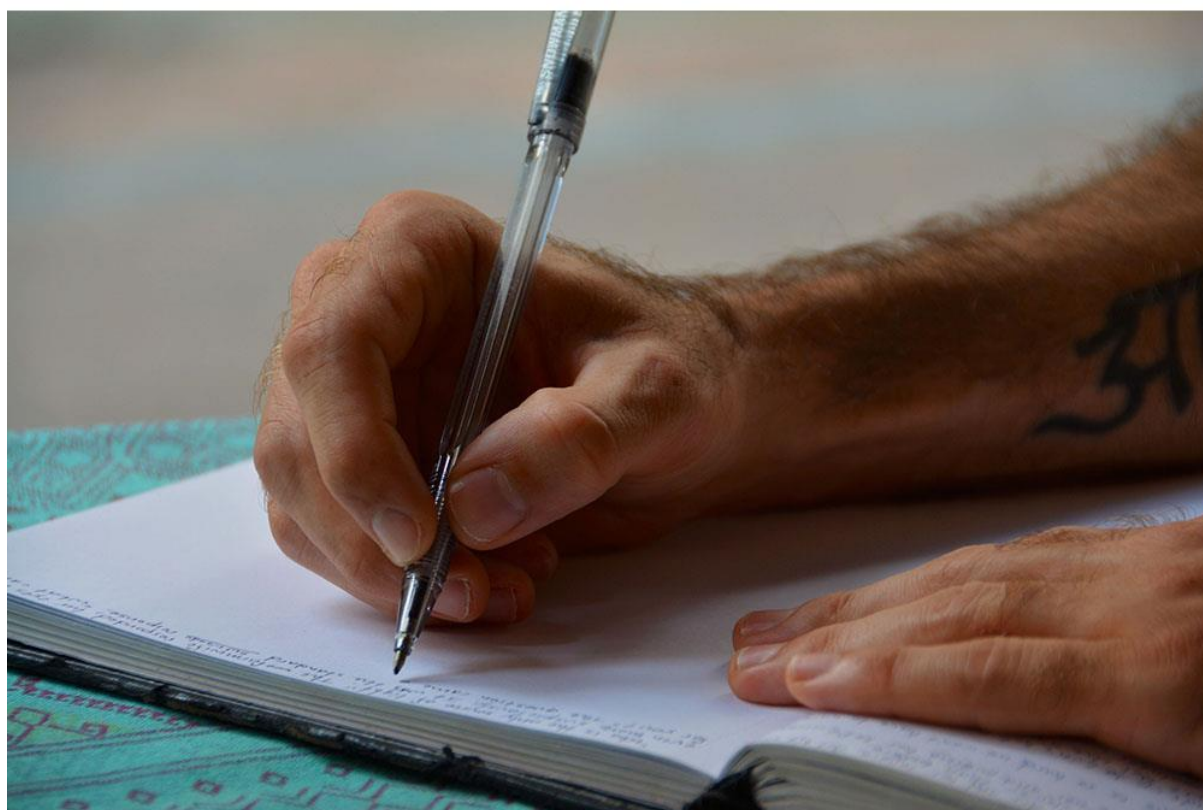


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Kandaswamy's Poetry: Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness

Abstract

Present epoch is the epoch of space, a complex set of relations. Marginality is the space that difference makes. It is a site of deprivation, repression, and oppression. Thus spaces can tell tacit stories and alter histories. This paper contextualizes Bell Hooks idea of marginality as a place of radical possibility and resistance to show feminist perspectives of Dalit marginal spatial reality through the study of the select poetry of Kandaswami from her debut poetry collection *Touch*. Her poetry is thunderous of all her writings that produce a realistic picture of gruesome daily occurrences of gender prejudice and double bondage of dalit woman.

Keywords: Space, marginality, spatial reality, oppression, resistance

In current years 'space' and 'place' have been the entities of serious discussion and intense rethinking in the humanities and social sciences. The two conceptions are closely associated as the one makes the other feasible. Present epoch is the epoch of space. (Foucault, 1986, 22). According to Foucault space is a complex set of relations that tries to find out how space and spatial arrangements sustain and generate bio-power and diverse cultural meanings in contemporary society and how they delineate and control social practices. The current attention to lived spaces is of great importance as it generates new epistemology. Space is also

approached as socially produced (Lefebvre, 1974) and mutually space produces social relations. Thus Spaces can tell stories, write and rewrite histories.

Dalit marginal spaces are constructed to segregate the 'other' (Edward, 1978) based on caste discrimination. It has been an act of repression, exercising power and to make 'other' dependent. Dalit autobiographies divulge how the upper castes exercise their power through numerous ways of the subjectivity of the lower caste by confining them to marginal spaces, denying them basic facilities like drinking water, land, shelter, education, employment, and voice. Major Dalit writers talk of their marginalized spaces in their writings as the caste-based division of spaces which is a tangible experience for the Dalits that got entrenched in their psyche and finally shaped their self-perception in addition to their social life. Therefore most Dalit life narratives commence with the account of the segregation based on repression and exclusion. For instance,

Valmiki's *Joothan* begins with a narration on the physical demarcation of their dwellings from the upper caste colonies 'there was a pond that demarcated the boundaries between the villagers of the Tagas, the high caste people and the Chuhras, the untouchables.' Bama's *Karukku* illustrates the compartmentalised settlement of the lower castes and at the entrance of her village, there was a small bus terminus from where the buses did not go further as if the "entire world ended there" (Bama, 2001, 6). Similarly, we come across the description of separate settlements of the untouchables in Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* as well as in Basant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India*. Thus 'Marginality' is the space that difference makes. It is a site of deprivation and oppression. On the contrary, this study contextualizing Bell Hooks idea of 'marginality as site of radical possibility, a space of resistance' (1992, p.148) illustrates marginality as a space of radical openness, and protest through select poems from Kandaswamy's debut poetry collection *Touch* (2006).

Meena Kandaswamy (b. 1984) is a bright emerging poetic figure of Dalit writing in English, creative writer and translator who comes from Chennai. She articulates the voice of marginalized, oppressed and muted community of Dalits and predominantly triple oppression of dalit women through her collection of poems, *Touch*, *Ms. Militancy*, *The Gypsy Goddess*, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife*. The study is an endeavor to put forth feminist perspectives of Dalit marginal spatial reality through the medium of Kandaswami's poetry.

Touch themed around caste and untouchability is a collection of eighty-four poems that depict the life of 'Dalits' and dalit women. It is divided into seven categories: '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'; all filled with fire as it brings out the anger in the hearts of the downtrodden communities. As our perception of the world is shaped by our lived experiences certain socio-political positions or 'marginalized locations' can turn into sites of epistemic privilege seeing that 'the experience of the oppressed groups' may possibly 'become an important source of critical insight.' (Collins, 2004, 7). Kandaswami's poems produce a realistic picture of shocking daily occurrences of overlapping oppressions of caste, class, and gender in the life of dalit woman.

Touch is the title of Kandaswami's debut poetry collection. 'Touch' is also the title of one of the seven categories into which this anthology has been divided and last but not the least 'Touch' is also the title of the poem in this anthology. It illustrates the central role 'touch' plays in the life of 'Untouchables'; the very touch of these people was considered polluting, relegating them to the category of 'untouchables', forcing them to live on peripheries. Enduring common life experience of repression further culminating into a bonding which keeps these people in 'touch', in social contact generating a consciousness that transforms marginal space into a site of resistance.

Kandaswami is called the angry young woman; her anger of suppression is evident in her poems. The poet gives free rein to her words to harness the power of language and boils it down to the bare facts that tell aloud the tales of many silences. In her poem *Touch*, (35) she addresses the basic sense of touch and the pleasures that it is associated with. To any person who has not been subjugated by discrimination, the sense of touch only brings pleasure.

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. (24-31)

But in the same poem *Touch*, Kandasamy contrasts these pleasant feelings to the harsh reality faced by Dalits purely from the very same sense organ, the skin-

You will have known almost

Every knowledgeable thing 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. (24-41)

Here the poet uses the recurring contrasting emotions of love and hatred to bring out the disparity in life experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed, upper-caste and the lower-caste. Through such differentiation, the writer highlights the gulf that exists between the perceptions of the Dalit and that of the upper caste.

In the poem *Last Love Letter* (51) the poet brings out the paradox of love in death rather than love in life. She writes:

. . . Our passionate love,

Once transcended caste.

Let it now

Transcend mortality . . .

Fear not beloved,

In Love—

Life is not compulsory. (1-7)

The difference of perspective is highlighted once more, where it is only in death that love can be perfected. Sarcasm is her weapon here and it also illustrates the helplessness of the oppressed to voice injustice. The oppressed can only speak through her body as also discussed by Spivak in her famous essay ‘Can a Subaltern Speak?’ The poem also brings to mind the various honor killings that have tried to catch the attention of the country. In an interview with Times of India, Kandasamy asserts that not allowing a woman to choose her partner is a kind of suppression. Like honor killings for instance, is it not direct oppression of her sexuality?

In her other poem *We Will Rebuild Worlds* (60), Kandasamy asks

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

And you wanted/ to teach/ other boys and other girls/ the

Lessons of/ how to/ whom to/ when to/ where to/ continue

Their caste lines (16-23)

Apart from banging on the caste hierarchy which divides the society into privileged and the unprivileged, oppressors and the oppressed, Kandasamy addresses gender issues with the same bang. Her pent up anger is evident in her poetry which is an impulsive overflow of aggression that mounts up out of the injustice that she observes all around her in the name of caste and gender. In her poem entitled *Their Daughters* (139), the poet writes:

Young wife near my father's home, with a drunken husband

Who never changed; she bore his daily beatings until on one

Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seed bags.

We: their daughters.

We: the daughters of their soil.

We, mostly, write. (14-19)

Therefore she writes poetry with a purpose; using it as a weapon on the ills of society. The genre, she has selected for her message allows her to convey the essence without diluting it. She has a way with words that pounce on the reader and affects them with unrefined emotions.

Double marginalization of the Dalit women is a recurrent theme in her poems. The physical and sexual abuse they are subjected to is brought to light in *Narration* (56):

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? (Narration 1-7)

The blot of untouchability was temporarily abandoned for the ease of the upper-caste men.

Thus Dalit women suffer from double patriarchy: exploitation from the upper caste men as narrated in the aforementioned excerpt and oppression from the men of their own community as narrated in the excerpt below extracted from the same poem.

How can I say

Anything, anything

Against my own man?

How?

So I take shelter in silence

Wear it like a mask. (*Narration, 15-20*)

The narration also surfaces the fact that Dalit women have no identity or dignity but are only treated as colonized bodies, as objects.

The priest, his lecherous eyes,

Glances that disrobed, defiled.

I was not polluting at four feet. (*Narration, 12-14*)

The plight of such repressed women in the name of caste oppression is portrayed once more in *Shame* (58)

"Dalit Girl Raped"

Is much too commonplace.

Humiliation gnaws

The sixteen-year-old.

Gory scars on a wrecked body,

Serve as constant reminders

Of disgrace, helplessness. (*Shame*, 9-15)

And there is no hearing against such crimes as upper caste men are granted impunity in the name of their caste-

But, the criminals have

Already mainstreamed—

Their Caste is a classic shield. (*Shame*, 6-9)

Thus Kandasamy's poetry is not the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' or 'emotion recollected in tranquility' (Wordsworth). It also totally rejects T.S. Eliot's notion that a writer should be impersonal and his writings should be devoid of personal emotion and feelings. On the contrary, she asserts, "My writing is very, very autobiographical. It stems out of who I am, and what happened to me? I am extremely conscious of the fact that I am a woman and Dalit." (Kandaswamy, 2008). Thus her poetry is aggression of suppression, her pent-up anger oozes out in her writings:

I'll curse the skies,

And shout: scream to you

Words that incite wrath... (*Narration*, 7-9)

One need not concur with all that Kandasamy says to enjoy her poetry, but she has a way of involving her readers in a convincing way as she has done through *Prayers*, (57)

Caste –crueler than a disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll

Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion.

Unanswered questions remain. (21-23)

Conclusion

Though we live in a time when poetry is often contemplated as irrelevant. But Poetry has certain benefits—the benefit of the underdog: the opposition of the listener is less manifested; the listener hasn't rejected to hear. The other benefit of poetry is the intrinsic power that marks it as a handy tool for developing social consciousness and political activism.

The poetry of Meena Kandasamy is loud, explosive, and has a definite rhythm with which it moves. She is brave enough to speak her mind. The provocative style that she uses may not please all her readers but it will surely get them to pay attention to her. Kandaswami's anthology *Touch* is a sharp and clear reflection on the society living in the marginal space. Presenting perspectives of the marginalized, explicitly triple oppression of dalit women is a clear cut development of Dalit Feminist Standpoint that in turn can provide valuable preparatory points for enquiry into issues, matters or problems about dalit women by the oppressive social and political system but also about those who draw legitimacy to the position of oppressors by the same social system.

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