

A STUDY OF ISSUES OF CASTE AND COMMUNITY PRESENTED IN 'TOUCH' BY MEENA KANDASAMY

Dr. Rajesh S. Latane

Principal

Chakan Shikshan Mandal's Arts and Commerce College, Chakan, Pune

Abstract:

'Touch', poetry by Meena Kandasamy, a Tamil Dalit writer, presents the issues of caste, gender, women, discrimination, inequality and other issues of the Dalit community. The current research paper deals with these issues.

Keywords: caste, community, gender, discrimination, inequality.

Introduction:

Meena Kandasamy, born in a Tamil Dalit family, is an emerging poet, fiction writer, translator and an activist. She is one of the fiction writers from South Asia who have been featured in an Anthology published by Zubaan, New Delhi. She has three novels, *The Gypsy Goddess*, and *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers* to her credit. Her second novel, *When I Hit You*, was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018. A number of essays of Meena Kandasamy have appeared in some reputed Magazines, such as The white Review, New York Times, The Guardian and Al Jazeera. She is also a co-author of the first English biography of a famous Dalit leader, Ayyankali from Kerala. She was an editor of a bimonthly, *The Dalit*, in 2002 that was a platform for the discourse of oppression issues, atrocities and forgotten heritage. She has translated essays and speeches of a Dalit leader and politician, Dr. Thirumavalavan or Thol into English, titled as *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003) and *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers* (2004). She, also, has translated Periyar's *Penn Yaen Adimai Aanaal? (Why Were Women Enslaved?)* in English. These writings and translations include views of Meena Kandasamy about anti-caste movement and Dalit issues.

Meena Kandasamy has published her two Collections of poems, namely *Touch* in 2006 and *Ms Militancy* in 2010. Her first collection of poems, *Touch* (2006) is dealing with issues of women, casteism and untouchability. She expresses her grieves about the age-old anti-social practices, like untouchability, that are based on the

caste system prevailing in the Indian Society. The caste system has discriminated the people from one another and brought to a dehumanised state. These issues are discussed and attacked in the collection of poems, 'Touch', by Meena Kandasamy. The present paper tries to bring these issues of Caste and Community to the light.

A Collection of poems, 'Touch':

'Touch' is the first Collection of poems by Meena Kandasamy, published in 2006. It includes 84 poems with a foreword by a famous Indo-Anglian poet, Kamla Das. She has praised this anthology for its honesty with the community and the culture Meena Kandasamy belongs to. While praising this anthology in her forewords Kamla Das writes, "Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology of verse." (Meena Kandasamy, 2006:7) In this anthology, Meena Kandasamy presents her views about certain social evils, such as injustice, discrimination, untouchability, and harassment of women. The title, *Touch*, is indicative of a social evil of untouchability. The touch, one of the five senses of a man, is a way to support a weak and powerless person, to fill him or her with hope and joy. This touch is denied to a person by making him untouchable. The poet thinks that it is unbelievable that the persons of same natural birth can be different from each other only because they have born in different castes. As they belong to different castes, they cannot touch each other and if a person from the lower caste touches the person of upper caste, the upper caste will be spoiled. This untouchability is considered by the poet as a social taboo. The poet attacks the social system by means of this anthology of poems. She questions the upper caste if they try meditation, they can raise or transcend themselves from the bodily levels to the spiritual levels, but untouchables cannot outmatch their untouchability. She expresses her anger against such type of segregation. The lower caste people are deprived of fundamental rights. This community issue is also raised by the poet in this anthology. This collection of poems also can be considered as the voice of those who are forced to silence for a

number of centuries. In this anthology, the poet tries to present the miseries, injustice, humiliation and brutality that is faced by the oppressed. Along with untouchability, the poet talks about the caste system and the issues of women also. The issue of women is, basically, related to the gender inequality. The women of lower caste are the victims of casteism as well as sexual harassment. Meena Kandasamy attacks the male Society for treating women as the objects of enjoyment and their slaves. She writes: ...

*"Domesticated into drudgery she was just
 Another territory worn out by Wars, A Slave.
 who maintained your numbers." (Meena Kandasamy
 2006:112)*

She does not only attack the evils in the society, but urges her community to fight against them. With this fight she desires oneness and equality in the Indian community. Her poem 'Advaita' highlights her desire:

| | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| <i>Can</i> | <i>my</i> |
| <i>Untouchable</i> | <i>Atman</i> |
| <i>And</i> | <i>your</i> |
| <i>Brahmin</i> | <i>Atman</i> |
| <i>Ever</i> | <i>Be. ...</i> |

*One?
 (Meena Kandasamy, 2006:37)*

In the course of discussion the poet grieves that there are evil spirits within the society those abuse people and dehumanise them. She also hopes that there should be oneness and equality among all the people in the Indian society.

Caste: A cause of Social Discrimination and Exploitation:

The social discrimination and high-caste violence have disturbed Indian National culture. Meena Kandasamy suggests the thorough evaluation of this National culture for the betterment of the society. In the present situation, she challenges the concept of 'National Culture' as it contains the roots of social discrimination and inequality. She rejects the glorification of higher caste and desires the Dalit activism. The basic cause of casteism lies in the dominant Hindu social, cultural and political systems. These systems have divided people into different castes and religion has been used as a weapon to make them accept whatever caste has thrust upon them. The religious rules and regulations are made mandatory for all and strictly are to be followed by all. The poet satirises this Hindu orthodoxy by means of a number of poems, such as 'Prayers, 'The Gods Wake up', 'When the God drank Milk', 'Overheard' and 'Sacred Thread.' The Hindu religion has a number of

rituals as well as a number of beliefs. Due to these rituals and beliefs the Dalits are not allowed to have certain rights. They are not allowed to enter a Hindu temple, it is considered to be a crime. In a poem, 'Prayers', the poet narrates an incident of an old Dalit man being killed for entering a temple. While blaming the casteism and the God, She writes,

*"God, Lifeless as ever-watched grimly with closed
 eyes.*

*..... Caste-Crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took
 its toll*

*Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to
 devotion."*

(Meena Kandasamy 2006: 57)

This indicates that the religion is the cause of segregation and sufferings of the Dalit. The Religion is considered to be a power tool of mankind. It has been turned into a weapon of discrimination by the man. It is a mean of exploitation of the Dalit Community and reason of denial of natural rights to the community. The Man has created the caste system and divisions of labour on the basis of Karma. In the course of time it is turned in to a caste by humans in the name of God. In this relation Meena Kandasamy questions the Hindu Gods and supporters of the caste system:

"I wanted to know why

*Caste was there, why people suffered because of
 their Karmas. I questioned the Gods, ... and the
 learned*

Sages there,

I worried of about the division of labour...."

(Meena Kandasamy, 2006: 41)

The poet rebels against the caste system and pleads for liberty-equality-fraternity in Indian society. This poetry by Meena Kandasamy is a tool to deconstruct the social, religious and cultural stereotypes and reconstruct them in a way that they would help the downtrodden people to get basic rights of food, water and protection.

The Issues of Women:

The sexual exploitation of women is also an issue that is discussed and attacked in the poetry, 'Touch'. The poet opines that the women are considered to be the 'others' in almost all the religions in the world. According to her, Indian society is a caste governed society. In this society the Dalit women are exploited as the women by the men of their own caste and as the Dalit women by other male dominated society also. They suffer of maltreatment and oppression from the main

stream of society and are tortured by their fathers, brothers and husbands at home. They are molested, raped and killed only for the reason of their caste. Meena Kandasamy presents such type of incident in her poem, 'Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985'. A massacre of Karamchedu took place in Andhra Pradesh in 1985. This incident took place because of the protestation of Madiga women against washing of buffalos in drinking water pond by Kammas, upper class men. In this massacre six Madiga men were killed and three Madiga women were raped by the Kammas. Kandasamy writes:

"A bold Dalit lady
 dares to question injustice.
 Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation
 is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.
 Killings." (Meena Kandasamy 2006:52)

Kandasamy raises the question of existence of the Dalit women. She also argues that it cannot be justified that the genuine demands and voices of these oppressed people are silenced. Their grievances are not addressed in a justified way and they are brutally tortured and killed. The poetry of Meena Kandasamy is an attack on the scornful views of the main stream society towards the deprived and they are forced to live a non-existence life. Such type of oppression is a brutal process of dehumanising of the down trodden people. They are not affected physically only, but psychologically also. While talking about this social evil of casteism, she writes in a poem, 'Fleeting':

*"Caste perennially remains
 a scheming bulldozer
 Crushing Dalits-"*
 (Meena Kandasamy, 2006:47)

The poet desires an awakening in the community by presenting such type of views in her poetry. She appeals the community to give proper fight against the atrocities and the injustice they are suffering of.

Conclusion:

The anthology of poems, 'Touch', by Meena Kandasamy, is poetry of the plight and social

position of the Dalit community in the past and in the present Indian society. It is an opposition and protest of the downtrodden people to the traditional and conventional practices existing in the Indian Society. She expresses her anger against present caste system through her poetry, 'Touch'. It throws light on caste, poverty, discrimination, oppression, injustice and pang of the Dalit men and women. She has raised the grievances of the Dalit community in 'Touch'. While raising the issues of the down trodden, she appeals the main stream of society to be sympathetic towards these oppressed class. She also desires for dignity and equality of all and tries to awaken the oppressed for the revolt against these inhuman practices. Thus, the poet presents the bare truth of the Indian society and desires that the oppressed may get their natural rights and common lives as others.

The collection of poems, 'Touch', raises the issues of sexual harassment of the women, along with the issues of social injustice and discrimination. The Dalit women are tortured by fathers and husbands in the home and exploited by the men of upper class society out of her home. In this way they are doubly tortured as the women and as the Dalit Women- as the slaves and the objects. Thus the casteism, social injustice, oppression and segregation are issues of the Dalit society those have found expression in the poetry, 'Touch', by Meena Kandasamy.

Works Cited:

1. Kandasamy, Meena. *Touch*. Mumbai: Peacock Books, 2006. Print.
2. ——. *Ms Militancy*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2010.
3. Kumar R. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. Kolkata: Orient Black Swan, 2010. Print.
4. <https://www.kandasamy.co.uk/Bio|meenakandajamy>
5. <https://www.poemhunter.com/biography>
6. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260285097_meena_kandasamy
7. <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijSELL>