will understand:
The torn sari, disheveled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then. (1-7)

In our society physical and mental exploitation of the girls of the poor section is very common. Most shocking aspect is that the culprits involved in these sexual assaults find easy escape because of their high caste affiliations. In the poem 'Shame' the poet depicts how an untouchable girl becomes the victim of gang rape. But the rapists are spared as they belong to upper caste and the innocent and helpless girl suffers humiliation and irrecoverable pain and ultimately commits suicide.

'Gang Rape'
Two severe syllables/
implied in her presence
perpetuate the assault…
Public's prying eyes
segregate her—the victim.
But the criminals have
already maintained—
Their Caste is classic shield. (1-9)

Gory scars on the wretched body
serves as constant reminders
of disgrace, helpless. (14-16)

The helpless girl sets herself into fire as a solution to this sin.

Bravely, in search of
a definite solution,
and elusive purification,
she takes the test of the fire—
the ancient medicine for shame. (22-26)

To sum up, in *Touch,* Meena Kandasamy depicts the bare truth of our society where people living in the margins are still victims of illogical and unscientific notions

which deprive them of fundamental rights. It is also the voice of those who were condemned to silence for thousands of years. Moreover, social oppression is justified by the oppressors on the basis of verna system of society. She poignantly records the miseries, humiliation, and brutalities experienced by the oppressed in *Touch*. Her poetry is an onslaught on the social evils prevailing in our society such as caste system, untoutchability, oppression on women, and cultural hegemony. She places human at the centre and registers a strong protest against the hierarchy of castes, race, tribe and gender showing the value of human liberty. She champions the cause of the marginalized and pleads for their liberty, equality, fraternity and justice so that they can live with honour and dignity.

Works Cited

- Anand, Mulk Raj and Eleanor Zelliot. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992. Print.
- Kandasamy, Meena. *Touch*. Mumbai: Peacock Books, 2006. Print.

