

# The Question of Caste in Some Select Poetry by Meena Kandasamy

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Meena Kandasamy

## Abstract

The word 'caste' was used first by the Portuguese invaders in the 15th century BC to define the Sanskrit word 'varna' which means classification of society in terms of professions. *Manusmriti* and other Hindu religious texts like the Vedas mentioned about classifying the society in four varnas or castes:

Brahmins (born from Lord Brahma's head) belong to the highest order of the caste system and they comprise priests, scholars and teachers.

Kshatriyas (born from Brahma's arms) belong to the second highest order of the caste system and they comprise rulers and warriors.

Vaishyas (born from Brahma's thighs) belong to the third highest order of the caste system and they belong to the merchant and trader class.

Shudras (born from Brahma's feet) belong to the lowest stratum in the caste system and they comprise labourers.

People belonging to any of the four afore mentioned castes are called savarna or caste Hindus. On the other hand, the Dalits who do not belong to any of the four castes are called avarna or casteless. So the caste system follows a rigid hierarchical system based on Hindu religious notions of purity/impurity and excludes the rest as outcastes (avarna) and untouchables. This caste system then, sanctioned inequality among the 'higher' and the 'lower' castes and it saw a violent past as much as it is witness to an

equally oppressive contemporary reality in India when in the name of caste, Dalits are being exploited, tortured, disgraced and are even subjected to mass killings at times. The very idea of the Dalit identity comes from mythology and Hindu religious texts. Poets like Meena Kandasamy, who herself hails from a Dalit community breaks away from this mythological framework and writes their own myths. She denounces the marginalization of the casteless Dalits in the society and seeks to rewrite counter narratives from an anti-caste perspective. This paper studies some select poetry by Meena Kandasamy to investigate how she uses her poetry as a tool of resistance against the hegemonic power that has historically oppressed the rest in the name of caste.

**Keywords:** casteless, Dalit, caste discrimination, hegemony, Meena Kandasamy, anti-caste perspective.

*Manusmriti*, which is one of the ancient Dharmasastras of Hinduism, validates caste and untouchability. Dalit poet activist Meena Kandasamy therefore, writes in the preface ‘Should You Take Offence’ to her second anthology of poetry *Ms Militancy* –You are Manu robbing me of my right to live and learn and choose. (8)

Her first poetry anthology titled *Touch* (2006) talks about the stigma associated with the very touch of the Dalits and how their touch is considered to be polluting by the Brahmanical caste system. She says with indignation —

“But, you will never have known  
that touch—the taboo  
to your transcendence,  
when crystallized in caste  
was a paraphernalia of  
undeserving hate.” (36-41)

Critiquing the ideology of non-dualism in Hinduism, Kandasamy, in the poem ‘Advaita: The Ultimate Question’ interrogates about the equality of the untouchable soul and the Brahmin soul before God—

“Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be
One	?” (Kandasamy1-23)

Written in the form that denotes dualism, Kandasamy critically questions the hypocrisy inherent in the Hindu philosophy of non-dualism that when every atman in this universe is part of the universal Brahman, so can an untouchable atman and a Brahmin atman ever be one. Dalits, who are seen as less than humans are negated of their being as humans and in the poem “One –eyed”, Kandasamy poignantly highlights how the eyesight of a child was snatched away for drinking water from a glass that was meant for the upper castes—

“the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule  
the doctor sees a medical emergency  
the school sees a potential embarrassment  
the press sees a headline and a photo feature  
dhanam sees a world torn in half.  
her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,  
the price for a taste of that touchable water.” (Ms Militancy4-10)

The poem “Becoming a Brahmin” is based on the speech delivered by Gandhiji at Tirupur on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1947 in which he very clearly proclaimed that if a beautiful Shudra girl marries a Brahmin boy and gives birth to a girl child and if that girl child marries a Brahmin boy in future, and in case this practice continues for the next three four generations, then the final product will be a Brahmin. Such a propagation by the father of the nation to eradicate untouchability from India is inherently casteist in the sense that instead of removing untouchability, it would only convert a pariah into a Brahmin after three four generations down the line and increase the Brahmin population and thereby preserve the hegemony of the upper castes —

“Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

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.” (Touch 1-9)

Kandasamy further reproaches Gandhiji in the poem “Mohandas Karamchand” for identifying Dalits as Harijans, meaning children of God. Even after repeated objections by people like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who himself was born into a Dalit family and served as independent India’s first Law and Justice minister and headed the drafting committee of the Constitution of India, people belonging to the so-called upper castes have had used the name Harijan as a word of insult to look down upon the Dalits. Kandasamy therefore, is very critical of the deification of Gandhiji as the father of the nation and voices her anger in the following lines—

“...you called us names,  
You dubbed us pariahs--- “Harijans”  
Don’t ever act like a holy saint.  
we can see through you, impure you.  
You knew, you bloody well knew,  
Caste won’t go, they wouldn’t let it go.  
It haunts us now, the way you do  
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two.

Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.” (Touch 9-10,13-14,21-24, 29)

Ekalavya is a mythological figure from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. In the poem ‘Ekalaiavan’, Kandasamy reviews this myth from the subaltern perspective and says that Ekalaiavan’s sheer brilliance in archery terrorizes Guru Dronacharya since he appears to be surpassing his favourite student, Arjuna. Hence, Ekalavya, the skilled outcast was demanded of his thumb by Guru Dronacharya so that he cannot be a rival to prince Arjuna in archery in the future. Kandasamy writes to Ekalaiavan in her characteristic style—

“You can do a lot of things  
With your left hand.  
Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant  
Left-handed treatment.  
Also,  
You don’t need your right thumb,  
To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.” (Touch 2-8)

The hegemony exercised by Brahmanical patriarchy during the times of ancient Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the Vedas and the Upanishads, is based on the ideology of preserving caste purity and the purity of women so as to construct a closed social structure. The Hindu religious texts consider that when a closed social structure breaks down, the whole social order collapses. *The Bhagavad Gita* refers to the collapse of this closed social and moral order when there is intermingling of castes, especially between women of the upper castes and men of the lower castes. The corrupted family members are unqualified to perform the rites prescribed in Vedic scriptures such as *sraddha* and *tarpan* and this deprivation of Vedic rites and rituals causes unhappiness amongst the ancestors of the family leading the whole family to hell. So by polluting the very system of caste (upper caste), man loses both worlds, heaven and this world of existence itself.

With the upsurge of sin, the women of the family become extremely corrupt and when women become corrupt, offsprings of mixed castes are born (*Bhagwad Gita* I Verse 41). In “We Will Rebuild Worlds”, Meena Kandasamy voices her resistance against caste discrimination and inhuman violence on the Dalits and asserts that the Dalits will rebuild a world where they can lead a respectful life without any discrimination and oppression in the name of caste. She writes—

“We will rebuild/worlds from shattered glass/and remnants of holocausts.  
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 outcasts/ degraded/as untouchable at/sixty-four feet/denied a  
life/and livelihood and done to death/...  
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/where to/continue their  
caste lines/and we will refresh your mind with other histories/of how you  
brutally murdered and massacred our peoples/with the smiling promise  
of/heaven in the next birth/and in this/a peace that/never belonged”  
(Kandasamy1-7, 18-25).

## Conclusion

As a contemporary Indian English woman poet, Meena Kandasamy rewrites Hindu religious myths from the perspective of the oppressed caste and Dalits. Instead of accepting Brahmanical patriarchy's attempt to silence women and the Dalits, she presents us with such marginalized characters who are not passive receivers of oppression but they put up active resistance to it in an effort to reclaim their identity from erasure and oblivion.

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