

Sufferings of Dalits in the Select Poems of Meena Kandasamy

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Meena Kandasamy is a prominent Indian poet in the contemporary literary arena. She is a champion of marginalized sections of the society like Dalits and women. In her poetry, she raises her voice against inequality and systematic exploitation of Dalits. She uses her voice not only to expose the atrocities faced by the Dalits but also to represent the anger that boils within them as a reaction to these prejudices. *Touch* (2006), her first collection of poetry is a clear sighted, fearless and a scathing attack on the perpetuation of social oppression of Dalits. This study aims at an analysis of the select poems of Meena Kandasamy namely “Marriamma” and “Narration” so as to bring out her treatment of the sufferings of the Dalits in general and their women in particular at the hands of upper caste of men.

In “Marriamma,” Meena expresses her anger for showing the difference even in God. Almighty is common to all and the Savior to the whole mankind. Unfortunately, the upper caste men impose discrimination even in worship:

We understand
why upper caste Gods
and their ‘good-girls’ much-married, father-fucked,
virgin, vegetarian oh-so- pure Goddesses
borne in their golden chariots
don’t come to our streets. (1-6)

They categorize the Gods and Goddesses too as “low-caste” and “high-caste.” Her ire is particularly directed at the figure of Saraswati whose origin has ambivalence in the Puranas. While on the hand, she is supposed to be the daughter of Brahma, on the other hand, she is also

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presented as one of the wives of Brahma. They treat Saraswati as upper caste goddess. They call her pure goddess. They decorate their deity in golden chariot to show their wealth and pomp. These so-called pure deities do not enter the slum areas and Dalit ghettos. The upper-caste men prevent the deities to enter the Dalit settlements by citing their caste as a reason.

Dalits treat Goddess Marriamma as their own and offer animal sacrifice to reduce her wrath. She is considered to be the Goddess of rain and who has helped the yield in the fields. If she becomes angry, she may spread the deadly pestilence small pox:

But Marriamma,
when you are still getting
those roosters and goats,
why have you stopped coming to our doors? (10-13)

People from the lower caste observe that the high caste Gods could not enter their slum areas due to the belief that their sweat would corrupt them. The caste Hindus contend that the poverty of the ghettos would spoil the richness of their wealthy gods and goddesses. People in slums organize festivals and offer roosters and goats to their goddess Marriamma. Unfortunately, their goddess too is stopped to enter their homes due to the design of dominant caste. Hence Meena asks: “Maari, our girl, / since when did you join their gang?” (14-15) Her appeal shows the pathetic state of the Dalits who are not allowed even to worship their deities in the caste ridden Indian society.

In fact, Meena presents a real life incident which occurred in Kancheepuram district of Tamil Nadu recently. She expresses her anger against how even in worship of God, Dalits are victimized. She brings out vividly the suffering of Dalits in the poem. With the expression, “Maari, our girl” (14), Meena claims possessively that the goddess belongs to Dalit community. The goddess is for the under privileged and downtrodden. Unfortunately, even the goddess Maari has been prevented by the upper caste men to enter the areas of the Dalits. This is the sinister design of the upper caste men. It is a great injustice committed against the Dalit community. Caste is a bane to the Indian society and discrimination

happens by its name. Dalits undergo excruciating pain due to this.

In "Narration," Meena brings out the sufferings of the Dalit women who undergo rough treatment not only from the upper-caste men but also from the men of their own caste. The Dalit woman is searching for her identity as a human and she is torn apart in the dual dominance of double marginalization. Dalit women have been vilified for generations as women of "loose morals" and they have been subjected to social or political authority. In this poem, Meena brings out the hypocrisy and duplicity of the upper caste man in the Indian society. He is a priest and practitioner of untouchability. The victim, a Dalit woman who is not allowed to enter the temple, due to her caste is physically abused by the priest. The man who contends the woman as impure to touch has devoured her body to fulfil his lust. Caste does not stop him to do the heinous crime of rape. Meena brings out the sad state of the victim:

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

When lust creeps up, the label of low-caste disappears. It is proved by the physical exploitation of the Dalit woman by the caste-Hindu landlord. Then she presents the exploitation of the priest. These high caste men do not have any reservation when they seek sex from Dalit women. Their "untouchability" disappears from them for a brief period. Meena depicts the atrocity of the priest: "The priest, his lecherous eyes, / Glances that disrobed, defiled. / I was not polluting at four feet" (12-14). The Dalit woman has been subjected to physical torture by different men who belong to upper caste. Unfortunately, her physical exploitation does not stop with that level. Men from her own community turns against her and quench their thirst:

How can I say
 Anything, anything

Against my own man?
How?
So I take shelter in silence
Wear it like a mask
When alone, I stumble
Into a flood of incoherencies. (15-22)

Meena obviously presents the pain of Dalit woman. She suffers from men who belong to both the castes namely upper caste and lower caste. Hence the Dalit woman undergoes the double marginalization. Men from the Dalit community do not care for much about their women and they too involve in the deeds against their own women. Meena vividly depicts the sufferings of the Dalit women in the poem. They are not in the position to express their sorrows hence the poet says that they take shelter in silence and they wear silence as their mask. Their suffering is indescribable and they are living in a pathetic state. They just think of their sad position when they are lonely and they speak to themselves. Meena Kandasamy has brought out successfully the voice of such voiceless people in the poem.

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