

Dalit Feminism and Political Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's Writing

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Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of Dalit feminism and political resistance in the literary oeuvre of Meena Kandasamy, one of the most radical voices in contemporary Indian English literature. Her writings—including poetry collections such as *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*, the novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, and her prose work *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*—serve as enduring tests of resistance against systemic caste oppression and patriarchal domination. While mainstream feminist discourse often overlooks caste hierarchies, Kandasamy's work foregrounds the lived experiences of Dalit women, critiquing not only caste-based violence but also the limitations of savarna feminist practice and the structural inequities embedded within Indian society. Through a close textual and contextual analysis, this paper argues that Kandasamy's writing transforms literature into a site of political agency, reconfiguring language itself to challenge hegemonic narratives and to assert the subjectivity and dissent of Dalit women. This study situates Kandasamy's works within broader frameworks of Dalit feminist theory, Ambedkarite political thought, and intersectional literary resistance to illustrate how her literature transcends mere representation to act as a catalyst for collective social critique and transformative engagement.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, political resistance, caste, gender, Indian English literature, intersectionality.

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Introduction

In the landscape of Indian English literature, few voices resonate with the raw political urgency and radical critique of caste and gender oppression as that of *Meena Kandasamy*. Born into a caste-conscious Tamil milieu, Kandasamy's work stands at the convergence of Dalit consciousness and feminist articulation, producing a literary voice that is uncompromising, defiant, and deeply politicized. Her writing reflects not only the brutal realities of caste-based discrimination but also the intersecting structures of gender-based violence that Dalit women endure—situating her as a central figure in the emergent discourse of Dalit feminist literature. This paper probes the critical dimensions of Dalit feminism within her writings, underscoring the ways in which Kandasamy harnesses literary form as a vehicle for political resistance.

Kandasamy's defiance is rooted in a critique of Brahmanical patriarchy that extends beyond symbolic representation to confront structural injustices. Through her poetry, prose, and narrative innovations, she interrogates caste hierarchies, deconstructs patriarchal norms, and reimagines language and narrative form as insurgent tools of dissent. Her literature is inseparable from her activism, which spans public interventions, media, and translation work, positioning her as both a literary and socio-political provocateur who insists that literary production be intrinsically tied to conditions of political struggle.

Dalit Feminism: Conceptual Framework

Dalit feminism emerges from the critique that mainstream feminist movements in India have historically centred upper-caste women's experiences, marginalizing the deeply specific forms of

caste-based oppression that Dalit women face. Dalit feminist theory foregrounds the dual axes of caste and gender, highlighting how these intertwined structures produce unique forms of exclusion and exploitation that are often unaddressed or understudied in Savarna feminist rhetoric. Dalit feminism insists that the fight for gender equality cannot be disentangled from the fight against caste hierarchy, as caste operates as an organizing principle of social, economic, and political exclusion.

Works in Dalit feminist theory emphasize that lived experiences of Dalit women cannot be fully captured through frameworks that do not acknowledge caste as a fundamental axis of structural violence and exploitation. Dalit feminists advocate for a politics of intersectionality that places caste alongside gender as equally critical in understanding oppression and resistance. In Indian literature, Dalit feminist writing occupies a hostile terrain—it must disrupt dominant canons, reject savarna literary orthodoxies, and reclaim narrative authority to tell stories that are otherwise erased or silenced.

Kandasamy's Literary Oeuvre: A Site of Resistance

Poetry as Politics: Touch and Ms. Militancy

Kandasamy's debut collection of poetry, *Touch* (2006), immediately positions itself as a site of radical dissent. The very title evokes the socially proscribed notion of "touchability" that Dalits historically endure under caste hierarchies, wherein physical contact is branded as polluting and defines the boundaries of social ostracization. Her poems articulate the intimate violence of caste discrimination and challenge the religious and cultural

justifications that sustain such hierarchies. Through stark imagery and visceral voice, Kandasamy exposes the mechanics of caste oppression, questioning how social and religious doctrines rationalize Dalit marginalization.

Touch also foregrounds Dalit womanhood in a way that refuses sentimentalization or victimhood; instead, it channels rage, defiance, and a demand for autonomous selfhood. Poems such as “Eklaivaan,” which invokes the mythological figure of Eklavya, subvert canonical narratives that have historically legitimized caste inequality. By reclaiming myth and legend, Kandasamy reorients literary language away from savarna cultural authority and toward a subaltern discourse of resistance.

Her later poetry in *Ms. Militancy* (2010) extends this insurgent artistry by reimagining mythological characters such as Sita, Draupadi, and Kannagi in contexts of rebellion rather than submission. These reconfigurations dismantle classical tropes that have positioned women within sacrificial and submissive roles, instead presenting them as embodied subjects who resist and disrupt patriarchal violence. This strategic appropriation and re-signification of myth enable Kandasamy to assert women’s agency on her own terms, rejecting the domestication of female narratives within literature.

These collections not only expose caste injustices but also insist on forging new literary lexicons. Through irony, bold imagery, and unfiltered diction, Kandasamy transforms English into a vernacular of resistance—a language that carries the weight of social experience rather than serving as a medium of colonial mimicry or elite expressionism.

Narrative Resistance in The Gypsy Goddess

While Kandasamy’s poetry shatters and rebuilds linguistic forms, her first novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), expands the terrain of resistance into historical and narrative politics. The novel revisits the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre in Tamil Nadu, in which upper-caste landlords murdered Dalit agricultural labourers. In reconstructing this historical atrocity, Kandasamy does not confine the event to archival reminiscence; rather, she reanimates the socio-political conditions that reproduce caste violence, exposing the ongoing systems of exploitation and domination that persist beyond singular incidents of violence.

The novel’s narrative strategy deviates from conventional linear storytelling. It integrates multiple voices, oral histories, and textual disruptions that unsettle dominant nationalist and caste-blind literary forms. This method constitutes a form of literary resistance—denying readers the comfort of traditional plot progression and compelling confrontation with the multiplicity of casteed experience. In doing so, Kandasamy recovers subaltern narratives that have been historically marginalized, allowing the voices of Dalit men and women to speak with unmediated agency.

Moreover, *The Gypsy Goddess* situates women at the heart of resistance. Far from passive observers, female characters actively participate in collective struggle and communal solidarity. Their presence emphasizes how resistance to caste cannot be disentangled from gendered forms of oppression; Dalit women’s articulation of resistance becomes a political force that challenges both caste hierarchy and patriarchal suppression.

Autobiographical Defiance in When I Hit You

In *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017), Kandasamy turns her lens toward intimate violence and domestic oppression. While not exclusively a work of Dalit autobiography, it situates gendered violence within the broader context of social and familial structures that perpetuate control over women’s bodies and subjectivities. The narrative recounts the experience of an abusive marriage, confronting not only physical violence but the psychological, cultural, and institutional frameworks that shield and perpetuate it.

This work intersects with Dalit feminist concerns by exposing the ways in which patriarchal violence functions alongside caste structures to shape women’s lived realities. Although the novel foregrounds personal trauma, its political resonance lies in its radical refusal to silence pain and acquiescence. The protagonist’s resistance becomes symbolic of larger struggles against oppressive systems—whether in the domestic sphere or in wider societal hierarchies.

Language, Form, and Violence: Reclaiming Narrative

One of the distinguishing features of Kandasamy’s writing is how she repurposes language itself as a tool of political dissent. The use of English—often criticized as a colonial imposition—is, in her hands, subverted into a vernacular of insurgent politics. This is evident in her poetry where syntax, rhythm, and diction defy polite lyricism and embrace a confrontational aesthetic responsive to violence and injustice.

Kandasamy’s engagement with form—whether in fragmented verse, nonlinear narrative, or intertextual collage—reflects an inherent critique of normative literary forms that often replicate dominant ideologies. By destabilizing form, she critiques the very structures of literary representation that have historically marginalized Dalit voices. Her language resists sanitization and insists on the corporeal realities of caste, gender, and class violence.

Political Resistance: Beyond Representation

Kandasamy’s work is not content with depicting marginalization; it actively intervenes in political discourse. Through her public engagements, interviews, and activist work, she extends her literary politics into public realms, advocating for caste annihilation, women’s autonomy, and social justice. Her insistence that caste cannot be separated from feminist struggle challenges mainstream feminism’s reluctance to address caste hierarchy, insisting instead on a truly intersectional politics.

Dalit feminist resistance in Kandasamy’s writing is not merely rhetorical; it is a call for social transformation. Her literature creates spaces for collective memory, communal solidarity, and political consciousness. It invites readers to recognize caste as a structuring force of Indian society and demands accountability from dominant cultural institutions that sustain inequity.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy’s literary canon stands as one of the most powerful articulations of Dalit feminist resistance in contemporary Indian English literature. Through her poetry, narrative innovation, and unapologetic engagement with caste and gender violence, she transforms literature into a political practice that disputes hegemonic narratives and affirms subaltern agency.

Her work exemplifies how Dalit feminist literature does not merely represent oppression but actively contests it—insisting on visibility, voice, and radical re-imagination.

In centering Dalit women's experiences, Kandasamy confronts structural inequalities embedded within caste and patriarchal systems, calling for a deeper engagement with the politics of intersectionality. Her writing encourages readers and scholars to rethink the boundaries of literary form, feminist thought, and political activism—insisting that meaningful resistance must dismantle both caste and gender hierarchies in pursuit of genuine social justice.

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