



**When a Dalit Woman Speaks:
Resisting Casteism and Untouchability
in Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*
(Selected Poems)**

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عندما تتحدث إحدى نساء الداليت: مقاومة الطبقيّة والنبذ في المجموعة
الشعرية الأولى لمينا كانداسامي "اللمس Touch" (قصائد مختارة)

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الملخص:

كان الأدب ولا يزال الوسيلة التي تجسد معاناة الشعوب؛ إذ يمثل صوت الطبقات المنبوذة والمهمشة داخل أي مجتمع طبقي. إن الصراع بين الطبقات الاجتماعية قديم قدم الزمان، وخاصة بين سكان الوطن الواحد. هذا هو الحال في شبه القارة الهندية؛ حيث يشهد المجتمع الهندي حالة من "الطبقية" "Casteism" أو ما يمكن تسميته "بالنظام الطبقي الهندي". فالطبقية هي نظام اجتماعي سقيم تتجم عنه ممارسات خبيثة يتعرض لها أفراد الطبقات المنبوذة مثل القهر والإذلال والقمع. كذلك فإن "النبذ" أو حظر المساس "Untouchability" يعد أحد نواتج الطبقيّة. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف الطريقة التي تبنتها مينا كانداسامي - شاعرة تنتمي إلى طبقة الداليت المنبوذة- في مقاومة كلا من النبذ والطبقية التي يتعرض لها أفراد الداليت المضطهدين في مجلدها الشعري الأول "Touch" (٢٠٠٦). في واقع الأمر تواجه طبقة الداليت المنبوذة تمييزاً عنصرياً في شتى مناحي الحياة على أيدي أفراد الطبقات الهندوسية المهيمنة (البراهما). تمثل كانداسامي الصوت الغاضب لطبقة الداليت المنبوذين. يعالج المجلد

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الشعري الأول لكانداسامي موضوعات رئيسة أشهرها النبذ والطائفية والقمع والاضطهاد والقهر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النبذ ، الطبقة ، المقاومة ، الاضطهاد ، القهر ، الداليت.

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Abstract:

Literature has always been and is still the medium through which people's sufferings have been revealed. It is the voice of the silenced and marginalized strata inside a stratified society. Since the earliest times, the conflict among social castes has always been omnipresent, especially among the inhabitants of the same land. This is particularly true in the case of the Indian subcontinent, where the Indian society has been witnessing a state of "casteism" or what can be called "the Hindu caste system". As a matter of fact, casteism is an evil social system that results in such malevolent acts as subjugation, humiliation and oppression to be practiced by upper caste members against the marginalized groups of lower castes. Moreover, the despicable act of "untouchability" is an evil byproduct of casteism. This paper purports to explore the way in which Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit poet, resists such acts of casteism and untouchability in her first volume *Touch* (2006). Indian Dalit literature is mainly concerned with the sufferings and pains of the Dalits. Meena Kandasamy epitomizes the angry voice of the down-trodden Dalits, the *untouchables*. The main themes

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tackled by Kandasamy in *Touch* are untouchability, casteism, oppression, persecution and subjugation.

Keywords: Untouchability, Casteism, Resistance, Oppression, Subjugation, Dalits.

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Introduction to the Hindu Caste System

The caste system in India is not a modern phenomenon. Rather, it traces its origins back to the pre-Christian era. The word "caste" derived its origin from the Spanish word "*casta*," which signifies a "race" or a "social class". According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word "caste" means, "One of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restrict the occupation of their members and their association with the members of other castes." Over the course of its history, the Indian society has witnessed a state of class stratification or what can be called "the Hindu caste system." Such a system is principally rooted in religion (Hinduism) besides being based on the division of labour.

Regrettably, the caste system in India divides the Indian Hindus into four main social classes as follows: *Brahmana* or *Brahmin* (scholarly community), which consists of "those engaged in scriptural education and teaching, essential for the continuation of knowledge" (Kalsekar 92). The second Hindu caste is *Kshatriya* (warriors or political community), which includes those Indians who "take on all forms of public service, including administration, maintenance of law and order, and defense" (92). Then comes *Vaishya* (mercantile community), which combines those who are involved in "commercial activity such as businessmen" (93). The fourth Hindu caste is *Shudra* (service providing

community), which includes those who work as semi-skilled and unskilled laborers.

As mentioned above, casteism is embedded in the major religion of India, i.e. Hinduism. It is Brahma who originated casteism in the Hindu society. In her book *Phule Ambedkar Movement* (2002), the Dalit woman writer, Minakshi Moon, argues, “The birth of caste hierarchy is from the Brahma; Brahmins are born from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas from the arms of Brahma, Vaishyas form the thighs of Brahma and Shudras from the foot of Brahma” (87). According to the Hindu beliefs, Brahma is considered to be the Lord of creation and goodness. He is the Lord of Lords as well as the first member of the Hindu Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva).

However, there is a fifth caste, the *Dalits*, who officially do not belong to the four main castes mentioned above. In the eyes of the Hindu upper castes, those Dalits are considered socially degraded members of the Indian society. They are also called the “untouchables” or “outcastes”. In his book *Report on the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes* (2012), K. B. Saxina declares:

The ‘untouchables’ were not a part of this Scheme. However, over a period of time, the exigencies of situation led to the addition of a Fifth group to this classification which was not given any ‘caste status’ as such, but nonetheless integrally linked to the social order and is referred to as ‘untouchables’ or ‘outcastes’. The membership of this group

was determined by birth and could not be changed by individual effort or social acceptance. (2)

Regrettably, the Hindu Caste System revolves around two main concepts: purity and pollution, with purity ascribed to those of the higher classes (the Brahmins at the top) whereas pollution to those of the lower classes (the Dalits at the bottom). In its literal sense, the *Free Dictionary* tells us that the word “untouchable” means “a member of a large formerly segregated hereditary group in India having in traditional Hindu belief the quality of defiling by contact a member of a higher caste”. According to this definition, the untouchable is not permitted to touch any member of the higher social castes lest he/she would defile or pollute them.

It is the norm of any sacred religious book to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. To clarify, such evil acts as casteism and untouchability should be fought and resisted in the main sacred Hindu texts. Disappointingly, the incurable sickness of untouchability is

scattered in the popular scripture like *The Mahabharata* when a great saint Uttanga refused to drink water from a Nishad; the disguised Indra said that he would prefer death to accepting water from an untouchable. Eklavya was excluded from studying the art of archery at the hands of the great guru Drona because of the one reason that he is from the lower caste. Shambuka in

The Ramayana, Eklavya in *The Mahabharata* are some of the famous models to show the ill-treatment of untouchables in so called great Indian epics. (Chelliah 31)

It is worth mentioning that the despicable act of untouchability is a byproduct of casteism. In this, Gurusamy argues that untouchability “is prompted by the spirit of social aggression and the belief in purity and pollution that characterises casteism” (17). Accordingly, the Dalits are considered polluted people as well as the lowest class in the caste order. They are assigned the jobs that are related to anything impure such as “removing human waste (known as ‘manual scavenging’), dragging away and skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather, making and fixing shoes, and washing clothes” (17). Dalits are obliged to reside outside the village lest their physical presence should pollute the real village.

Whereas the higher caste Hindus live in well-facilitated houses, the Dalits’ houses are both “inferior in quality and devoid of any facilities like water and electricity” (Gurusamy 18). Compared with the higher-caste Hindus, Dalits are not allowed to use the wells used by the Hindus, go to their barber shops or enter their temples. With regard to jobs, they are paid less than the higher-caste Hindus, and rarely promoted. At schools, Dalit children are assigned to clean toilets and to eat in separate places. Moreover, the level of casteism touches the names given to them. To illustrate, Dalit children are given such inferior names as “Kachro (filth), Melo (dirty), Dhudiyo (dusty), Gandy (mad), Ghelo (stupid), Punjo (waste)” (18).

The 1950 National Constitution of India had issued enactments that legally abolish any practice of untouchability. However, those measures have not had a positive impact on the reality of daily life for most Dalits as the Indian government frequently tolerates oppression and open discrimination aimed at this group. In the year 2000, some official reports announced the murder of 486 registered cases of persons “belonging to scheduled castes besides 1034 cases of rape” (Chakraborty 39). However according to the 2008 reports, the numbers “have shot up to 626 and 1457 respectively” (39). In case a Dalit member violates any of the unjust rules set by the upper castes, the entire Dalit community “will face some punishments that often take the form of “denial of access to land or employment, physical attacks on Dalit women, and the burning down of Dalit homes” (18).

The question now is, “Why is all such oppression exercised against the Dalits?”. The answer is given by K. B. Saxina when he says that India

has witnessed increase in both caste and communal violence since independence which the processes of modernization have not abated... The frequency and intensity of violence is an offshoot of desperate attempts by the upper caste groups to protect their entrenched status against the process of disengagement and upward mobility among lower castes resulting from affirmative action of State Policy. (1)

Thus, it has become an undeniable fact that the evil Hindu caste system is the root of all the violence

experienced by the Dalits at the hands of the upper caste members.

Meena Kandasamy: A Freedom-Fighter Dalit Poet

Indeed, the practices of oppression and untouchability exercised against the Indian Dalits had produced in such Dalit writers as Meena Kandasamy both the rebellion and the desire of death for freedom. However, which type of freedom do they aspire to accomplish? The answer is freedom from all forms of injustice and suppression. Such Dalits dream of being liberated from the prison of subjugation and suppression to fly freely in the open world of freedom.

Meena Kandasamy, born in 1984, is a gifted Dalit poet and novelist writing in English, besides being a translator and an activist. She was the editor of *The Dalit*, a bimonthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network, first published in 2001. Such a magazine had served as a platform to “record atrocities, condemn oppressive hierarchies and document the forgotten heritage of the Dalits” (Kandasamy 143). Kandasamy is a highly credited poet since her works have been published 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.” (Mahto 12).

As a poet, Kandasamy has made a significant contribution to Indian English poetry. She employs diverse elements of resistance in her poetry, particularly her first volume *Touch*, published in 2006. With the help

of her poetic creativity and sensibility, Kandasamy could wage a militant assault on the oppressive practices exercised against the untouchable Dalits. Her first anthology *Touch* is made up of eighty-four poems. It is amazing to find out that the number, eighty-four, is analogous to the year in which Kandasamy was born, 1984.

Kandasamy's *Touch* bears a brilliant one-page foreword by the prominent Indian poet, Kamala Das. In this foreword, Das admires Kandasamy's spirit of resistance towards the untouchability exercised against the marginalized and oppressed members of her lowest Hindu caste (the Dalits):

Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive. "Happiness is a hollow world for fools to inhabit" cries Meena at a moment of revelation. Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips. Older by nearly half a century. (Kandasamy 7)

Here, India is described as the country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion. For this, Kandasamy dedicates the essence of her work to wage a revolution against casteism and untouchability. In this regard, Abin Chakraborty states, "Meena Kandasamy's poetry offers significant beacons of light in this regard as it rigorously militates against the very

discourse of caste and that myth of Brahmanical glory which continues to prevail in various areas of India's national life" (38). Then, Das acknowledges the superiority of Kandasamy's poetic vision, wishing 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" (Kandasamy 7).

Having been informed of both "casteism" and "untouchability," let us be acquainted with the way in which Meena Kandasamy tackled such themes in her first collection, *Touch* (2006), particularly in the twenty-two poems that constitute the second section of the book, entitled "Touch".

Exploring Casteism and Untouchability in Meena Kandasamy's *Touch*

The poems in *Touch* exemplify Kandasamy's intention to establish an autonomous and forceful identity for the untouchable Dalits. They attempt to "strike an emphasis to institute a separate voice for the oppressed" (Marjory 90). Kandasamy's *Touch* demonstrates the class struggle between the oppressed (the lower caste) and their oppressors (the higher caste). Her approach here is confessional like that of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Langston Hughes whose poetry expresses extreme moments of personal experiences. Kandasamy's poetry explores a variety of "subjective possibilities and relates them to her own identity and sociological formulation. It arises not out of reading and knowledge, but out of active engagement in real life" (91).

Meena Kandasamy proves to be a strong defender of human rights not just of the Dalits, but also of all human beings. Her poetry comes from the furthest margins of society to champion “the social rights of women, class and caste system” (Chelliah 29). Her aim is to assert the Dalit self and identity, to give voice to the voiceless Dalits and to bring them to the centre. In her volume *Touch*, Kandasamy presents the agonies of the Indian Dalits, particularly the caste problems. To be clear, the poems of *Touch* are devoted to “Dalit issues, superstitious beliefs and political intrusions in the society” (30). The title word “Touch” has a significant implication since it “focuses upon the firm divisions of caste which had accomplished thousands of Indians ‘untouchable’ by birth and thus assigned them to an inferior level as their mere touch was considered to be polluting to people of the higher castes” (30).

As mentioned before, Kandasamy’s first volume *Touch* is made up of eighty-four poems, divided into seven categories as follows: ‘Bring him up to worship you’, ‘Touch’, ‘Add some spice’, ‘To that more congenial spot’, ‘Lines of control’, ‘Slander in a slaughterhouse’, and ‘Their daughters’. Of these categories, the choice falls upon the second section ‘Touch’ to be our focus here in the present study. The motive behind choosing such a part is due to the fact that its poems, twenty-two in number, highly deal with the major problems that face the Dalits in their daily contact with the members of higher classes.

The title poem “Touch” is the best example set by Kandasamy to illustrate the idea of ‘untouchability’. In

this poem, she expresses her grief over the gross betrayal coming from her own skin (the higher caste) against the oppressed Dalits:

Have you ever tried meditation?
Struggling hard to concentrate,
And keeping your mind as blank
As a whitewashed wall by closing
Your eyes, nose, ears; and shutting out
Every possible thought. Everything.
And, the only failure, that ever came,
The only gross betrayal—
Was from your own skin.

You will have known this. (Kandasamy
35)

Here, the poet touches upon the state of subjugation and humiliation experienced by her own lowest caste. She asks the whole Indians to keep their minds as blank as a whitewashed wall, then try to meditate via closing their eyes, nose, ears; and shutting down every possible thought with the aim to recall the first moment at which the struggle between the Dalits and the Hindu upper class members arose. The second stanza tells us that the first moment at which a Dalit member suffered a racial discrimination was when the skin color was blamed as a sinner. The poet praises her own class as being “blank as a whitewashed wall”. In contrast, she attributes the disvalue of betrayal and disloyalty to those of the upper

class. In this, she expresses her anger and anguish against the oppressors of her own skin.

As the unfair caste system has made of the Dalits ‘untouchable’ human beings, so Kandasamy, out of resistance, chooses the sense of ‘touch’ to be the title of her first volume, *Touch*. By saying “that touch—the taboo,” Kandasamy regards any attempt of aggressive touch to the Dalits as the ‘taboo’. It is known that ‘touch’ is one of the five physical senses that each person has. For most people, the sense of touch has several pleasures that can be felt by those who have not been racially discriminated:

... Or, you may recollect how

A gentle touch, a caress changed your life

Multifold, and you were never the person

You should have been. Feeling with your
skin,

Was perhaps the first of the senses,

Its reality always remained with you—

You never got rid of it.

You will have known this. (35)

However, when it comes to the touch of the Dalits, such pleasures will be missing due to the state of discrimination and subjugation exercised against them. In Kandasamy’s volume, the sense of touch has been handled mentally not physically. To illustrate, the poet aims to demolish the barriers between people to lead a

life based on freedom, equality and fraternity. The normal and sound minds will accept this; however, the ill minds cannot be pleased with such touch or an unexpected touch. At this touch, they will become “rumple and seems to be erupted even by the unexpected touch because they are filled with the thoughts of discrimination and Casteism (Boobalakrishnan, *Literary Lover's*).

At the end of the poem, the poet regards hurting the Dalits or just touching them as “the taboo”. She sarcastically addresses the Brahmins saying, “You think that you might have known everything about the charms and the temptations that touch could hold but

... you will never have known
That touch—the taboo
To your transcendence,
When crystallized in caste
Was a paraphernalia of
Undeserving hate. (36)

For Kandasamy, “Touch” is a matter of life and death, and any Brahminical attempt to hurt the Dalits is considered a “taboo”.

In another poem entitled “Advaita: The Ultimate Question,” Kandasamy demands that the philosophy of “*Advaita*” should be applied on the Dalits too. Now, the question is, ‘What is Advaita?’. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* tells us that “*Advaita*” is “Vedantic non dualism that denies the separateness of any aspect of reality from the impersonal oneness of Brahma”. To

illustrate, “Advaita” is a Sanskrit word which means “non-dualism”. It is a Hindu philosophy claiming that the inner Self, or “*Atman*,” is the same as the absolute reality, that is *Brahman*. Paradoxically speaking, there is a racial discrimination in the belief that the absolute reality lies in being a ‘Brahmin’ only, whereas any other caste is a mere appearance or illusion. Kandasamy’s poem “Advaita: The Ultimate Question” rejects the Brahmin-only advaita. In contrast, it calls for the Brahmin-Dalit advaita:

Advaita: The Ultimate Question

Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
Will	You
Ever	Agree?

(Kandasamy 37)

Here, the poet claims that as long as Atman and Brahmin are equal and the same, so the outcaste Dalit and God are considered one. According to her equation, she hopes that the Brahmin and the Dalit should be one.

Again, Kandasamy aims to achieve the principle of equality or non-dualism between the touchable Brahmins and untouchable Dalits. She wonders if the Brahmin Atman be equal with the untouchable Atman. This

question by Kandasamy is given in a sarcastic way as she knows for sure that “the sacred scriptures and preaching of the Brahmans cannot answer her sarcastic question” (Manjushree 211). Therefore, she intends to leave the question’s answer open to “underline the fact that despite the talks about Atman, Brahman and Advaita, the practice of untouchability exists and persists even to this day” (211).

As long as Atman and Brahman are equal and same, the distinction between upper castes and outcastes sounds absurd:

No	Matter
What	You
Preach,	Answer
Me.	Through
Your	Saints.
One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be
One?	(37)

Here, Kandasamy severely criticizes the Hindu ideology that calls in its scriptural texts for the doctrine of equality, but at the same time it implants the evil ideas of discrimination through regarding any person who does not get on well with the Brahminical beliefs as an

“outcaste” or “untouchable. Thus, the poet wages a severe assault on such scriptural texts through directing a sarcasm that is regarded as

an integral element of a counter-discourse that seeks to displace altogether the supposed glory of ancient Hindu religion and the associated cultural framework because it is these discursive frameworks that also provide the basis of the various massacres and atrocities that keep occurring in the name of caste, as exemplified by either the familiar legend of Ekalavya or the Karamchedu massacre that Kandasamy herself writes about in “Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985”. (Chakraborty 45)

It is known that nothing lasts forever, everything changes. This is the case with the evil acts of subjugation and untouchability practiced against the Indian Dalits. Such evil acts had to find resistance in the Dalit literature. In her poem “Aggression,” Kandasamy aims to direct a message to the Hindu aggressors saying, “Your aggression must find a reaction, which is our aggression”. Then in a whole poem, she starts to expound the aggressive nature of her own race:

Ours is a silence

That waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it

Any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions
End in our bemoaning the tragedy.

Sometimes,
The outward signals
Of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our
dreams explode.

Most of the time:
Aggression is the best kind of trouble-
shooting. (Kandasamy 38)

The aggressive nature here takes more than one step as follows: it starts as being a 'silence'. Then, this 'silence' reaches an unbearable point when 'it breaks into wails'. However, the act of 'bemoaning' never lasts for long as 'the outward signals of inward struggles take colossal forms, and the revolution happens because our dreams explode'. In this, Jadhav comments, "Silence of the Dalit means waiting, when the limitations of waiting cease, the struggle takes an expanding form. Struggle converts into the social revolution. But ruined mind upper castes create obstacles in the proceeding of Dalits' development. It is radical, and at times violent" (21).

Kandasamy thinks that the best solution to end troubles with the Hindu upper castes is 'aggression'. Here, the Dalit consciousness begins to take an action. Of the Dalit consciousness, Chelliah argues:

Consciousness is a constructed reality formed out of human experience and it is an activity of social perception, reflection and evaluation... Constructing consciousness is an unending process. Dalit literature imbibes Dalit consciousness and the consciousness of a subordinated community is represented in and through its lived experience. The subordinated Dalit community is depersonalised and dehumanized. Dalit consciousness acts as a potent weapon to transform a marginalized Dalit community into a strong but a free individual. (30)

Another poem which represents the rejecting attitude of Kandasamy towards the evil Hindu caste system is “Another Paradise Lost: The Hindu way”. In this poem, the speaker tells of a situation that happened to her with a snake. The poet says that one day while she was getting a glass of chilled water ready, she encountered a snake under the fridge. When she hurried to burn it with the acid, the snake hissed in the Tamil language saying, “Stop it, I am an exile”:

"Stop it", the snake hissed in pure Tamil
Connecting with me in the language of
My prayer and poetry. "I am an exile."
And I configured mental images of political
Refugees. (Kandasamy 39)

The exiled snake here is a symbol of the suppressed and outcaste Dalits. Being exiled from the

alleged paradise of the Hindu caste system, the snake began to depreciate the belief that Hindu upper castes are of high morals and principles, “Karma is just bunkum” (Kandasamy 39). The word ‘bankum’ here means ‘nonsense’. For the poet, such an evil system is difficult to understand. Thus, it is illogical to challenge something you do not understand, “You could never challenge what you do not comprehend” (40). Then, the speaker began to direct vehement accusations against the snake describing it as “a mean serpent./ Instigator. Trouble-maker. Sly liar. Undulating/ temptation-provider. Unworthy reminder /of the seduction of strength over matter” (40). The snake refuted all these accusations, saying: “No, I am not any of this. I am just an exile, from paradise” (40).

The snake started to defend himself, showing that the reason behind his dismissal from the Hindu alleged paradise was his rebellion against the evil Hindu caste system. It was due to his dissenting thoughts that he was exiled from heaven (paradise):

Look here comrade, my credentials

Are different. In heaven, I was an activist. An

Avid dissenter. Before the accession to heaven,

Long long ago, I was a mighty monarch on earth,

Feared and respected. I was Nahusa the Great.

My subjects were happy, the kingdom prosperous.

And I ruled for twelve thousand years, until the day

When I decided that I could take leave of life. In

Heaven too, I was venerated. (40-41)

Then the snake wondered why such an evil caste system was there. He hoped that both the high-born and the low-born were equal in both duties and rights, i.e. to be brothers. Unfortunately due to his kind and humane aspirations, the snake faced Gods' curses and, as a result, was banished from paradise:

... 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 them what would happen if a
High-born did manual work just like the low-born.
(41)

At the end of the poem, the snake confesses that "Tradition triumphed over reason/ and the good were cast away" (41). Similarly, Kandasamy expresses her desperate attitude towards changing or abolishing the Hindu evil caste system by saying, "Tradition triumphed over reason / and the good were cast away" (41).

In her poem "Becoming a Brahmin," Kandasamy satirically expresses her repulsion against the Hindu caste system and at the same time her urging aspiration to abolish such an evil system. Her aim is to change India from a multi-caste country into a one-caste society. Kandasamy's attitude here is the same as that of Thanthai Periyar, the Hindu political activist, who called for a one-caste society as a solution to the evil caste system. In "Becoming a Brahmin," Kandasamy cites an algorithm

advocated by Thanthai Periyar, the Father of the Nation, at Tirupur. Such algorithm sarcastically sets six certain steps through which the untouchable can become an upper caste member:

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.

Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.

Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.

Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End. (Kandasamy 42)

According to these lines, the rigid Hindu traditions that discriminate and divide the inhabitants of the same land into unfair social castes can be subverted in case such a frivolous conversion recipe is followed. This indicates how unjust and unfair the Hindu caste system is to the members of the lower classes. Her attitude is sarcastic here.

Another piece of verse in which Kandasamy offers criticism against the Hindu caste system is "Dignity". In this poem, the poet addresses those who belong to the oppressor castes. At first, she sardonically praises the racial roots of the upper castes, describing them as 'virtuous' due to their 'virtuous deeds'. Thus, their position is, as she claims, 'envious':

Sons of the oppressor castes:

You are 'virtuous' children
Of 'virtuous' fathers
Born in an envious
Position because of
Your 'virtuous' deeds. (Kandasamy 43)

Then, the poet visualizes the Hindu caste system as the “incurable sickness”. For her, it is not a physical sickness but a mental one. The poet takes for granted their adherence to the principle of hierarchy based on casteism. She begs them to be sympathetic and gentle towards the oppressed Dalits. Her aim is to achieve dignity and equality to all castes including the untouchable Dalits. What the poet wishes is that the upper caste members let the marginalized outcastes practice their share of faith and dignity like them:

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. (43)

Kandasamy named one of her popular poems “Ekalaivan” after a mythological figure, Ekalavya, whose story was narrated in the popular Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. Ekalavya was a prince of the Nishadha kingdom, a low-caste forest tribe. In this story, Ekalavya was deprived from studying archery at the hands of the great guru Dronacharya due to his belonging to a lower caste:

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things

With your left hand.

Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant

Left-handed treatment. (Kandasamy 44)

The poet here describes Dronacharya and his likes of the upper caste members as “fascist” and “left-handed”, a description that sums up the extreme oppression and subjugation exercised against the untouchable Dalits.

In her poem “Evil Spirits,” the poet declares that the Dalits are regarded by the upper classes as both devils and witches. She begins to portray how harsh their lived experiences are with the upper class oppressors. They are forced to have “a 'meal'—bland food mixed/ with your hair, nails, spit and pus./ Illegally (despite the government ban),” (Kandasamy 45). At the start of the poem, the poet claims that the upper caste members are possessed with evil spirits, and to control such evil spirits and devils is something challenging. Moreover, she wonders if the

oppressor upper caste Hindus become devils instead of the devils themselves:

And because ghosts and ghouls

Obey your rules, they leave you to come to us.

Is this 'transference'? An unofficial appeasement. (Kandasamy 45)

Then, the poet complains that her people become inhabited by the dead, who ruin their doomed lives and that demons in their bodies

... are brutal tenants and frequently,

They suck with their vampire tongues

To drink our anemic blood—

Leave their puncture marks, which

Can be faintly seen on our black skins;

Skins that bear greater scars,

Reminders of larger, human cruelty. . . (45)

The poet ends her poem saying repeatedly, “We die, we die,” declaring that they are just souls walking on the Earth. Their bodies are lifeless. They rot away, they rot away, a refrain that assures the miserable lives experienced by the Dalits:

Anyway, there isn't a lot of life in our bodies.

We are souls. Wandering souls. Still, once

Ghost-tasted, we rot away. We rot away.

Remember, rotting is a long procedure. . .

Day by day, we grow coffin cold and slowly

Life creeps out, a lazy earthworm. At last,
we die.

We die. (45)

Here, the poet revolutionizes against casteism that creates a hierarchical-based society where her own people (the Dalits) are both outcastes or untouchables. Her aim is to achieve equality and fraternity among all members of the Indian society but in vain. In 1950, the independent India's constitution put an end to the caste system aiming to inaugurate a casteless society but the upper class do not let it happen.

In another poem entitled "Fire", Kandasamy also visualizes a melancholic scene in which the untouchables are suffering while their huts and slums are being burnt. Disappointingly, their cries for help go ignored by the upper class since they consider the untouchable Dalits as "indifferent bastards" not as human beings like them:

Our huts are burning—

Regular huts in proper rows.

Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)

Feed the flames as we rush out

Shrieking-crying-moaning

Open mouthed hysterical curses

And as if in an answer—

When the blazing work is done

Fire engines arrive . . .

Deliberately late. (Kandasamy 46)

Here, the poet portrays the state of indifference and letdown adopted by the upper castes against the Dalits. Their response towards the cries and moans coming from the Dalits is deliberately too late.

Again, the poet describes how painful the Dalits' cries are, depicting them as "feverish", "defenseless" and "as loud as snail shells crackling under nailed boots". Regrettably, such cries did not find any kind of response, and, if found, it was too late as they came from "indifferent bastards" (46).

In "Fleeting," Kandasamy frankly mentions that the Hindu casteism is what destroyed the history of the Dalits. Even the attempts made to recollect such a history "entail in melancholy" (Kandasamy 47). The poet sees casteism as "a scheming bulldozer/ Crushing only the Dalits—/ And renewing, revoking our bitter past." (47). At the end of the poem, Kandasamy wonders when "can we get to live our lives in retrospect?" (47). Her tone here is gloomy and highly pessimistic. It is as if she wants to say "Dalits cannot lead a dignified life as long as the evil caste system is omnipresent in India". To lead a noble life, the Dalits have to immigrate outside India to escape the manacles of casteism.

"Hymns of a Hag" is another poem which best portrays the extent to which Kandasamy despises casteism and hopes to avenge the oppression practiced against the members of her own class. The poet imagines

herself and the other Dalit women as witches who carry a fire, hoping to burn their oppressors. Furthermore, the poet and her fellow female Dalits wish to cast on their subjugators “dark spells, making them dead” (Kandasamy 49). Moreover, she wishes she could arm the minority of her own social group with

knives, 'least an axe.

Lot later I fly to temple streets.

Our men firm, I show my feats.

Haunting oppressors to shave their
heads.

Cutting all their holy threads.

Experiencing joy as they bleed.

Dance, rejoice my black black deed.
(Kandasamy 49)

The poet's aim here is to free not just herself but also all her fellow Dalits from the rigid custody of the casteism.

In her Dalit poetry, Kandasamy dedicates some of her poems to commemorate and praise the most patriotic figures who struggle hard to liberate the Dalits, educate them, allow them freedoms and make their place known in a caste entrenched society. One of such figures is Immanuel Sekaran, a Dalit freedom fighter and a Civil Rights activist. Immanuel proved to be a daring and courageous patriot and leader who was ready to sacrifice his own self for the cause of the Dalits' freedom. In her

poem “Immanuel”, named after the patriotic leader himself, Kandasamy describes Immanuel as a “God” for all the sacrifices he made to free his own race out of the oppression imposed on them by the upper castes although he died at a young age. It should be noted that Immanuel died in 1957 at the age of 32, having been ambushed and murdered by a group of Thevars for his opposition to them:

God he was, in those short living years,
When he lifted the lowly and put down
The mighty from their thrones.

And he became a greater God,
With his brutal death, that incited
Many deaths and a significant liberation.
(Kandasamy 50)

What made Immanuel a “God”, as Kandasamy claims, is the fact that he lifted the lowly (the Dalits) and put down the mighty (the upper castes) from their thrones. Moreover, his brutal murder at the hands of the his enemies also made him a great God, as the poet argues. Immanuel’s passing is described as a warrior’s passing since he spent all his life fighting for the freedom of his own people (the Dalits). For Kandasamy, it was the heroes only who deserve mourning.

In her poem “Last Love Letter”, the poet and her fellow Dalit members sadly relegates their passionate love not to their present life but to their life after death (eternal love). For her, there will not be real love as long

as the unfair caste system exists. To clarify, the real love will be achieved after death as there will not be casteism or untouchability. In the absence of such social evils, real and eternal love shall prevail:

. . . Our passionate love,

Once transcended caste.

Let it now

Transcend mortality. . .

Let us leave it to cold Death,

Cruelly, He shall

Perfect our Love.

Preserve it for Eternity. . . (Kandasamy 51)

Here, caste is likened to 'mortality and death' whereas love is related to 'life and eternity'. Moreover, in this poem, Kandasamy's attitude is much more feminist in the sense that she defends the women of her own race with regard to the domestic violence, subjugation and humiliation to which they are subjected whether by "men and women of other castes or by the men of the very caste to which they themselves belong" (Athwale 99).

Then comes "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985," where the evil caste system caused the killing of a number of innocent lower caste citizens (the Madigas) at the hands of upper caste members (the Kammas). As the title suggests, the tragedy is liquid since there was a protest by a courageous Madiga woman against the attempts made by the Kammas to bathe their buffaloes in

the drinking water dedicated to the Madigas. Upon such a protest, the kammass “were angered by the audacity of the Madiga woman to raise questions and led to the killing of six Madiga men and the rape of three Madiga women” (Narasimhan 436). Regrettably, the conflict on water turned into blood shedding. To memorize such a tragedy, Kandasamy composed a song entitled, “Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985,” which greatly touched the hearts of its readers both in form and content. Out of high imagination, such a poem took the shape of a pot, the container used by the Madigas to drink with. To defend herself, the brave Madiga woman used such a pot to hit the Kamma oppressors.

It is important to say that Kandasamy’s poem here is symbolic. To illustrate, as the pot was used by the woman to hit with, the poet composed such a poem to “hit forth at the world for its discrimination” (Narasimhan 437). For her, poetry is the writer’s tool to “bring to light many of such incidents as the Karamchedu event to break the Brahminical idiom” (437):

Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985

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. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly
Consult History—"If there was a way out then,
There shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with
Esteemed Father of our Nation. His *Samaadhi* speaks:
If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them
Set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example
Is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories
Dalits exit—weary of the persecution
And wander all over the nation.
Again, a Dalit Exodus.

Total Surrender. (Kandasamy 52)

It is the evil caste system which made the Dalits "weary of the persecution/ and wander all over the nation". Therefore, on the tongue of the esteemed father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, the poet demands that the Harijans (the Dalits) should have the right to lead a dignified life like the other Hindu castes. For Gandhi, if Harijans do not get water in Karamchedu, then let them set on a sojourn elsewhere. The poet supports Gandhi's outlook saying, "If there was a way out then, there shall be a way out now." And this would be fulfilled in case casteism and untouchability were eradicated from the ill minds of upper caste Hindu members.

In a poem entitled "Maariamamma", which refers to the South Indian Hindu Goddess of rain, Kandasamy

directs her blame towards Maari for not coming to the Dalit's streets and pouring rain on their inhabitants. She blames her for joining the gang of the other Hindu Gods and Goddesses. For Kandasamy, it is the poverty and disgraceful labor of the Dalits which prevents the upper caste Hindu Gods and Goddesses from coming to the slums of her own race:

We know the reasons for their non-entry into slums.

Actually, our poverty would soil their hearts

And our labor corrupt their souls.

But Maariamamma,

When you are still getting

Those roosters and goats,

Why have you stopped coming to our doors?

Maari, our girl,

When did you join their gang? (Kandasamy 53)

The difference between Maari and other Hindu Gods or Goddesses is that Maari is a non-Vedic goddess that is worshipped by all castes. This is clear in Kandasamy's words describing her as "our girl", whereas she describes all Hindu Gods and Goddesses, saying:

Upper caste Gods

And their 'good-girl' much-married, father-fucked,

Virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses

Borne in their golden chariots (53)

In her poem “Mohandas Karamchand”, Kandasamy confirms the belief that “Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go/ It haunts us now, the way you do/ with a spooky stick, an eerie laugh or two.” (54-55). Here, she blames Mahatma Gandhi for his persistent call for tolerance and non-violence. Regrettably, his tolerance was met with being murdered:

But they killed you, the naked you,

Your blood with mud was gooey goo.

Sadist fool, you killed your body

Many times before this too. (Kandasamy 55)

Here, she accused him of being a “Sadist fool” for his tolerance with the oppressors. She concluded her poem saying, “Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you” (55). She regards aggression and violence as the best way to deal with such oppressors. For her, aggression has to be met with aggression.

“Narration” is another poem that portrays the painful sufferings experienced by the Dalits, particularly the physical and sensual abuses exercised against the Dalit women. Paradoxically speaking, those untouchable women have become touchable through the brutal acts committed by the upper class members against them. In “Narration,” the landlord had committed such inhuman acts as “The torn sari, disheveled hair / Stifled cries and meek submission. / I was not an untouchable then” (Kandasamy 56). Regrettably, such a landlord was one of the speaker's own community, i.e., a Dalit man. Thus, the

oppressed Dalit women suffer some kind of double oppression: oppression from the higher caste men and oppression from the men of their own community. In this, Kandasamy says:

How can I say
Anything, anything
Against my own man?
How? (56)

In consequence, the poet finds silence to be a peaceful shelter for her against the injustices and oppression practiced by the higher caste people, which reflects her powerlessness to resist the suppression of those people:

So I take shelter in silence
Wear it like a mask.
When alone, I stumble
Into a flood of incoherencies. . . (56)

In this shelter, the speaker cannot do anything except crying, screaming and cursing. In this, she says, “I’ll curse the skies,/ And shout: scream to you/ Words that incite wrath” (56).

In her poem “Prayers”, Kandasamy likens caste as being “crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll/ confirming traditional truths” (57). This is due to the killing of a sixty-year-old Dalit man at the hands of a Brahmin in a temple that belongs to the upper caste people. The poet depicts the land that belongs to the

upper caste as being “arid”, where caste resides. Having been partially recovered from the Typhoid disease, the old Dalit man wanted to thank God. So he

drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple.

Sadly, of an Upper-caste God.

Away from the temple, he bends in supplication.

Says his last prayer—Unwelcome Gratefulness.

To a God who (anyway) didn't help him recover.

Innocent Acts of Undulating Faith spurned

Anger. Retaliation. (Kandasamy 57).

Mercilessly, an upper caste savage beat him with an iron rod, with gods standing powerless:

An irked Rajput surged forth

And smote the untouchable with an iron rod.

He, warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate encroachment.

At the temple. By a Dalit. Deathly howls of a feeble-voiced

Rent the air, fervently seeking holy intervention.

God, Lifeless as ever—watched grimly with closed eyes.

In resigned submission, the sick man's Life
was given away. (57)

At the end of the poem, the poet wonders where the
untouchable's soul will go. Will he go to Heaven where
the martyrs reside or to Hell where the Gods exist issuing
Caste Laws:

Where did this poor man's sixty-five-year-
old soul go?

To Heaven—to join noble martyrs who died
for a cause?

Or to Hell—where the Gods reside, making
Caste Laws? (57)

Unfortunately, there are many untouchables who
are either murdered or raped every day, not for anything
but because they are of the lowest caste. Throughout her
poetry, Kandasamy represents the angry voice through
which she articulates the agonies and pains suffered by
the outcaste Dalits. With what Kandasamy and her likes
have done and are still doing, the monstrously evil acts of
oppression and subjugation would gradually decrease
until they disappear.

Again, the dilemma of the Dalit women who are
suffering from physical and sensual abuses is repeated in
Kandasamy's poem "Shame". Here, the poet delineates
the rape assault waged by two upper caste men on a 16-
year-old weak Dalit girl:

"Gang Rape."

Two severe syllables

Implied in her presence

Perpetuate the assault. . . (Kandasamy 58)

Then, the poet portrays the passivity of the people who are just watching with no attempt of them to save her, as well as the cruelty of the criminals who take of their caste a classic shield:

Public's prying eyes

Segregate her—the victim.

But, the criminals have

Already mainstreamed—

Their Caste is a classic shield. (58)

Disappointingly, the saying “Dalit Girl Raped” has become common since it occurs day and night. Now, the girl has been raped, with “Gory scars on a wrecked body, / Serve as constant reminders / Of disgrace, helplessness” (58). To purify herself from such a dirty act, the victim bravely chooses the ancient medicine for shame, which is to burn herself to death:

Bravely, in search of

A definite solution,

And an elusive purification,

She takes the tests of fire—

The ancient medicine for shame. (58)

It is known that after a long night dawn comes, and after the coldest winter the joyful spring arrives. In the

coming two poems, “We Real Hot” and “We will Rebuild Worlds”, a sense of revolution can be felt. Kandasamy is confident of her own race (the Dalits) and their ability to annihilate the evil Caste system, then rebuild a world based on equality, freedom and dignity for the untouchables. In a few well-placed words in “We Real Hot,” Kandasamy could convey the bravery of the outcastes and their ability to make change:

We real hot. We

Ne'er rot. We

Know knack. We

Beat back. We

Shock stars. We

Win wars. We

Ne'er late. We

Fuck Fate. (Kandasamy 59)

Here, the pronoun “We” refers to the Dalits who “have begun to assert pride in their Dalit identity” (Biswas 61). They are the speaking subjects, not afraid “to show their resentment at the injustice done to them; they retaliate, counterattack, confront discrimination and defy providence to instate a counter-culture” (61). They are not “the liberal-reformist upper caste authors’ often romanticized, ineffectual characters” (61).

Furthermore, in her long poem “We will Rebuild Worlds,” Kandasamy conveys the Dalits’ intention to

“rebuild/ worlds from shattered glass/ and remnants of
holocausts” (60). First, she began to recall the extent of
humiliation, degradation and discrimination experienced
by the Dalits:

Once impaled for our faith/ and trained to
speak in

Voiceless whispers/ we'll implore/ you to
produce the list/

From hallowed memories/ of our people
disgraced/ as

Outcastes/ degraded/ as untouchable at /
sixty-four feet/

Denied a life/ and livelihood and done to
death/ (Kandasamy 60)

The speaker here reminiscences the bloody and violent nature of the upper castes. Their policy is that of suppression, oppression and murder. The speaker recalls how her own race (the outcastes) have been trained to speak in voiceless whispers. She recalls how forty-four men, women and children, were burnt to death because they asked for handfuls of rice. Moreover, many children were electrocuted to instant death because they played in the wells of the upper castes, besides many other carnages or massacres. However, the cruelest crime is that of passion when a Dalit man falls in love with an upper-caste woman, then he will be tortured to death either by pouring poison and pesticide through the ear-nose-mouth or being hanged in public:

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 (60)

Now, Kandasamy blames those oppressors for their insistence to teach their boys and girls “the lessons of/ how to/ whom to/ when to/ where to/ continue their caste lines” (60). In response to this, the poet reminds them of how they brutally murdered and massacred her own race with “the smiling promise of/ heaven in the next birth/ and in this/ a peace that/ never belonged” (61). Then, in a vengeful tone, the poet threatens the upper-caste members to uproot all forms of suppression, oppression, subjugation and hypocrisy. This will be achieved through revolution:

We will learn/ how to fight/ with the
substantial

Spontaneity/ with which we first learnt/ how
to love.

So/ now/ upon a future time/

There will be a revolution. (61)

Then, the poet elaborates when such a revolution will begin. For her:

It will begin/ as our naked bodies/ held close
together/ like

Hands in prayer/ against each other/ like
hands in prayer/

Set to defy the dares the/ diktats the years the
terms/ the

Threats/ that set us apart.

.....
.....

It will begin when never/ resting we will
scream/ until/

Our uvulas tear away and our breathless
words

Breathe life to the bleeding dead and in the
black magic

Of our momentary silences/ you will hear
two questions/

*India, what is the caste of sperm?/ India,
what is the cost of life?*

And the rest of our words will rush/ in this
silenced earth/

Like the rage of a river in first flood. (61-62)

In conclusion, Meena Kandasamy proves to be a courageous freedom fighter and a political activist, calling for the collectivization of the efforts of the untouchables (the Dalits) to lead the caste struggle against the oppressive forces (the upper castes). She believes that the caste struggle will end through revolution and resistance. For her, aggression is the best solution to

oppression. Moreover, Kandasamy proves to be a gifted poet writing in English. Her poetry launches stinging criticism against the practices of the upper castes towards her own race. Her first volume *Touch* revolves around themes of casteism and untouchability exercised against the Dalits, who suffer some kind of oppression, subjugation and annihilation at the hands of the Hindu upper castes. Her aim is to achieve freedom and dignity for the untouchable Dalits. To do this, she adopts an angry voice through which she articulates the pains suffered by the down-trodden Dalits. Anger, sarcasm and aggression are her weapons to fight the brutal acts of the oppressors.

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