



Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's first novel, The Gypsy Goddess, is an experimental novel that takes inspiration from the Kilvenmani massacre to depict the struggle, plight, and injustice meted on a group of Dalit agricultural labourers. The novel through its radical postmodern structure tries to confront the dynamics of caste and gender in Indian society. This paper argues that the novel beginning from the title itself gives a pivotal position to women and Dalit women in particular. It attempts to discuss the problems, struggles, and spirit of Dalit women in the novel which are specific to Dalit women and which are marginalized by mainstream feminist movements. This paper believes that though the novel fundamentally opposes the nexus between the state and upper caste landlords and bats for communism, it also complicates the relationship between class struggle and caste questions in India. Therefore, this paper by analyzing The Gypsy Goddess wants to emphasize the necessity of discussion regarding the workings of caste and gender among Indians and Dalits in particular.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, Postmodern Fiction, Caste, Dalit Feminism, Class Struggle.

Introduction

Meena Kandasamy's debut novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, published in 2014 occupies a unique position in the stream of Dalit literature. Beginning from autobiographical narratives, Dalit literature has produced a diverse range of literary texts employing various kinds of genres and modes such as poetry, songs, fiction, autobiography, magic realism, hypertexts, historical novels, graphic novels, etc. Within Dalit literature, Dalit women's writings occupy a unique position by accounting for the limitations of male Dalit literature and mainstream feminist movements thereby presenting a unique sense of consciousness and identity. As Geetha notes, "Since the problems of Dalit women are subsumed under the mainstream male Dalit movement and the upper-caste feminist movement, Dalit women have endeavored to create a distinct space for themselves by mobilizing a Dalit feminist movement" (5). *The Gypsy Goddess* narrates the events preceding and succeeding the horrific Kilvenmani massacre of 1968 where upper-caste landlords conspired to burn down the Dalit streets of Pallars, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars. This novel tries to deal with not just Dalit consciousness



but also Dalit feminist consciousness and to accomplish this, the novel resorts to postmodern techniques of narration. In this light, we argue that this novel should be seen as a unique addition to the diverse stream of Dalit literature.

Depiction of Dalit Women in *Gypsy Goddess*

Though the novel's principal concerns revolve around feudalism, relationship between caste and class, and more significantly, the traumatic events of the massacre, the novel still couldn't escape from being structurally contiguous with the voices and concerns of women (here Dalit women). Regarding the title, the author shares a legend centered around gypsy women known as "Kuruvars":

On one night, many many nights ago, 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. (Kandasamy 34-35; Our Emphasis)

The above passage indicates a foreshadowing effect wherein, the women and children of Kilvenmani also meet a similar kind of death at the later part of the novel. Just like the legend of gypsy women, the truth of the Kilvenmani massacre was also distorted/ buried/ suppressed by the "versions" orchestrated by police and landlords—"Framing a flimsy case, the police prepare the ground for the landlords to have sufficient escape routes" (146); "However, the Special Additional First-Class Magistrate was not very pleased with our [people of Kilvenmani] versions" (151). The legend could represent the tragic helplessness of the Kilvenmani women and children who had to stay in their houses during the massacre while their men were trying to free their fellow men that were under the landlord's captivity. This rings a bell with what K. Geetha rightly observes, "in any communal clash the worst-affected are Dalit women" (5).

The author also speaks to the reader regarding the selection of the title and gives a postmodern justification for the title—"I have a great title. I have a great story. They don't belong to each other" (Kandasamy 33). Owing to the postmodern features such as undecidability and multiple possibilities, it would be wrong to infer that the title categorically represents a particular perspective. However, we could argue that this irrelevance between the title and story is equivalent to the irrelevance between the truth of the Kilvenmani massacre and the verdict of the court which acquitted all the perpetrators. This could suggest that the form of the novel is complicit with its content. As pointed out by Dolores Herrero,

To give just one obvious example, the survivors of the massacre tell their own trauma stories to the court and the commission or, rather, they strive to work through their



traumatic blockage in order to desperately try to articulate the unspeakable into a partially comprehensible narrative, but most of them fail, and these official institutions are not pleased with their versions. (8)

Similarly, we also see the women's contiguous position in the novel when the author presents us her deliberations on how she should begin the story. She narrates us how she initially thought of writing small fragmented paragraphs but later decided not to. However, she puts the small paragraphs within the novel. In these paragraphs, she traces the biography of the "old woman" (Maayi). This biography is replete with the hardships of Dalit women and their subjugation by the upper-castes:

...during the great famine, she [Maayi's grandmother] lost her husband and her three little sons. She managed to stay alive eating handfuls of mud. . . . The death, due to septic shock, resulted from the use of an agricultural sickle to cut her [Maayi's mother] umbilical cord. . . . Dragged from her [Maayi] grandmother's home at the outskirts of the town, the fourteen-year-old girl heard nothing but her own screams through the night; the landlord-rapists did not stop... (Kandasamy 30)

These fragmented paragraphs also talk about how Maayi's husband was "mysteriously" killed after he protested against caste discrimination (30). They also mention how the killing of Sannasi's brother—Thayyan—was distorted by the police as "arson-related accident" (30). These paragraphs end with Maayi deciding to join hands with the Communist party to avenge her husband's death (31). Through the biography of Maayi, the author highlights the fact that the struggles and oppression of Dalits would return again and again. They also suggest that as long as this caste oppression exists, Dalits have to bravely resist with resilience. This necessity of Dalit resilience seen from Dalit women's position is encapsulated in the statement—"life is circular"—written by the author during her defense for adopting a non-linear narrative style for the novel.

The indomitable fighting spirit and resolve of Kilvenmani's Dalit women are brought from the contiguity to the foreground when the author discusses the manifold ways through which these women protest, struggle and seek justice particularly regarding women-specific problems such as equal wages, breaks during work-time to take care of infants, etc (53). Along with gender-specific problems, they also fight for their whole community's problems. Hence, it becomes imperative to recognize the author's attempt to demand emancipation from the Dalit women's subjective position. This is reflected when the author writes, "Most of the time, they fight for everybody" (53), which acknowledges the argument—"since they [Dalit women] know what it would take to change [the world and in] identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is" (Mohanty 213). This idea of reclaiming centrality for Dalit women continues further in the novel in different contexts. The Dalits of Kilvenmani assemble to sort out their dilemma of whether to stick with the Communist Party or not. Instead of "typical" village meetings, the author indicates that, "this time the men did not do most of the talking" (Kandasamy 77). This explicit emphasis of contrariness simultaneously serves two purposes: acknowledging the patriarchy



within Dalits and giving voice to Dalit women to assert their rights. This combined with the accounting of caste atrocities against women perfectly goes in line with the widely accepted states of *intersectionality* (of caste, class, and gender) and *double patriarchy* (by upper-caste men and Dalit men) experienced by Dalit women. The village meeting ends with the women convincing the men to stand by the Communist Party as it helped in protecting the honor of Dalit women (77).

The significance of Dalit women is made to sustain even after the the horrific massacre takes place. The author describes the diverse range of post-traumatic responses of Kilvenmani's people. Men like Muni "drown their sorrows with drink" (128); Karuppaiah couldn't control his tormenting thoughts and takes "away the only life he had" (133); Nandan was fuming with rage that could "vanish" (137). The responses and reactions of women hold our attention. The horror of the massacre gets reflected through the hallucinations and psychological illness exhibited by the women like Letchumi, Armugam's daughter, Packiam, etc (127, 129, 134). Though Maayi—the old woman—states that, "everyone in Kilvenmani carried the ghosts of their dead", the reactions of women, in particular, maintain their distinctness (127). Men were trying either to forget the horrific massacre or to settle scores with anger. But women were trying not to let go of the memories of the dead by clinging onto the traumatic experience so as to preserve their story for the posterity. Maayi also says that those men who were physically hurt at least had pain to "prevent them [men] from disappearing to other worlds" (133). Though both women and men were trying to preserve their anger and not give in to madness, the author maintained a difference in representing the reactions of women so that women's consciousness gets its due space.

Even more interesting is the role of Thangamma. She resists being a victim and instead, she lives to take care of the village and share her story of brave fight against the assault during the massacre by Kerosene Govinda—one of the landlords. The author writes, "Thangamma had to survive for the sake of the village... She never cried so they [journalists] listened to her and asked her more questions with the hope that she would start weeping and they could go back with a story of how strong women crumbled. She never cried in front of them" (132). The most crucial women character in the novel is Maayi. After the massacre, she takes up the job of healing the village from the trauma and shows utmost resilience when she says, "Even if all of us are going to die, we will die in Kilvenmani itself" (140). Hence, it is more than clear that Dalit women are paramount both in the form as well as in the content of the novel.

Caste versus Class

Communism in India throughout history played more than a significant role in fighting for the emancipation of laborers, workers, tribals, and other downtrodden classes. However, Dalitism often shared a chequered relationship with Communism. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his quintessential work—*Annihilation of Caste*—brings out the ground reality responsible for the chasm between Communism and Dalitism:



The assurance of a Socialist leading the revolution that he does not believe in Caste, I am sure will not suffice. The assurance must be the assurance proceeding from a much deeper foundation—namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity. Can it be said that the proletariat of India, poor as it is, recognises no distinctions except that of the rich and the poor? Can it be said that the poor in India recognize no such distinctions of caste or creed, high or low? If the fact is that they do, what unity of front can be expected from such a proletariat in its action against the rich? How can there be a revolution if the proletariat cannot present a united front? (16)

Nevertheless, either Dalit literature or Dalit activism did not abandon interpreting the Indian society through the Marxist framework. Sharankumar Limbale identifies the fundamental features common to Dalitism and Marxism—humanity, revolt against exploitation, and human liberation (75). However, the way communist parties worked in India time and again revealed their failure in eradicating the caste blockade and in creating a strong united working class. The wholesale import of class analysis for applying to the Indian context is fraught with sociological problems.

In this novel, the main struggle is between the landlords—represented by Gopalakrishna Naidu—and the agricultural laborers of Kilvenmani and the other villages of East Tanjore (or Nagapattinam). The relationship between them is obviously feudal. The Communist Party inevitably takes up the fight of the laborers and engages in an intense ideological battle with the landlords. However, the class relations alone shouldn't seem to us as obvious but also the caste relations—landlords belong to a few “upper” castes and laborers belong to many “lower” castes. Though the novel privileges class struggle, the shortcomings and failures of Communism in dealing with the caste problem are not ignored. While explaining how Communism entered into East Tanjore, she writes, “twentieth-century Marxists would turn feudal, almost fascist, and seek to silence everybody who spoke of caste in place of class” (Kandasamy 25). The author doesn't want to reduce the Dalits' struggle in India into a homogenous narrative of class struggle. Rather she wants the reader to recognize the reluctance of caste to get subsumed under the monolith blanket of class:

After such class-based classification, the reader will encounter many intermediary castes: Vellalar, Naidu or Naicker, Agamudaiyar, Mudaliar, Chettiar, Reddiyar, Konar, Kallar, Vanniyar, Nadar. She will be plagued by the plight of the untouchable castes: Pallar, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar. The reader will be lost in such an alphabet soup. She will learn that life in these parts operates along lines of caste, and not just along structured feudal relations governing the modes of production. (49-50)

Nevertheless, the Kilvenmani Dalits stood by the Party because “they [party] were fighting for the rights of the workers and the tillers and the toilers... movement [communist] would fight and uproot centuries of caste and feudalism” (79). The Party acted as a source of strength to stand against the atrocities of landlords and police brutality. But the Communists themselves are conscious about their shortcomings: “the caste mentality that divides the



working classes, the slackness of their party's high command... (55). The novel's first chapter begins with a petition written by the landlord and the architect of the Kilvenmani massacre—Gopalakrishna Naidu—representing the ideologies of feudalism and casteism. Similarly, communists also write a pamphlet presenting their demands for higher wages, land redistribution, and justice regarding caste atrocities. In this pamphlet, communists acknowledge that “‘untouchable’ castes, who form the majority of the working-class peasantry...” (65). This acknowledgment if considered as the criticism against communist parties of India, it becomes inevitable to accept that the “cadre” of these parties is composed of Dalits but their leaders come from the “upper” castes (Ilaiah 61). The novel clearly states that “the red salute could only unite up to a certain point. Fault-lines began to appear along the issue of untouchability. People started choosing convenient options that kept their caste codes intact” (Kandasamy 82). The leakage of feudalistic casteism into the communist parties is revealed when the author writes, “The party demanded loyalty: the feudal origins of this important trait were conveniently forgotten” (82). The author also states that the Party was not cautious enough when the Dalits of Kilvenmani were complaining about the open threats issued by Gopalakrishna Naidu (82). Instead, the Party inclined more towards the parliamentary power politics (83).

We argue that these failures of communist parties are symbolically represented during various instances of the novel. For instance, while addressing the Dalits, Gopalakrishna Naidu uses the phrase “Harijan agricultural labourers” (88). This indicates the need for eradicating caste before class. As long as laborers are divided by caste, the working class cannot give a united fight against predatory capitalism. Similarly, the background of the massacre actually begins with Perumal Naidu—one of the landlords' men—deliberately assaulting Muniyan—the village headman. Perumal Naidu “threw caste slurs” on Muniyan before he hit Muniyan with a log of firewood (109). This act of Perumal Naidu points to the fact that the hierarchy fundamental to the caste system gives a pretext for the oppressors to crush down any kind of resistance put forth by the oppressed. That's why the problem of caste needs to be resolved before the issue of class struggle emerges. Finally, it could be argued that the way the courts asked for a “single story” instead of multiple accounts of the massacre resonates with Communism's eagerness to eclipse the caste specificity and present a monolith class. To clearly understand the specificity of caste we could turn to Anupama Rao. She argues that:

The engagement with the idea of proletarian emancipation was critical, but it was also not sufficient. Labor was political because the identity of labor derived from its antagonism to capital. Thinking stigma through labor appeared to be productive and useful. Yet to fully transform caste into class would ignore caste's history as (Hindu) violence. Like religion (and Hinduism), labor, too, was ultimately only a partial force in accounting for Dalit dispossession. (55)

The tendency to undermine casteism is reflected through the propaganda of the Communist Party in the novel. The author writes, “Some days it was about caste, but only at the edges, at



the wing tips, so that it could be brushed off before we would all launch into flight” (Kandasamy 142). This explains the eagerness of the Party in creating a universal proletariat without first eradicating the stigma of caste. As Anupama Rao writes,

Rather than deriving a model of emancipation through labor as Marx proposed, Ambedkar turned to the universality of rights. The response to Dalits’ dilemma did not call for politicizing labor as such via the general strike. Rather, it required, as a first step, the dissolution of stigma through the inclusion of Dalits in capitalist social life. (54)

The politics behind this stigmatization of caste is best explained when Kandasamy writes,

Banned by holy books from using a plough and believing that all manual labour was disgusting and degrading and fit only for the lower castes, the Brahmins would sublet their land. Because what was deemed fit for the Brahmin was deemed fit for everyone who wanted to feel superior and everyone who wanted to dominate, the landowning Naidus and the landowning Mudaliars and the landowning OtherCastes started to avoid all manual labour, too. We [Dalits] were told that this aversion to manual labour was a defining feature of ruling-class behaviour. We were told that Marx had written about this. We were told that because we worked with our hands, we were the working class. We were also told that because we worked, and because they hated work, they hated us. (142)

Hence, this novel instead of retelling the Kilvenmani massacre entirely through a Marxist class framework reflected the unaddressed gaps between class and caste. By this, the novel suggested that the Kilvenmani massacre was as much about caste as it was about class. Therefore the Dalits of Kilvenamni rightly observed that the Communist Party is both a “matter of pride” and a “matter of limit” (Kandasamy 56).

Conclusion

To sum up, *The Gypsy Goddess* represented the consciousness of Dalit women as well as addressed the caste-class relationship, and through this, it could be argued that the real emancipation of Dalits necessitates indispensable engagement with Dalit women subjectivity and Caste specificity. Meena Kandasamy, through her radical style of narration, retold the Kilvenmani massacre by incorporating Nagapattinam’s history which she begins from the 16th-century Portuguese arrival and takes the readers to the 1980s of Tamil Nadu. Within this long history, she mentions German Protestant missionaries who visited Nagapattinam, Mao and Ho Chi Min during the burgeoning of Communism in East Tanjore, Gandhi (although she is skeptical about his approach to caste), Periyar Ramaswamy, Anna Durai, Karunanidhi, etc. All these historical figures in one way or the other influenced the people of Nagapattinam. But she did not mention Dr. B. R. Ambedkar even in a vague way. Ambedkar did not have a specific role in the Nagapattinam’s history. Still, he is the principal architect of Dalit Consciousness. However, this novel or Meena Kandasmy are not complicit with the “systemic elision of Ambedkar” (Christopher 74). Though Ambedkar is absent, the novel still represented Dalit consciousness by depicting Dalits as protesting against caste discrimination,



fighting for their self-respect, and more significantly seeking a complete revolution. Thus this novel agrees with B. Krishnappa, a Dalit critic from Karnataka, who views Dalit literature as signifying protest and clamouring for revolution (109). Therefore, *The Gypsy Goddess* for representing the Dalits' struggle through metafictional and postmodern shrewdness should be considered as a significant work within the diverse stream of Dalit literature.

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