

Voice of Resistance: Feminism and Political Struggle in Meena

Kandasamy's Works

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Abstract

This study explores the feminist and political dimensions of Meena Kandasamy's literary works, particularly focusing on her contributions before 2016. It examines how Kandasamy employs literature as a tool of resistance, addressing the intersection of gender and caste oppression in Indian society. Through an analysis of her works like *Ms Militancy* (2010) and *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), this paper investigates her use of experimental narrative techniques, including stream of consciousness and non-linear storytelling, to portray women's defiance against patriarchal and caste-based structures. Additionally, the study compares Kandasamy's feminist approach to that of Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, and international feminist figures such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, highlighting her distinct emphasis on political activism. By reclaiming Indian mythology for feminist and anti-caste narratives, Kandasamy crafts a bold literary voice that challenges social injustices, from caste violence to state oppression. This study underscores her lasting impact on contemporary feminist discourse and her role in shaping the intersectional feminist and Dalit literary movements in India.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, Feminism, Caste Oppression, Intersectionality, Indian Literature, Political Resistance, Gender Studies, Dalit Feminism, Mythology Reinterpretation, Literary Activism.

I. Introduction

1.1 Overview of Indian Feminist Literature

The history of Indian feminist literature is rooted in the socio-political context of the country's struggles with patriarchy, casteism, and colonialism. Early feminist writers like Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi began challenging gender roles and questioning societal norms. Indian feminist writing evolved from a focus on personal female experiences to engaging with larger political issues. By the late 20th century, feminist literature in India had become a powerful tool for highlighting not only gender but

also caste and class oppression (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Meena Kandasamy, a modern feminist voice, continues this tradition of using literature as a means to address and challenge socio-political injustices.

1.2 Introduction to Meena Kandasamy

Meena Kandasamy, born in 1984, is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator, and activist who emerged as a strong voice in feminist and anti-caste literature. Before 2016, Kandasamy's significant works included *Ms Militancy* (2010), which reimagined mythological women as figures of defiance, and her translations of Tamil Dalit writing, which amplified marginalized voices. Kandasamy's poetry and prose challenge patriarchal, caste-based, and colonial structures. She employs feminist and anti-caste narratives to address socio-political injustices faced by women, particularly those from Dalit and marginalized communities (Kandasamy, 2010).

1.3 Objective of the Paper

The objective of this paper is to explore the intersection of feminism and political struggle in Meena Kandasamy's works before 2016. Through a close reading of her early works, such as *Ms Militancy* and her translations, this study will examine how Kandasamy uses literature as a tool of resistance against patriarchy, caste oppression, and socio-political injustice. The thesis posits that Kandasamy's writing serves as both an artistic and political platform for marginalized voices.

II. Feminist Themes in Kandasamy's Works

2.1 Representation of Women's Resistance

Meena Kandasamy's early works depict women who defy societal norms and patriarchal constraints. In *Ms Militancy*, Kandasamy reimagines women from Indian mythology—such as Draupadi, Sita, and Kannagi—not as passive figures but as rebellious and strong-willed individuals who resist their prescribed roles (Kandasamy, 2010). Through these retellings, Kandasamy provides a feminist perspective on the traditionally patriarchal narratives, portraying women as active agents of change. The defiance of these mythological figures reflects Kandasamy's broader critique of the limitations placed on women in contemporary society.

2.2 Body Politics and Female Desire

In *Ms Militancy*, Kandasamy directly challenges societal control over female bodies and desires. She reinterprets women's sexuality as a form of resistance, which is particularly

evident in her retelling of the story of Draupadi, where Draupadi's disrobing becomes a symbol of both sexual and political resistance (Kandasamy, 2010). By reclaiming sexual autonomy, Kandasamy critiques the patriarchal culture that confines women's sexuality to the norms of chastity and purity. Her poetry, thus, serves as a platform for exploring female desire outside the boundaries imposed by patriarchal control (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

2.3 Critique of Marriage and Domesticity

Kandasamy's critique of marriage and domesticity is prominent in her early poetry and prose. She frequently challenges the institution of marriage as a tool for patriarchal domination. Her poem "Mascara" (2010) critiques the roles assigned to women in domestic spaces, using vivid imagery to describe the entrapment of women within traditional marital roles. Kandasamy's portrayal of domestic violence in her early works serves as a critique of the emotional and physical abuse women often face within the institution of marriage (Kandasamy, 2010). Her writing underscores the need for societal rethinking of gender roles within domestic life (Geetha, 2007).

III. Caste and Social Injustice

3.1 Intersection of Gender and Caste

Meena Kandasamy's works before 2016, such as *Ms Militancy* and *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), vividly explore the double oppression faced by Dalit women, highlighting how caste and gender intersect to create a system of layered subjugation. Dalit women, in particular, are marginalized not only by the patriarchal structures common to all women but also by the rigid caste hierarchies that position them at the lowest rung of society. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kandasamy portrays the Kilvenmani massacre of 1968, in which Dalit agricultural labourers were brutally killed for demanding fair wages. Through this narrative, she underscores the intersectionality of caste and gender, as Dalit women often bear the brunt of caste violence alongside the burdens of patriarchy (Kandasamy, 2014). Kandasamy uses her work to give voice to these women, presenting them as active agents of resistance rather than passive victims (Guru, 1995).

3.2 The Politics of Language and Representation

Language plays a crucial role in Kandasamy's works as a tool of defiance against caste-based marginalization. Her works, especially *Ms Militancy*, are steeped in Tamil culture, myths, and Dravidian identity. By reclaiming Tamil language and Dravidian cultural

symbols, Kandasamy directly challenges the dominance of Brahmanical culture and Sanskritization, which have historically marginalized non-Brahmin communities, particularly Dalits (Pandian, 2007). In her poetry, Kandasamy reinterprets ancient Tamil myths, positioning them within a feminist and anti-caste framework. By doing so, she not only asserts the relevance of Tamil heritage but also challenges the hegemony of Brahminical patriarchy. Her use of Dravidian cultural references serves as a form of literary activism, subverting the casteist discourse that has long oppressed Dalit communities (Sivaramakrishnan, 2006).

IV. Political Struggle and Revolution

4.1 Anti-Establishment Narratives

Kandasamy's early works frequently critique the political structures that perpetuate inequality. Her poetry and prose expose the deep-seated inequalities inherent in India's political and social systems, particularly those that uphold caste-based oppression. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kandasamy explores how the state, in collusion with landowners, perpetuates systemic violence against marginalized communities, such as the Dalits (Kandasamy, 2014). This anti-establishment narrative reveals the corrupt relationships between the ruling class and the state apparatus, which consistently suppresses the voices of the oppressed. By critiquing government corruption and state violence, Kandasamy provides a scathing indictment of the existing political order (Omvedt, 1993).

4.2 Radical Activism through Literature

Kandasamy's works are not just literature; they are a form of radical activism. Her advocacy for marginalized communities, including Dalits, women, and labourers, is evident in her writing and her public life. She actively participates in protests, speaks out against state violence, and uses her literary platform to demand justice for the oppressed. Kandasamy's use of literature as a form of political activism aligns with the tradition of Dalit literature, which has long been a space for political expression and social critique (Zelliot, 1996). Her works, such as *Ms Militancy*, combine personal narratives of feminist resistance with broader political struggles, positioning her as both a writer and an activist.

4.3 Depiction of Revolt and Rebellion

Kandasamy's depiction of rebellion and revolution is a recurring theme in her works before 2016. In *When I Hit You*, although published later, her earlier works such as *Ms Militancy* lay the foundation for these depictions of personal and political rebellion. In *Ms*

Militancy, Kandasamy uses figures like Draupadi and Kannagi to symbolize revolutionary resistance against both patriarchal and caste-based oppression (Kandasamy, 2010). These mythological figures are reimagined as rebels who refuse to submit to the dominant power structures. The symbolic representation of revolution is also prominent in her poetry, where she frequently invokes imagery of fire, blood, and destruction to signify the need for radical change (Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). This revolutionary spirit permeates her body of work, positioning her as a leading voice in the fight against injustice.

V. Meena Kandasamy's Narrative Style and Literary Devices

5.1 Use of Experimental Narratives

Meena Kandasamy's narrative style, particularly before 2016, is marked by her experimental approach to storytelling. She often employs stream-of-consciousness techniques, fragmented structures, and non-linear timelines in both her poetry and prose. These experimental forms reflect the chaotic, often fragmented experiences of her characters, who live at the intersections of caste, gender, and political struggle. In *Ms Militancy* (2010), Kandasamy's poems often lack traditional narrative progression, instead presenting powerful vignettes or emotional snapshots that challenge the reader to piece together the larger picture of resistance and revolt. This fragmented approach is particularly effective in conveying the disjointed and oppressive reality faced by marginalized individuals (Kandasamy, 2010). Her non-linear storytelling allows her to simultaneously highlight both personal and historical forms of oppression, demonstrating how these forces are intertwined (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

5.2 Use of Myths and Historical Figures

Kandasamy's work, especially *Ms Militancy*, reclaims Indian mythology and historical narratives to challenge patriarchal and caste-based oppression. She retells myths from a feminist and anti-caste perspective, focusing on the strength and rebellion of female figures who have traditionally been depicted as submissive. In her reinterpretation of the story of Draupadi, for instance, Kandasamy focuses on Draupadi's act of defiance during her disrobing, portraying her as a symbol of feminist resistance rather than victimhood (Kandasamy, 2010). Similarly, in her poems about Kannagi, Kandasamy transforms the legendary woman from Tamil literature into a figure of righteous rage and revolution. These reinterpretations allow Kandasamy to critique both the historical silencing of women and the modern-day oppression faced by marginalized women (Geetha, 2007).

5.3 Poetic Form and Rhetoric

Kandasamy's poetry before 2016 shows a striking evolution from lyrical introspection to militant rhetoric. In *Ms Militancy*, her use of poetic form is deliberately aggressive and confrontational, designed to provoke the reader into recognizing and challenging systemic injustices. Kandasamy employs metaphors of fire, blood, and destruction to symbolize revolution and change. Her use of symbols and metaphors is both direct and powerful, underscoring the urgency of her message (Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). Additionally, her use of direct speech in many of her poems amplifies the voices of marginalized women, presenting their defiance against caste and patriarchy without mediation or censorship. This bold and unapologetic tone is a hallmark of her poetic style, making her work stand out in contemporary Indian feminist literature.

VI. Reception and Criticism

6.1 Public and Critical Reception of Kandasamy's Works

Meena Kandasamy's works, particularly *Ms Militancy*, have received both critical acclaim and public attention for their raw portrayal of gender and caste oppression. Feminist scholars have praised her for bringing Dalit and feminist issues to the forefront of literary discourse, noting her ability to intertwine personal and political narratives. Critics like Susie Tharu have acknowledged the importance of Kandasamy's work in the broader context of Dalit feminist literature, recognizing her efforts to challenge not only patriarchy but also the deeply entrenched caste system in India (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Kandasamy's works are celebrated for their fearless critique of social norms, with many literary figures lauding her for addressing taboo subjects such as female desire, sexual autonomy, and caste violence (Guru, 1995).

6.2 Controversies and Censorship

However, Kandasamy's radical stance on social issues has also attracted considerable controversy. Her critique of caste and religion, as well as her unapologetic portrayal of female sexuality, has led to backlash from conservative cultural groups in India. The boldness of *Ms Militancy*, with its reinterpretation of sacred myths and its critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, has provoked strong reactions from orthodox sections of society. Some critics have accused Kandasamy of deliberately courting controversy to gain attention, while others argue that her radical approach is necessary to spark dialogue on uncomfortable truths (Omvedt, 1993). Despite—or perhaps because of—these

controversies, Kandasamy's works remain influential, continuing to challenge readers to confront the oppressive structures that underpin Indian society.

VII. Comparative Analysis with Other Feminist Writers

7.1 Meena Kandasamy and Kamala Das

Meena Kandasamy and Kamala Das both bring unique voices to Indian feminist literature, particularly in their exploration of sexuality and rebellion. While Kamala Das was one of the early voices in Indian English poetry to openly address female sexuality, her work often carries a sense of internal conflict and ambivalence toward traditional roles, as seen in *My Story* (1976). Das's work highlights the emotional turbulence of navigating personal desire within a repressive society, but her rebellion is often personal rather than overtly political (Das, 1976). In contrast, Kandasamy's feminism is unapologetically militant. Her focus is less on personal identity struggles and more on the intersection of caste and gender oppression, as well as on political resistance. Kandasamy reclaims sexuality not just as personal expression but as a form of defiance against patriarchal and caste systems, especially in *Ms Militancy* (2010). This sharp, confrontational approach places Kandasamy at the forefront of feminist political literature, while Das's work often emphasizes emotional and psychological rebellion.

Table 1: Key Themes and Comparisons in Meena Kandasamy's Works

Theme	Description	Key Works	Comparative Analysis
Feminist Resistance	Exploration of female defiance against patriarchal norms and gender roles.	<i>Ms Militancy</i> (2010)	Compared with Kamala Das's focus on personal rebellion.
Caste and Gender Intersectionality	Focus on the double oppression of Dalit women, linking caste and gender.	<i>The Gypsy Goddess</i> (2014)	Compared with Arundhati Roy's exploration of caste in <i>The God of Small Things</i> (1997).
Use of Mythology	Reinterpretation of Indian myths for feminist and anti-caste narratives.	<i>Ms Militancy</i> (2010)	Compared to international figures like Audre Lorde's reclamation of identity

			and power.
Political Activism and Social Change	Advocacy for marginalized communities and critique of state violence.	<i>The Gypsy Goddess</i> (2014)	Compared to Arundhati Roy's political activism and global feminist writers like bell hooks.
Experimental Narrative Styles	Use of stream of consciousness, fragmentation, and non-linear storytelling.	<i>Ms Militancy</i> (2010), <i>The Gypsy Goddess</i> (2014)	Compared to modernist and postcolonial narrative techniques in feminist literature.

This table 1 provide a concise summary of the key themes discussed and how they are compared with other feminist writers, helping readers visualize the central ideas before diving into detailed comparisons.

7.2 Meena Kandasamy and Arundhati Roy

Both Meena Kandasamy and Arundhati Roy engage deeply with political activism in their literature, but their methods and thematic concerns differ. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) tackles caste, colonialism, and societal oppression through a literary lens that incorporates both personal narrative and political critique. While Roy's political involvement post-*The God of Small Things* has expanded to activism against environmental destruction, capitalism, and state oppression, her approach tends to blend lyrical prose with subtle political critique (Roy, 1997). Kandasamy, by contrast, is more direct in her political engagement. Her work often critiques state violence, as seen in *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), and she advocates for the rights of marginalized communities, especially Dalits. Both writers, however, share a commitment to literature as a form of political activism, using their platforms to highlight injustice and mobilize readers toward change.

7.3 International Comparisons

On the global stage, Kandasamy's work can be compared to the feminist writings of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, particularly in their shared focus on intersectionality. Like Kandasamy, Lorde and hooks analyse the intersections of race, gender, and class, often highlighting the unique struggles faced by women of colour. Lorde's emphasis on the

power of self-expression and her assertion that silence can be a form of complicity resonate with Kandasamy's militant stance against oppression (Lorde, 1984). Similarly, hooks' critique of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy parallels Kandasamy's critique of caste and gender-based violence. Kandasamy, like these international feminist icons, uses her writing not only to analyse oppressive systems but also to advocate for radical social change, making her part of a larger global feminist movement.

VIII. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Key Points

Meena Kandasamy's body of work demonstrates how feminist literature can function as a powerful tool of political resistance. Through her unique narrative style, use of mythological figures, and radical rhetoric, Kandasamy blends personal narratives with broader political struggles. Her feminist framework consistently addresses the intersection of caste and gender, making her work a significant contribution to Dalit feminist discourse. Kandasamy uses literature not only as an artistic expression but also as a means to challenge systemic injustices, such as caste-based violence, patriarchy, and state corruption.

8.2 Impact and Legacy

Kandasamy's contribution to Indian literature and feminist thought is profound. By giving voice to Dalit women and critiquing both caste and patriarchal oppression, she has redefined the role of feminist literature in India. Her works, particularly *Ms Militancy* (2010) and *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), have opened up conversations around the necessity of linking feminist discourse with caste and class struggles. Looking forward, Kandasamy's radical approach suggests that she will continue to be a critical voice in both Indian and global feminist movements. As Indian society continues to grapple with issues of gender inequality and caste oppression, Kandasamy's work remains as relevant as ever, inspiring both readers and activists to resist injustice.

8.3 Final Thoughts

Meena Kandasamy's lasting influence on contemporary feminist discourse lies in her ability to use literature as a form of political resistance. Her bold reimagining of myths, her defiant stance against patriarchal and caste systems, and her willingness to confront the state and society place her among the most important feminist writers of her generation.

Through her works, Kandasamy exemplifies how literature can not only reflect societal issues but also actively challenge and seek to transform oppressive structures.

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