

## Narrating Resistance: A Critique of Caste Politics via Radical Aesthetics in *The Gypsy Goddess*

Dr. B. Krishnaiah, Assistant Professor Department of English, School of Humanities University of Hyderabad Gachibowli, Hyderabad – 500046, TELANGANA.

### Abstract:

*Meena Kandasamy's first novel, The Gypsy Goddess presents the Kilvenmani massacre on December 25, 1968. Dalit farm workers were burned alive in a movement over wages and unionization Tamil Nadu delta. Kandasamy creates a radical aesthetic that shakes up the norms of realist storytelling, instead of copying the documentary's claim to openness. It questions the depoliticized consumption of violence, and uses form to criticize caste dominance. This article contends that the novel's experimental framework—comprising metafictional interruptions, polyphonic testimony, apostrophic address, counter-archival fragments, refusal of closure, and a politics of language—constitutes a resistant narratology that positions caste not merely as a thematic element but as a fundamental force of representation. By reading The Gypsy Goddess alongside Jacques Ranciere's concept of the "distribution of the sensible," Dalit feminist scholarship, and subaltern studies, I demonstrate how Kandasamy converts the reader from a mere observer of caste violence to an engaged witness. The novel's radical aesthetics reposition literary worth within insurgent memory practices and a collectivized temporality that challenges the upper-caste imperative of historical amnesia. In the end, The Gypsy Goddess demonstrates how a book may be a site for militant pedagogy, not a memorial monolith, but an open-ended way to read, listen, and organize against caste injustice.*

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste, Tamil Nadu, Kilvenmani massacre, radical aesthetics, testimony, subaltern studies, Ranciere, Dalit feminism, counter-archive

### Introduction

*The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandaswamy deals with a labor dispute at Kilvenmani. Forty-four Dalit sharecroppers and farm laborers who were members of left-wing organizations died in fire in which, most of them women and children who were locked inside a hut on 25 December 1968. Kandasamy talks to the reader in a voice that is very self-aware and shows the politics of narration—how horror becomes clear, who is allowed to speak, and what kinds of stories are considered acceptable for reporting about caste violence. Her work is part of a long tradition of subaltern writing that changes the way history and narrative relate to each other, but what makes it unique is how it fills form with the urgency of caste critique. When we talk about "narrating resistance" in this way, we are putting craft next to content. The story does not just show people who are resistant; it also uses resistance as a theme for art and as a moral attitude. The writing openly engages with the reader's yearning for narrative, proof, and emotional release, so revealing the frameworks that make Dalit pain commodifiable and, hence, expendable. In this regard, Kandasamy's reinterpretation of the massacre rejects the comforts of national memory and the moral pretensions of humanitarian spectatorship. In this context, caste

is not a fixed sociological framework; rather, it serves as an aesthetic regulator that determines whose suffering can be spoken and whose quiet can be preserved.

The study makes three claims that are connected to each other. First, *The Gypsy Goddess* uses a radical aesthetics of refusal to stop the simple consumption of Dalit fatalities by breaking up realist transparency. Second, the book puts together a counter-archive of caste violence using polyphonic fragments that change the way we think about authority and proof. Third, Kandasamy's linguistic politics—particularly code switching, apostrophe, and metacommentary—cultivate an ethic of witness that engages readers in the systems of caste rather than exonerating them via mere empathy. The subsequent sections elaborate on these assertions concerning form, address, temporality, and the politics of memory, positioning the book within Dalit feminist discourse and subaltern historiography.

## Radical Aesthetics and the Politics of Readability

The novel's formal experimentalism derives its vitality from Ranciere's concept of politics in art, which involves a disruption of perceptual regimes that designate roles of visibility and audibility (Ranciere 1–19). In a lot of Indian English and Tamil realist fiction, the peasant or Dalit is either a sociological character or a symbol of national pity. Kandasamy does not accept either. Her prologues and interruptions draw attention to how evidence is chosen, ordered, and framed, which takes away the “naturalness” of objective narration. The outcome is less postmodern play and more revolutionary pedagogy of the past. In fact, as William Faulkner mentioned, “The past is never dead. It's not even past” (85). According to Sivakami, most Dalit narratives “largely focus on the past and present experiences, historical struggle, language, and culture of Dalit people” (436) as an expression of their battle “against exploitation, repression, and marginalization” (439).

Subaltern studies have illuminated the constraints of elite historiography while Dalit feminist study has elucidated the gendered and domestic nature of caste violence, frequently relegated to the private realm, rendering it incalculable and ungrievable. Kandasamy's narrative internalizes these lessons by concentrating on the frameworks that render such violence narratable. The book does not give a single clear chain of events that led to the event. Instead, it uses an assemblage form. Newspaper snippets, oral testimony, rumor, elegy, and exhortation are organized to mimic the function of an archive, albeit one that is intentionally biased. The book also echoes Ngugi wa Thiong'o's calls to decolonize language and bring back orature as a living resource. Tamil inflections, forms of village address, and trade union lexicons are presented without defensive glossing; the work compels readers to adapt to a language environment that eschews upper-caste Anglophone simplicity. This is not exoticism; it is a rejection of the medium's propensity to sanitize caste through English. Lastly, the book embodies a Gramscian interpretation of hegemony as a struggle of common sense and a Fanonian conception of violence as both material and epistemic.

Kandasamy's rhetorical methods are meant to go against the norm. They rebuild common sense around Dalit experience and labor politics while making the reader face the fact that caste is the same across state, landlord, and police. The discourse on such atrocities is less witnessed,

the accounts of these events are surfacing often in the form of poetry and autobiographical works portraying several symptoms of trauma. Letchumi, one of the victims, was left with 'strangeness' in her head. "She had become so dizzy that police battalions and hired rowdies and armed landlords kept running away as flag-bearing Communists and the dead chased them through her, ear to ear, in unceasing waves." (199) Unable to bear with the agony she was undergoing, she explains to her neighbor that "she could feel a hundred fights inside her body and nobody retired to take rest and their madness made her fly... Her complaints varied, but the relentless throbbing never stopped. The dead were devouring her from the inside. Again and again, she collapsed in the chaos." (199)

One of the most interesting things about *The Gypsy Goddess* is that it does not settle into a single narrative voice. The chapters often feel like separate pieces, some of which are accusatory, some of which are diary entries, some of which are poetic, and some of which are forensic. They are all held together by a guiding intelligence that is more of an organizer than a narrator. This fragmentation disrupts the conventional parameters of historical fiction, wherein comprehensiveness confers validity. In Kandasamy's design, fragmented form serves as a truth technique, reflecting the fractured lived reality of caste fear and the impossibility of a "complete story" when essential institutions—police, courts, newspapers—perpetuate caste silence. In such silent situation of voluntary thought suppression, victims may seek to alter unbearable reality into agony and helplessness. Kandaswamy writes:

The living in Kilvenmani lack life. Everyone is something else: there are the ones who do not eat, the ones who do not talk, the ones who do not bathe, the ones who do not step outside their homes, the ones who do not step inside their homes. It is strange the way in which the village has exchanged its sorrow for insanity. (211)

The novel's meta-narratorial addresses frequently engage an imagined reader in pursuit of an 'objective account.' Instead of apologizing for subjectivity, the text asserts that objectivity within a caste society serves as a facade for savarna common sense. The fragmentation serves as a critique of epistemic frameworks that favor the "view from nowhere." In this manner, the novel links itself with Dalit life writing and testimonial genres that regard discontinuity and repetition as fundamental modalities. The book's repetition is less about being redundant and more about being ritualistic: each time it is told, it fights against the anesthetic of spectacle that frequently comes with media coverage of terrible events. The outcome is a rhythmic pattern of scene, apostrophe, documentary fragment, and expository aside. The cuts take the reader away from the story's momentum—there is no quick path to catharsis—and instead focus on the circumstances of narration. Kandasamy subverts the conventional moral economy of trauma narratives by transforming the reader's demand for narrative from an act of empathy into an inquiry of involvement. That aesthetic advances what Butler refers to as "responsible responsiveness," (134) when the imperative of recognition supersedes the need for narrative gratification.

Kandasamy's apostrophes—direct addresses to the reader, the dead, the offenders, and the state—prevent the excuse of distance. Apostrophe is not a decoration here; it is a tool for politics. When the narrator explicitly addresses the "gentle reader," that politeness is tinged with irony, making the reader a part of the lengthy chain of caste avoidance. The "you" becomes a place of conflict. This method comes from anticolonial pamphlets and Dalit manifestos, and it

creates public spaces. The book does not see itself as just telling the truth to those in power; it also sees itself as bringing together a wide range of readers to form a counter-public based on ending caste and labor. Address also undertakes local epistemic work. The book reconstructs sensory disciplines distorted by caste habitus by prompting the reader to “look,” “listen,” and “follow.” In Ranciere’s terminology, apostrophe reconfigures the division of the sensible by redirecting the gaze from voyeurism to attention, focusing not on what transpired, but on how we came to know and then forget those events (12–19). The apostrophic viewpoint also rejects the paternalistic ventriloquy that is common when upper-caste narrators talk about Dalit misery. Here, voice is seen as work done together, not as salvage.

## Politics of Language

*The Gypsy Goddess* fights against the smoothing influence of English by using Tamil kinship phrases, village slang, honorifics, union slogans, and idioms. This rejection of full domestication serves multiple objectives. First, it protects the Kilvenmani world’s epistemic integrity by saying that language differences do not get in the way of understanding but are necessary for moral encounters. Second, it goes against the rules of Indian English fiction that put the convenience of the city reader above the independence of the life world being shown. Third, it supports Ngugi’s idea that language carries histories of struggle; orature and local registers can change who has the power in a story (14–25). Even when translation is available, it frequently includes comments about the limitations of translation, a form of metadiscourse that rejects the illusion of seamless equivalence. The text makes the reader slow down and thinks. That friction is intentional, reading about caste violence without any literary difficulties would, in this aesthetic, repeat the privilege that lets caste work in secret. This way, the text becomes a place to learn how to unlearn, a little but effective technique to shift difficulties from the oppressed to the reader, who benefits from caste’s invisibility.

Kandasamy’s violent scenes stand out since they do not include obscene details. The people in the hut—men, women, and children—do not become props for the reader’s desire for sensationalism. Instead, the story typically pulls back right when you would normally see the horrible thing happen up close. This strategy takes away the morally comforting sensation of fright and replaces it with fury. The criticism is twofold – it targets the market for atrocity and the national inclination to transform violence into a moral narrative without enacting structural reform. Butler’s concept of grievability is pertinent, whose deaths warrant narrative investment, and who determines this? Kandasamy’s austerity revalues the economy of representation by directing narrative labor towards the organization of contexts rather than eliciting shock. This anti-spectacular position also affirms a feminist perspective. Dalit feminist study demonstrates that egregious violence against women is often either hyper-visible (as in rape-murder) or hyper-invisible (as in work compulsion, domestic terror), both of which serve to maintain patriarchal caste structures (Rege & Paik). Kandasamy’s emphasis on salary disputes, union gatherings, gossip, and everyday acts of solidarity highlights the ordinary mechanisms that enable violence and support resistance. The “action” is not just in the fire; it is also in the meetings that happen before and the mobilizations that happen after.

The archive imagination is a very important part of *The Gypsy Goddess*. The novel is full of the broken pieces of memory techniques, like bits of testimony, fake footnotes, lists of names, re-told newspaper articles, and legalistic comments. This is not documentation fetishism, it is an insurgent archival poetics that brings memory together against the forgetting that caste and its complicity with state mechanisms require. In this way, the text is similar to subaltern studies' goal of bringing back peasant uprisings that colonial archives made hard to read. Irony plays a big role in how the law is shown in the book. Police statements, FIRs, and trial narratives—when they do show up—are less like neutral records and more like tools for cleaning up caste impunity. The counter-archive thus challenges the legal archive not by replicating it but by reassessing alternative forms of evidence—embodied memory, rumor as social knowledge, women's discourse, and union registers. This type of archive goes against the “single story” that rational law is driving society toward fairness. Dalit critics have long argued for materialist analyses of caste dominance instead (Teltumbde & Yengde). The work exemplifies a reparative historiography, asserting the capacity to designate atrocity and allocate responsibility beyond legal acknowledgment.

The story's time is not linear. The narrative does not build up to the night of the fire and then provide the reader a sense of relief through either revenge or forgiveness. Instead, it loops, rewinds, and changes the setting. That temporal structure rejects the modernist notion of the event as a distinct rupture. Caste violence is both an occurrence and a system; it keeps happening because it is part of land relations, kinship rules, education, and local government. Kandasamy's looping time makes these structures clear while also making it clear that the massacre is not something that happened in the past, but something that the reader is still living through. This refusal of closure also goes against the country's aim to turn horrible events into lessons learnt. The novel challenges what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the homogenizing “now” of national time by keeping the wound as an open space for political organizing instead of a place for memorial consumption. The book does not advocate for perpetual sorrow; instead, it envisions a future centered on abolition, collective strength, and the eradication of caste. So, the open-endedness is a strategy.

## Class and Caste

A danger in telling the narrative of Kilvenmani is that it could turn caste struggle into class struggle, or the other way around. *The Gypsy Goddess* maintains an eye on both. The agricultural workers are involved in salary disputes, but their caste structure makes them easy to replace. The same is true for landlords, whose authority is both economic and ritual. The union scenes in the book make this knot even stronger. The text portrays the unity of Dalit workers as an insurrection against wage exploitation and untouchability, challenging the traditional analysis that views caste as “superstructure” and class as “base.” As Ambedkar asserted, the eradication of caste necessitates a structural rupture with the Hindu social order; absent this rupture, class struggle in India will be subsumed by caste. Kandasamy's story shows this aesthetically. Its structure connects caste and class through repeating themes of land, family, food, and physical weakness. Gramsci is also useful here. The landlords' control is not just based on force; it is also based on education, like the village school, the temple hierarchy, and the normality of respect. Kandasamy's use of apostrophes and instruction-like language is a form of counter-pedagogy



that teaches readers to see the “common sense” of caste as a made-up agreement that can be broken. The novel’s exploration of voice and address contributes to the formation of a new collective consciousness—unified, solidaristic, and anti-caste. The novel does not portray the women and children who died in the slaughter as passive victims. Instead, it focuses on the gendered work that makes both village life and union organizing feasible, like cooking for meetings, taking care of kids while men negotiate salaries, gathering information, and going between homes. Sharmila Rege’s assertion that Dalit women’s autobiographical narratives constitute epistemic interventions rather than mere “experience” aligns with Kandasamy’s depiction (103–27). The novel’s focus on women’s speech acts and silences provide a feminist contrast to the hyper-masculine rhetoric that frequently pervades both left and right politics. Simultaneously, the narrative refrains from romanticizing camaraderie; it documents discord and disparity within the oppressed community. This focus on distinction bolsters the political argument instead of undermining it. Paik’s research on the education and migration of Dalit women illustrates that emancipation is perpetually negotiated among internal hierarchies and external antagonism (65–103). Kandasamy’s approach captures that intricacy without making her clear accusation of brutality by landlords and the state less clear.

Kandasamy’s decisions over naming – what to rename the hamlet, whether to keep historical names, and how to talk about the people who did the crime – show how important representation is. The novel engages with the historical reference of Kilvenmani while emphasizing the politics of commemoration. Even partially listing the dead fights against their being turned into a “massacre.” Nevertheless, the book also fights against the opposite move of turning people into sentimentalized main characters whose personal stories explain the structural analysis. The balancing act demonstrates a Butlerian ethic to name is to grieve, but to grieve appropriately is to locate the deceased within a critique of the reality that killed them. The careful language used to describe criminals, landlords, and police officers avoids libel not because it is afraid to do so, but because it is focused on systems rather than on making villainy a character feature. This approach reflects the techniques of Dalit activists who go beyond blaming people in court and instead focus on developing movements.

*The Gypsy Goddess* is an English-language novel that is sold around the world. It deals with the dilemma between being distinctive to one place and being easy to read in other places. Kandasamy won’t be open with city audiences, but she will still exploit the worldwide novel’s ability to spread. The book’s paratexts, such as acknowledgments, author’s comments, and interview-like interruptions, speak to readers all over the world without making caste into a generic human rights issue. *The Gypsy Goddess* can be read with other Indian English books that rethink form to deal with systemic violence, yet it is different because it is very clear about caste. While some novels use caste as a metaphor, Kandasamy ties narrative experimentation to political education. The result is not ethnography or postmodernism; it is a partisan literature that invites readers as comrades empathise with the victims. Kandasamy’s work shows that effort through the reader’s sensory and narrative habits. The novel does not supplant activism nor suggest literature as a substitute for physical battle. Instead, it shows how literature may break up the aesthetic practices that make caste seem normal. In that regard, the book not merely recounts resistance; it embodies it. It goes against the market’s need for suffering that can be consumed

and calls for literature that transforms how we hear Dalit discourse, how we keep track of state violence, and how we remember shared grief.

## Conclusion

*The Gypsy Goddess* shows how radical aesthetics can do more than just make political information look better; they can also change how we see, remember, and feel responsible. Kandasamy's narrative shifts the reader's focus from passively consuming atrocities to actively witnessing them. Its fragmentation, apostrophe, counter-archival structure, and linguistic politics collectively facilitate a redistribution of the sensible, challenging the caste system's dominance over visibility and audibility. When read with Ambedkar's call for annihilation, Dalit feminist epistemologies, and subaltern historiography, the novel shows that form is a battleground. In recounting Kilvenmani, Kandasamy neither trivializes the past nor idealizes it. She demands continuation of the fight against caste violence and it can be fought through organizing, memory work, and aesthetic re-education. In the epilogue, Kandaswamy writes:

You watch the women sing of the landlord's perverse lust, his bloodthirst and this red harvest. You hear the men say, with a sigh. '*Mudivu kandachu*,' which can be variously translated as 'It has been completed' or 'We have seen the end.' You join the people of Kilvenmani – on the village streets, in their paddy fields, in their toddy shops – as they rejoice in the revenge. You know, more than anyone else, how they have waited every day for this day." (273)

This reflects the continuation of the resistance of the Dalits until the end of Gopalakrishna Naidu in the novel. The novel bets that form can change readers – that hardship can bring people together, that refusal can make people pay more attention, and that stories can become militant without losing their beauty or depth. In a time when caste prejudice changes from one place to another, such from rural tenancy to urban labor markets and university campuses, the book's stress on radical aesthetics is not a luxury; it is a necessity. It demonstrates how literature can cultivate the perceptual and moral faculties necessary for the eradication of caste.

## References

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Annotated Critical Edition, edited by S. Anand, Navayana, 2014.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2004.
- Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage, 1996.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. International Publishers, 1971.

Kandasamy, Meena. *The Gypsy Goddess*. Harper Collins, 2014.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann, 1986.

Paik, Shailaja. *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*. Routledge, 2014.

Ranciere, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, 2004.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.

Sivakami, P. "Tamil Dalit literature: Some Riddles." In: Ashcroft B, Mendis R, McGonegal J and Mukherjee A (eds) *Literature for Our Times. Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century*. Rodopi, 2012. Pp. 433–442.

Teltumbde, Anand. *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*. Navayana, 2018.

Yengde, Suraj. *Caste Matters*. Viking, 2019.