

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

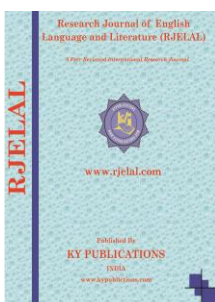
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

FEMINIST STUDY IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S NOVELS "WHEN I HIT YOU: OR, A PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER AS A YOUNG WIFE" AND "THE GYPSY GODDESS"

Dr. TANU KASHYAP

Assistant Professor Grade III,
Amity University, Noida



ABSTRACT

Aspirations and dreams are not always fulfilled...marriages are not always successful and the fairy tale romantic setting do not always consummate this is harsh reality that comes out in Meena Kandasamy's novel "When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" and "The Gypsy Goddess". In the contemporary scenario we talk about ecofeminism, radical feminism and eco centrism. Indian women writers have voiced their concerns from last five decades against a number of atrocities and gender inequalities that have meted out to them.

For an ordinary Indian woman "marriage" means happiness galore because ironically marriage is regarded as sacrosanct and union of two families rather than two persons. Indian woman feels that sexually satisfying her husband is one of the vows that she has taken at the time of her marriage. Man on the other hand does not feel the same way- for him it is a man's world and he needs to be aggressive in all spheres of life.

In her novel, "The Gypsy Goddess" again the spotlight moves towards women caught in a political fight between haves and have not. Oppression and injustice acquires a totally new unbelievable dimension which is based on an actual massacre that took place in independent India. Meena Kandasamy has brought forth the patriarchal norms of society that helps man to dominate and subjugate both body and spirit of a woman and on the same time showcases lack of preparedness to accept radical feminism in the Indian society.

This paper delves in the issues of plight of the modern 21st century Indian woman who is always reminded that she is nothing but onlya woman. She has no right to stand up against marital rape, abuse, violation of her fundamental rights both in her personal or political domain. This research paper will try to find answers to these poignant questions which have baffled the modern Indian society.

Key words- feminism, marriage, patriarchal norms, subjugation, gender, oppression

Marriage has been an overrated institution which makes two people come together and exchange vows for lifetime until death tears them apart. Culturally, Indian society views marriage as sacrosanct and ultimate destination for a woman. The patriarchal system demands that the woman should take care of the husband and his family in

order to uphold the honour of her father. She does not enjoys any decision making powers when it comes to her conjugal rights. Everything lies in the hands of man.

It is indeed disheartening to notice the gradual deterioration of woman's status in the Indian society. The status of women in India has still

not been able to escape the ruthless clutches of power and establishment. In the most unfair play it is the woman which has to pay the price. Nature has not been that much partial as the people in this country are for the women. Women's capabilities are measured against the power that never flowed and accumulated in the hands of the other gender. Life is not a bed of roses for women in this country. Every woman has but to pay the price of dedication, passion, her attitude and the way she wants to live. This lopsided system allows the power to play with their lives, suppress them and keep them low.

Meena Kandasamy has shown this disparity in her novel- 'When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife'. The protagonist of the novel is vocal as well but the 21st century women are forced to keep mum, their contributions are never recognized and they have to bear all kinds of abuses and violations. Even today the rate of atrocities and torture, sexual harassments at workplace, sexual abuse and day to day eve teasing that women facing all over the country and beyond the borders of this country, is tremendous and to the magnitude we can hardly believe.

There has been much done but superficially and far less has been implemented truthfully. We need to take an initiative to make this world a shared one and an equal one. Throughout the history women have paid the price and are still paying it. Imagine how life will be without this beautiful angel. They are unsafe on the streets and discriminated against at work. At home, they are often worse off: reduced to slavish drudges, they are maltreated in a hundred different ways.

Constantly derided, frequently bullied, sometimes assaulted and occasionally burnt to death.

Indian women in any avatar remain victims. They are the primary underdogs of an exploitative society where the law of the jungle persists: the more powerful thrive at the expense of the less powerful. That law, since time immemorial, has put men before women. Dowry deaths have shocked them out of their placid stoicism. Unchecked assaults on their bodies have appalled them. Rising political consciousness has emboldened a growing number, and a fertile political milieu has brought

them out into the streets to protest against their degradation.

Meena Kandasamy's novel, "When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" very strongly shows the gender bias attitude of the society where a husband exercises sexual superiority, by getting it on demand and through any means possible. The novel gives us a very heart rendering psychological description of what actually goes in the mind of the protagonist. Though she is treated worse than an animal but still she musters courage to fight against all odds-

"Words in memory

But she knows better, and launches a fierce fight back, refusing to forget her words, and never her sense of humour. She poignantly writes letters to imaginary lovers: "I write to you because I can." The writing follows a pattern: "Open a file, write a paragraph or a page, erase before lunch." Even as she lays bare her suffocating life in Primrose Villa, where she is trapped "in the space of three rooms and a veranda", with a husband who takes out belts and other gadgets to punish her, she is not lost for words. So, you have the leaves of a coconut tree playing "air-piano in the rain"; or the Mangalore rain that "trespasses into every private sphere", telling "me to run away in every way it can."

The title, unwittingly or not, reminds us of an illustrious predecessor, James Joyce, and his first novel, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", in which Stephen Dedalus or the writer's literary alter ego, finds words to create his identity and his art, to describe Dublin and her many moods, to defy convention on nationality, language, religion and fly past the 'nets flung at it to hold it back from flight'.

Before she flies away, the narrator of Kandasamy's book chillingly records her ordeal: "...when he hits me, the terror flows from the instinct that this will go further, that it doesn't end easily...."

Her talks with her parents holds up a mirror to society. We are made acutely aware of a mother's "unending, unconditional, overconditioned love" for her child and her desperate ways to make a

daughter's marriage work. Her mother telling her "a marriage is not magic"; or her father saying, "Do not talk too much. Never in history has anything been solved by constantly talking."

And always parental pressure in six words: What will we tell the world?

No one should have to say this in any relationship: "I climb into the incredible sadness of silence." Her husband tries to break the silence with more violence—and rape. It's when he threatens to kill her that realisation dawns on her that she is "more useful alive than dead," and she does not want to do anything that would endanger her life. In the end, she escapes, not thanks to anyone else but herself. She is the woman with wings, the woman who can fly at will, smuggled "out of her history, out of the dos and don'ts for good Indian girls." The book jacket describes the story as a "scathing portrait of traditional wedlock in modern India. Maybe not all traditional marriages, but quite a few."

Meena has given the real picture of Indian woman of 21st century and the misleading facts about love marriage and marital rape. In one of her interviews, she says

"And the more familiar the strange becomes, the more and more strange the familiar appears. That's how the once-upon-a-time fiery feminist becomes a battered wife. By observing, but not doing anything. By experiencing, but not understanding. By recording- but not judging."

Her novel is a powerful analysis of 'modern' marriage through the art of fiction. An unnamed narrator takes us into her world of a misogynist husband; a father embarrassed by the shame that a possible divorce would bring, and a mother who tells her this is how things are, to be silent and to accept the situation because the first year of marriage is always hard; a mother who makes a "spectacle" of the narrator's embarrassment and advises her that time will pass and all her troubles will be forgotten. A crucial aspect this book brings out is the way violence perpetuates in a seemingly "modern", "love" marriage. We are always told when we question the patriarchy of traditional marriages that "*modern marriages are not like that*",

"*love marriages are not like that*"- Kandasamy breaks this myth.

The novel reveals a lot depends on the matters of love. The narrator tells us "*love is not blind; it just looks in the wrong places.*" The narrator escapes the brutality and the curfews imposed on her by writing letters to imaginary lovers. The book is a meditation on love, marriage, violence and how someone who is a feminist gets trapped in an abusive marriage.

Meena Kandasamy's portrayal of modern love marriage which perpetuates in violence is very convincing. This novel is a treat with all the poetry the author includes as epigraphs: an exploration of art, love and female desire (which is almost non-existent in our cultural discourse). A woman's sexuality is for her husband to possess. If not wanted by her husband, the woman is supposed to have no wants and sexual desires of her own. The narrator's brutally honest account of marital rape and the way penetration is used as a weapon against women is numbing. It makes me, as a reader, wonder how we managed to normalise this violence on a woman's body.

The question "*What prevents a woman from walking out of an abusive relationship?*" is one the author deals with, through a deeply personal narration, urgent and yet poetic. She invokes Elfriede Jelinek, Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton and many more on various pages. This is not just a story of the abuse that the unnamed narrator faces at the hands of her misogynist husband, but also an account of the struggle a young writer faces in absolute isolation. The book also exemplifies her struggles where she has to remind herself that you are more useful alive than dead, over and over again. Meena Kandasamy says in one of interviews-

"I learn to criticize myself. [...] I concede that my feminism, with its obsession about sexuality, is a middle-class project that forgets the lived realities of millions of working-class women. In the same breath I also say that I continue to think that working-class women also have sexual desires and need equal rights, and that they need feminism too."

The narrative style subtly brings out the Brahmanical and patriarchal values inherent in the institution of marriage; the blame that is always placed on women, the need to be submissive for the marriage to 'work'. When the narrator recounts her conversations with her parents, it is nothing new to us, we have heard this time and again. The author explores various ways of dealing with issues of violence, and how society normalises abuse a woman faces at the hands of her husband. Kandasamy invokes lot of literary and philosophical inferences from Althusser strangling his wife to Beauvoir and Sartre's relationship.

This novel takes us on a journey through structures of toxic masculinity and patriarchy, which allow such violence to be perpetuated.

"Avoid confrontation," her father tells her while her mother tells her that "*Marriage is a give and take*". These token bits of 'wisdom' are nothing new to anyone who has contested marriage and its parochial ways of subordinating women.

This, as mentioned earlier, is the survival story of a writer in isolation. Our narrator uses her words fiercely, sometimes to play along with the abusive husband in order to avoid possible violence, other times to provoke him. Her words are her only shield weapons. "*I slip words between his ribs like a stiletto knife*".

This is a piece of work which illustrates how gender-oppressive ideology and behaviour can be perpetuated, irrespective of your education, class, political leanings. It warns us how a seemingly "successful" marriage could be violent, oppressive and abusive without anyone around being aware of its brutality.

This book seems like advice to our future selves that we are on our own. It is a warning: that it is easy for a once upon a time a feminist to get trapped in an abusive marriage. It is also possible for her to rationalise and try make sense of her abusive partner's violence like our narrator here says,

"He can be kind, I know he can, I've seen how tender he is with the homeless boys in town, but with me I know he will always choose to be cruel."

She is told time and again by her husband that it is her feminism that is the problem and not

his abusive behaviour. This stark realism have elements of autobiographical element too. Meena has shared her own experiences-

"Here's a friend asking me if there was nothing redeemable about my ex-husband. I do not know how to justify myself. What do I tell people like him, who want a balanced picture, who want to know that this was a real person with a rainbow side, just so that they are reminded of their own humanity? I realize that this is the curse of victimhood, to feel compelled to lend an appropriate colour of goodness to their abuser."

If we examine this fact and compare it with her protagonist, we find very clear similarities-

"I write letters to lovers I have never seen, or heard, to lovers who do not exist, to lovers I invent on a lonely morning. Open a file, write a paragraph or a page, erase before lunch. The sheer pleasure of being able to write something that my husband can never access. The revenge in writing the word lover again and again and again. The knowledge that I can do it, that I can get away with doing it. The defiance, the spite. The eagerness to rub salt on his wounded pride, to reclaim my space, my right to write."

The protagonist's father is very critical of his daughter's choice of education because he is not convinced of her well being-

"Instead, their only daughter was only going to Kerala, just a dodgy neighbouring state, doing one of those five-year integrated MA degrees that held no charm, required no intellectual prowess, and did not even further one's job prospects. 'Everyone from Kerala comes here to study, but our unique daughter decides to go there. What can I do?' My father's intermittent grumbling was amplified by my mother who spoke non-stop about sex-rackets, ganja, alcoholism and foreign tourists, making Kerala – a demure land of lagoons and forty rivers – appear more and more like Goa."

There is gender difference which makes the father discourage the choice of his daughter.

Kandasamy's language is very vivid and she writes with poetic intensity. The novel grips the imagination of the readers-

"Hope prevents me from taking my own life. Hope is the kind voice in my head that prevents me from fleeing. Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage." Yet sometimes this intensity undoes itself: "I imagine my vagina falling out of me like spare change. Not with jingling noises, but in a wet, pulpy, silent way ..."

But even as she is beaten down – as, through Kandasamy's use of stylistic devices such as repetition, the risk of desensitization is averted.

The novel becomes a meditation on the art of writing about desire, abuse and trauma. She knows that writing can be her salvation – but "how could I open up to strangers who buy the fiction performed for their benefit?" :becomes her answer. She includes chapter epigraphs from Anne Sexton, Kamala Das and Elfriede Jelinek

"art creates the
suffering in the first place"

thus linking herself to feminist writers beyond caste, race or culture, even beyond language difference. It's one way of subverting the argument made by the novel's abuser that the Indian female writer working in English is akin to a Raj-era whore.

In its echo of a canonical title and its shared themes, Kandasamy's novel has much in common with another recent portrait of the writer as a young wife, Gwendoline Riley's Baileys prize-shortlisted "First Love". Though the abuse Riley's heroine suffers is primarily emotional, her husband's verbal attacks on her body, sanity and skills are on a par with those of the abuser in Kandasamy's novel.

Gwendoline Riley's protagonist -Neve also undergoes the same trauma like her unnamed Indian counterpart, is further held in place by her own mother and by social expectations. But a specifically Indian form of toxic masculinity is dissected by Kandasamy.

Meena Kandasamy has drawn much praise for her first novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, which was published last year. 'Novel' might be an inadequate description of the book as it reads more like a piece of narrative fiction. The 30-year-old poet and activist assumes the role of sutradhar to tell the

horrific story of a massacre that took place in the village of Kilvenmani in Tamil Nadu on Christmas day in 1968. On that day, 44 farmers, including women and children, were burnt alive by thugs sent by land owners. The farmers, organised by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), had been demanding better pay.

"The Gypsy Goddess" can be easily examined on the basis of gender inequality. The story begins with an epic novelist, who, having penned a racy thriller involving a hetero-normative love pentagon between three men and two women, enjoys enormous popularity and unparalleled critical, commercial and cultural success. At the zenith of his glory, he realizes that his characters have outgrown his epic and have become household names. Every day, he hears of fanclubs being started for his hero, beauty parlours and massage centres named after his heroine, and body-building gyms being inaugurated in the name of his hero's side-kick brother. And, much as his characters inspire love, they also inspire hate. He witnesses the effigy of his villain being burnt at street corners across the country. He hears stories of men, reeling under the influence of his epic heroes, cutting off the noses of women who have lust in their eyes. This horror, this horror is too much to take. His greatest creation, his labour of love, has turned into a nation's Frankenstein's monster. He foresees a future of massacre and mayhem, bloodshed and bomb-blasts, deaths and demolition.

So he fled to foreign shores. He travelled far and wide and here and there in search of anonymity and, finally, he decided to settle down in a Tamil village where the men had as many gods as their forefathers had found the leisure to invent, where the business of customized, cash-on-delivery idol-making flourished and kept up with the demands of the idol-worshippers, where the men and the women and the children called upon their lord gods every time they had a nervous tic or whooping cough or a full bladder or a mosquito bite or a peg of palm toddy or an argument with the local thug, where they boozed and banged around every day of every week, where they affectionately addressed their fathers as mother-fuckers, where they killed and committed adultery and stole and lied about

everything at the court and the confession box, where they coveted each other's concubines and wives, and where they did all of this because the script demanded it. Evidently, this village in Tanjore was an author's paradise.

They welcomed him with proverbial open arms. Being unrepentant idol-worshippers, they soon cast the charismatic novelist into the role of a demigod and rechristened him Mayavan, Man of Illusion and Mystery. He was consulted on every important decision regarding the village community. In perfect role-reversal, they told him stories.

The exile ignored their stories for days on end, not allowing any character to have the slightest impact on him out of fear that he would slip into writing once again. But, as was bound to happen, one story about Kuravars, the roaming nomad gypsies, caught his fancy, drove him into a frenzy and rendered him sleepless.

On one night, seven gypsy women, carrying their babies, strayed and lost their way whilst walking back to their camp. When they came home the next day, the seven women were murdered along with their babies. Their collective pleading did not help. Some versions go on to add that there were seventeen women. Every version agrees that all of them had children with them. Some versions say these women and their children were forced to drink poison. Some versions say that these women were locked in a tiny hut and burnt to death along with their children. Some gruesome versions say that these women were ordered to run and they had their heads chopped off with flying discs and their children died of fright at seeing their mothers' beheaded torsos run. It is said that after these murders, women never stepped out of the shadows of their husbands.

The novelist, ill at ease, wants to teach a lesson to the village. In one stroke, he elevates the seven condemned women and their children into one cult goddess. He divines that unless these dead women are worshipped, the village shall suffer ceaselessly.

Overnight, the villagers build a statue of mud of Kurathi Amman, the Gypsy Goddess, and say their first prayers. Misers come to ruin, thieves are struck blind, wife-beaters sprout horns, rapists are

mysteriously castrated, and murderers are found dead the following morning, their bodies mutilated beyond recognition.

Faith follows her ferocity. Over time, she becomes the reigning goddess.

She loves an animal slaughtered in her honour every once in a while but, mostly, she is content with the six measures of paddy that are paid to her on every important occasion.

"The Gypsy Goddess" is equally animated, bristling with ideas and powered by black humour and righteous anger. Stylistically, it breaks many rules. The narrative is stubbornly non-linear. Instead of a central character we get an assortment of busy voices. "Well, I'm someone who gets easily bored," Kandasamy explains.

"And so I had to set myself a challenge. Also the story was so sprawling that I didn't want to limit myself to one person, I wanted to bring in the state machinery, the Communist Party, the workers, eyewitness accounts and police records."

This single-mindedness seems to have been there from the outset. "There are stories your agent wants you to write, stories your publisher wants you to write, that your readers want, but there are some stories that grab you and shock you and you think deserve to be told, they haunt you to the extent that you have to tell them in order to go on with your life. This story was important for me."

One of the standout passages in "The Gypsy Goddess" is the description of the slaughter that unfolds over five pages in a single unflagging and unpunctuated sentence. We want the ordeal to stop but Kandasamy knows that to convey the full force of the horror means keeping a foot on the pedal and intensifying, not abating.

"This was my fight against academic language, a hypocritical language drained of all passion, which makes the people you are writing about inaccessible. You see it in NGO reports on Gaza, Sri Lanka or any genocide, it's almost as if the blood has been sanitised and cleaned up. What's the point of it?"

Kandasamy wins this "fight" by cataloguing the fate of every victim, especially the children. "The death of children is a huge cultural thing, whether we're dealing with King Herod or Hitler. Children are

never your defined enemy, they are without any views, and so I think the killing of children is a very particular brutality and one has to talk about it. Like the Gujarat genocide, for instance, the most striking image was the children's bodies being lined up. These are horrors that you just can't forget."

But Kandasamy's novel is more than a fictionalised account of a national tragedy. The book's grimness is tempered by many of the wry narrator's writer-to-reader asides and "metafictive devices". When we are told the novel in our hands is "Tamil in taste, English on the tongue, free of all poetry and prosody, dished out in dandy prose", we question the narrator's reliability, for offsetting the stark and brutal imagery is an abundance of poetic flourishes.

A number of Kandasamy's strident and sardonic essays have focused on topics such as caste annihilation and women's rights. At the beginning of her novel her unvanquished women are strong fighters; at the end they have been punished for their insubordination.

"And this is still happening," she asserts. "Caste is still happening. Honour killings and dowry deaths. Indian men are still beating up their wives. These men associate violence with disciplinary action. Women are still expected to be submissive, to obey their husbands as if they are lord and master. The violence that takes place in homes is so normalised."

She carries on, warming to her theme. "I come from the Tamil culture where sex is treated as the utmost taboo, especially sexual violence – you just can't speak about it. Not only did the landlords carry out this massacre, they also sexually exploited many millions of these lower-caste and outcast women. And yet we live in a society where you cannot talk about it, where it's taken for granted that your landlord has rights over your body. Husbands, too. No one talks about marital rape in India and it happens to women across social strata."

This seems like an opportune moment to bring up the spate of gang-rapes in India. Kandasamy has written many impassioned opinion pieces on the topic. In one essay she rails against what she calls India's "cultural sanction of rape". She is keen to get things in proportion. "It is more

prevalent in Cambodia. And look at a country like South Africa where gang-rape is a kind of initiation tool of male bonding." However, she agrees that not nearly enough is being done in her own country to end the abuses inflicted upon socially marginalised Dalit women by caste-Hindu men.

"The state criminalises Dalit people," she says. "These people, especially the women, have the least recourse to justice. There was this judgment that said a Dalit woman's rape could not have taken place because a caste-Hindu man would not defile himself by raping an untouchable woman. So you have the judiciary that legitimises rape at every stage."

And the police? Are they like their counterparts in the book, still "puppets of the ruling classes"?

"Women are raped in police stations," she replies, flatly. "There was an incident in my city this year where a man was raped in custody. A five-year-old was raped in Delhi by a couple of men and the doctor said he had never seen anything like that in his life, but when the parents went to file a complaint, the police tried to bribe the parents and told them not to press a complaint."

"And recently in this place Badaun, the father of two girls who were later found hanging in a tree after being raped went to the police and told them his daughters were missing but the police wouldn't file a missing person's complaint. Afterwards, the same police said in an interview with Al Jazeera that the girls committed suicide."

The Gypsy Goddess is part story, part communist commentary, one is treated to quotations from individuals like Gramsci and post-modernists such as Derrida. Most of the commentary is a Kandasamy's monologue, but as I said earlier, she does it well and I have no complaints.

Is Kandasamy a dyed-in-the-wool-communist or is she an open-minded writer willing to consider different points of view?

The character Maayi suggests that she belongs to the latter class. Maayi, we are told, is the widow of the village's witch doctor who once tamed evil ghosts and vampires and chased away devils and demons. The first thoughts about Maayi were that

she would be placed under the guillotine by the brave workmen of Kilvenmani.

But no, they do nothing of that sort and one sees Maayi comfort the survivors of the massacre.

When describing the fire that wiped out so many innocent lives trapped in an enclosed space, Kandasamy says that

“Born without eyes, the fire had used its feet to move. Lacking the forgiveness of water, it had burnt them with blindness and bitterness. So, that morning, the cheri did not carry the roses-and-marigolds smell of death. Only the coppery sick-sweet smell of charred flesh: a smell like nothing else, a smell that was almost a taste, a smell that was meant to be smuggled to the grave. Through the smoke clouds that hung heavier than mist, the police van returned to Kilvenmani to fetch the dead.”

Since the official death toll was forty two, the two small babies who were charred to death were “habeas corpses”, Kandasamy proposes. As for the survivors of the massacre, “the police, in love with variety, generously give everyone multiple sections of the Indian Penal Code.”

“The Gypsy Goddess” imaginatively reconstructs the build up to the Massacre, the Massacre itself, and its aftermath. The protagonist is Meena Kandaswamy herself. The writing is self-reflexive, constantly drawing attention to its fictional nature and explaining its decisions. This is by no means unusual, but Kandaswamy thinks that it is an act of bombastic subversion.

To her credit, Kandaswamy has both the energy and the range to tell in many different ways. I am willing, she writes, to do anything to get this story across. “Anything” ranges from pastiches of PPA and Communist Party pamphlets, monologues in the voices of survivors, and (perhaps the best one) an inspector’s post mortem in the chapter Expression of Countenance:

“If and when he were to rise in rank, he decided to redesign the standard templates that policemen had to fill out for every case of theft or suspicious death. Most of them required the repetition of the same sequence of events in three different formats, and a few of them, like the

inquest form he was completing, posed rude, impertinent questions. It required him to list identification marks of the diseased, describe the corpse carefully...comment on the expression of countenance and the position of the limbs... He was certain that the problem with these forms was not merely the absence of specificity, but also the thoughtlessness of generalization — perhaps a naive idiot had demanded the fingerprinting of every corpse that went to the coroner, but only a cold blooded sadist could have come up with an instruction to the reporting police officer to note down the facial expression of a fire victim” (150).

This is Kandaswamy subtly and effectively writing the conventional realist narrative whose tropes she claims to have dispensed with. She shows, rather than directly tells, her reader how detached and callous the district’s so-called protective authorities are to those it is their job to look after. For the rest of the chapter, the author’s voice mutes itself completely and we are shown forty-two inquest forms:

“7. Female; height 4’8”; marital status not known; completely charred legs, teeth intact, visible genitalia and breasts...

Charred corpse; sex not identifiable; height not known; marital status not known; only skeletal remains hang loosely as body completely burnt away...21 charred skull and tiny body; other details not known”

We need not be told that this is brutal and clinical in order to feel it is so. “Marital status not known”, which appears in nearly all forty-two descriptions is blackly comic. Kandaswamy has a remarkable flair for pastiche and the transposition of Tamil speech into English. The former — probably aided by her years of experience as an activist and organizer — can be seen in her imitations of political pamphlets, which are mimetic, but not slavishly so, satirical without being exaggerated or parodic.

The novel’s prologue is a missive sent by Gopalkrishna Naidu to the chief minister of Tamil Nadu:

“The Communist leaders merely keep coming up with a list of demands and inciting their followers to go on strike. When their unreasonable demands are not acceded to, they approach the

government...and a temporary settlement is reached. This petitioner, like other cultivators, is of the opinion that every meeting has extended the privileges of the agricultural coolies and this has empowered and emboldened the Communist leaders, who seek to create famine in order to make this land a fertile breeding ground for Maoism...All these agreements have been a threat to peace and law and order" (4).

The overly formal register, the indignant appeals to calamity and stability, the pervasive sense of victimization (the absurdity of a landlord complaining about a coolie's privilege) are all rendered with a precise and light touch. In a later chapter, Kandaswamy once again gives us a pamphlet, but this time it is a Communist Party one:

"In the name of this Green Revolution, we are dependent on American fertilisers. In Tanjore district alone, the use of fertiliser has had a 2,000 percent increase. This is not healthy. We have seen in every village alcoholics who can only walk steadily when they are drunk. Our land has become addicted to these chemical fertilisers in the same manner — if she does not have her fill, she forgets her fertility. She stops bearing crops. The government does not care because these projects fill its coffers."

The tone here is polemical, the statistic (2000 per cent increase) probably exaggerated. One cannot deny, however, that it makes one angry, that it compels and stirs. This is both an excellent imitation of propaganda and, in itself, excellent propaganda. The analogy between the soil and an alcoholic is, in its melodramatic precision, worthy of Trotsky.

Less successful, however, is Kandaswamy's depiction of the massacre itself:

"and in desperation a mother throws her one -year-old son out of the burning hut but the boy is caught by the leering mobsters and chopped into pieces and thrown back in and in that precise yet fleeting moment of loss and rage everyone realises that they would die if their death meant saving a loved one and that they would die if their death meant staying together and that they would die anyway because it would not be as disastrous as living long enough to share this sight and so alone and together they prepare to resign themselves to

the fact that they have mounted their collective funeral pyre" (164).

This is one paragraph in a four page long unpunctuated sentence that uses paragraph breaks as caesuras. Every paragraph begins with "and, and most clauses are connected with it. The problem is not just the clumsy "in and in", the phrase "precise yet fleeting moment" which forces one to wonder what an imprecise moment might be, the verbosity that flattens the forceful rhythm the author is clearly trying to give her prose; it's not even the physical improbability of the child, once chopped-up, being thrown back into the hut as if still whole. Even if this were a well-executed description, it would be inadequate. In the face of atrocity, journalistic language, no matter how charged, cannot make us understand events more than abstractly. Kandaswamy gives us the details of the massacre, she puts it in context; she tells us that it is terrible and unjust, but she fails to convey any of this to us affectively. We forget neither our own nor Kandaswamy's presence when we read this. We are kept at a distance where we should be made intimate with events.

In 100 Years of Solitude, Garcia Marquez describes the Banana Worker Massacre:

"at that moment ...the wild mass was starting to get to the corner and the row of machine guns opened fire... The people in front had already done so, swept down by the wave of bullets. The survivors, instead of getting down, tried to go back to the small square, and the panic became a dragon's tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon's tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease. They were penned in, swirling about in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns." (223)

This is a portrayal of a real atrocity, but the subject has been adequately fictionalized. Marquez is writing from the perspective of a child sitting on José Aureliano Segundo's shoulders, a child who is neither visually omniscient nor entirely

comprehending of what goes on around him. We are immersed in the events being described, we feel the confusion and the senselessness of the violence. There are few more ways to be killed more impersonal than being shot at from above, and we are made to see the massacre from an aerial perspective, feel the anonymity of the crowd. The metaphors — a dragon's tail, an onion — in addition to being acute, convey the dehumanization necessary for such a killing to take place. A documentary could do more effectively what Kandaswamy does, but only fiction can do this.

Only fiction can do this. But must it? Atrocities, because of their scale as much as their brutality, distance us when we try to comprehend them. As Stalin is quoted as saying, the death of one person may leave us in tears while the deaths of millions will leave us cold. Our imaginations, our sympathies often cannot exert themselves enough to feel the latter. Fiction — intimate by nature — does the difficult and necessary work of bringing us closer to these events.

"The Gypsy Goddess" is set in rural Tamil Nadu. None of its events took place in English, nor would any of the actors involved have spoken it. Kandaswamy's field research in Kilvenmani would have been carried out in Tamil as well. This is a problem almost every piece of Indian writing in English has to face: how does one write about people who do not know the language you are writing in? The best known (and most criticized) solution is the "kichdi" idiolect of Salman Rushdie's novels which, though it bears no relation to the speech it portrays, can be wonderfully comic and inventive. Kandaswamy, obviously, cannot (nor would she want to) do the same thing; her novel is too realistic, too rooted in its context. So she opts for scattering bits of untranslated Tamil throughout the text, bending English syntax to imitate Tamil intonation, translating Tamil swear words literally into archaic sounding English (whoreson, for example). Sometimes she uses the fact of translation to distance her reader:

"These songs don't really work in translation. They are here only to remind the reader that the historical events of this novel did not take place in any English-speaking country. Don't you

even try to get familiar with what goes on around here, for it is not only the sounds of my native land you will find staggering." (127)

But the point of the novel, Kandaswamy herself states, is to inform her readers, to familiarize. Surely she is trying to bring them closer to her subject? There seems to be a dual and contradictory impulse here whereby the author wants both to pull the reader in and to push them away. Passages like this point to an insecurity and resentment that is and has been felt by most Indians writing in English. Many — maybe most — of their readers will inevitably be in England or America; a minuscule portion of their country's population can read their work. They do not want to be anthropologists of their homes; they don't want to be the West's interpreters of the East.

In a novel that constantly addresses its readers directly, a novel whose existence is justified by its readers, this produces something of a crisis. Who is the reader to whom the author is talking? We are given several hints:

"Just because this is a novel set in rural India, do not expect a herd of buffalo to walk across every page for the sake of authenticity. Eager mothers who hold salt and dried red chillies and circle their hands over your head before asking you to spit into their palms three times to trick spirits of the evil eye into abandoning you have been held back at my behest because I do not want to lose you to nostalgia or exotica. The tinkling bells of bullocks could add music to these sentences, but they have been muted so you can silently stalk the storyline." (26-7)

From where other than the diaries of medieval Portuguese travelers or the stories of Premchand would one expect all this? Kandaswamy's implied reader, it seems, is an ignorant romantic. More importantly, Kandaswamy seems to assume that this reader is foreign. This is not just incidental to the novel; it's necessary. Without this imagined reader Kandaswamy would have had to change completely the novel's tone; she may not even have had to write it in the first place. At the beginning of the book, Kandaswamy discusses Kathleen Gough, the Marxist anthropologist of rural South India:

"If only I could get you to read all of her work, familiarise yourself with Marxist theory and take in all the information tucked away in the footnotes, I would have no need to write this novel. Sadly, you are too lazy for research papers.

To strike a fair balance, would you like to look into old American newspapers? Some headlines say the whole story: 'Madras is Reaping a Bitter Harvest of Rural Terrorism'; 'Rice Growers' Feud With Field Workers Has Fiery Climax As Labor Seeks Bigger Share of Gain from Crop Innovations'. In a way, that is all there is to it. This novel has only to fill in the blanks." (22)

To the question "What should a novel do with atrocity?" we have here Kandaswamy's answer-

"It should spread awareness that people are too lazy to acquire on their own. How this differs from pamphleteering is unclear to me. It supplements reportage by offering moral interpretation, imagining the gaps, the happenings we do not know about to produce a coherent narrative. "The Gypsy Goddess" does all of this, but as the Marquez passage shows us, fiction is capable of doing far more. A novel should add indispensably and uniquely to our understanding of its subject." Kandaswamy is clearly capable of portraying what she truly believes be it the societal injustice of the unnamed woman protagonist of "When I hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" or the ruthless political killing of majorly women in Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968 but still these dead women await justice..... The novelist has put forth scenario that demand solutions.

Bibliography

"The Hindu". Archived from the original on 18 January 2016. "Porterfolio" Archived "Huffington Post

Warrier, Shobha (21 May 2012). "They don't like women who are flamboyant about sexuality". Rediff.com. Retrieved 9 March 2013.

Jeyan, Subash (6 March 2011). "In a language darkly..." The Hindu. Archived from the original on 6 November 2012. Retrieved 2 March 20

Singh, Pallavi (8 March 2010). "Dalits look upon English as the language of

emancipation". Mint. HT Media Ltd. Archived from the original on 3 August 2015. Retrieved 8 March 2013.

Rangan, Baradwaj (29 April 2011). "The Politics of Poetry". The Hindu. Archived from the original on 16 October 2013. Retrieved 2 March 2013.

"Independent". Archived from the original on 9 October 2016.

"MeenaKandasamy". The Hindu. 28 January 2013. Retrieved 8 March 2013.

"Sampsonia Way". Archived from the original on 9 October 2016.

"Poetry collection". The Hindu. 19 February 2007. Retrieved 3 March 2013.

Tellis, Ashley (30 January 2011). "Poems of an outdated, designer feminism". The New Indian Express. Archived from the original on 23 October 2013. Retrieved 8 March 2013.

Chakraborty, Abin; Jana, Ujjwal (2012). "Venomous Touch: Meena Kandasamy and the Poetics of Dalit Resistance" (PDF). *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*. **3**. Retrieved 2 March 2013.

Kandaswamy Meena (2017). *When I was hit or A portrait of writer as a young wife, Jaggernut -Jadhav, Narendra. Outcaste: A Memoir*. New Delhi: Viking, 2003. Print.

_____. *The Gypsy Goddess*. London: Atlantic, 2014. Print. –

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004. Print.

Mukherjee, Sumana. "Book Review | The Gypsy Goddess." <http://www.livemint.com/>. Livemint, 10 May 2014. Web. 5 Jan. 2017. .

Murugkar, Lata. *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991. Print. –

Nagaraja, D. R. *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*. Bangalore: South Forum in Association with Institute for Cultural Research and Action, 1993. Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Studying Literature: An Introduction to Fiction and Poem*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013. Print. –

-
- Phuley, Jotirao. Slavery. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2008. Print. -Rao, Raja. Kanthapura. New York: New Directions, 1963. Print. –
- Satyanarayana, K. "Caste as the Baggage of the Past: Global Modernity and the Cosmopolitan Dalit Identity."
- Dalit Literatures in India.Ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi Barak.N.p.: Routledge India, 2015. 291-308. Print. –
- Sivakami, P. The Grip of Change: And Author's Notes. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006. Print. -Subramanian, Aishwarya. "Book Review: Meena Kandasamy's The Gypsy Goddess is undercut with anger." <http://www.hindustantimes.com/>. Hindustan Times, 08 Nov. 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2017
-