

## A Quest for Gender Equality in Meena Kandasamy's Touch

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**Abstract:** *Gender denotes socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women. It is decided by cultural, social, political and economic forces which influence social behavior of men and women. The gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between a man and woman. The discrimination based on the gender of a person is perpetuated through the social-cultural and psychological mechanisms prevalent in society. The question of social marginalization and the issue of gender inequality are inseparable.*

*Meena Kandasamy, the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English, in her poetry, raises her voice against the gender inequality and systematic subjugation of Indian woman. Her poetry arises not out of her reading and knowledge, but out of her own experience and active engagement with the cause of championing caste and gender equality. Touch (2006), her first published collection of poetry, is a clear-sighted, unafraid and a scathing attack on the perpetuation of the social patriarchal oppression of women in general and the Dalit women in particular.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, inequality, Dalit woman, patriarchy, subjugation, caste, untouchability, discrimination, male-domination.*

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'Sex' is a biological term whereas 'Gender' is a psychological and cultural term. It is widely held that while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender, of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behavior are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization (Abrams and Harpham, 2009. p.101).

In all traditions and cultures across the globe, women have always been considered inferior and incapable of any serious thought or action. Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists, opines Simone de Beauvoir, have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth.

Indian society has some sort of social mechanisms, arrangements, customs and institutions that act as covert modes of establishing and perpetuating the subjugation of women. India, being a male-dominated, patriarchal society, deprived women of their basic rights as human beings. Woman was denied along with many other rights, the right to education and the decisive power about her own life and was not even considered worthy of treating as a human being equal with man, rather she was, and still is, viewed as the 'other' of man. The issues like the patriarchal family structure, the custom of polygamy, endogamy, child marriage, unequal share in the family property, the 'Purdah' system, state of permanent widowhood etc. have contributed a great deal, as the obstacle for the free development of a woman. Women have generally tended to be excluded from the public discourse and confined to the "domestic sphere" of home and family and to women's work because women were only rarely taught to write, there is a relatively little direct documentary material about most of our fore mothers' lives. (Rao, 2004. p.02)

Despite the constitutional safeguards today, the situation of the woman in modern India has, if not wholly, remained unchanged to great extent; if equality persists, so does discrimination, domestic violence, ill-treatment, subjugation and so on; man is still the head of the family, dowry, albeit covertly, is still taken from the bride's family, the cases of sexual assault on women are quite often heard, woman is yet to be given the complete decisive power about the issues like her career, marriage and many other issues pertaining her life.

The Indian caste system also has relevance to the women's discriminatory status. The features of the caste system like 'endogamy' act as a mechanism of retaining control over the labour and

sexuality of women, the concepts like 'purity' and 'pollution', which segregate people from each other and regulate mobility of women deprecate the issue of gender equality further. The most effective weapon which helped in the perpetuation of the 'untouchability' and women's unequal status was the institutionalized denial, to the weaker sections of society and women, of access to educational resources.

Gender inequality has often been taken up as a subject by the Indian writers in their literary works. However, the issue of the marginalization and oppression of Dalit woman was not discussed by and large. The issues related to Dalit women have hardly been taken up seriously either by political leaders or scholars until very recently. The reasons might have to do with the socio-political and economic conditions of Dalit women who continue to remain voiceless even today. (Raj Kumar, 2010, p.211) Some contemporary Indian literary artists, like Meena Kandasamy, voice out their concerns regarding the 'sexual politics' and the gender inequality in their writings. Meena Kandasamy stands apart from those contemporary Indian woman poets who are caught in the midst of dualities, because of the dilemma between what they want to and what they are expected to write; she delineates the subjects like 'gender inequality' and 'caste discrimination' with a candid precision. She dissects, Very deftly, the complex mechanism of perpetual subjugation of the Indian woman in her writing.

An emerging poet, fiction writer, translator, journalist and a social activist, Meena Kandasamy maintains her focus, in throughout her writing, on caste annihilation and the issue of woman's equality on par with a man. She is hailed as the first Indian woman poet writing Dalit poetry in English. Kamala Das, one of India's foremost poets, in her foreword to *Touch (2006)* praises the poet as:

Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive. (07)

Her first collection of poetry, *Touch (2006)* is a scathing, militant attack on the perpetuation of the social oppression of the Indian women. It discusses the issue of the sexual harassment of the women. Meena Kandasamy, unlike other poets and writers dealing with this subject, portrays women, particularly the Dalit women not just as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men but as rebels fighting against the injustice perpetuated against them and champions the cause of the equality of women.

A woman is considered a chattel by the male dominated society. Men of all castes and classes collude in making certain rules of behavior and circumscribe the trajectory of female growth and confine her to the four walls of her house. In one of her poems in *Touch (2006)*, entitled '*Songs of Summer*', Meena Kandasamy rebukes the patriarchal society for treating the woman as its slave and a desired object:

To make her yours and yours alone,  
You pushed her deeper into harems  
Where she could see the sunlight  
Only from the lattice windows.  
Domesticated into drudgery she was just  
Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave  
Who maintained your numbers. (112)

The Poet also criticizes the society for not treating a woman as a woman. The male-dominated society recognizes a woman as a sister, a wife, a mother and also a goddess, but never as a woman herself. A woman's goodness is graded upon her degree of submission and servitude to her father, husband, brothers, sons and almost every other man in her family and society. She targets the society thus:

Your society always makes  
the spoon- feeding-the-man  
the pot-and-pan banging.  
the-sweeping-the –floor  
the masochist slave  
and other submissive women  
as goddesses. (130)

She vehemently condemns the stereotype male biased custom of girl seeing practiced in the Indian society, intended for judging her in order to assess her potential of being a possible bride to a man. A would be bride is judged on accounts of her femininity, education, beauty, physical fitness, her character, her politeness and submissiveness etc. On the other hand, the boy who wishes to get married to her is not judged on all these counts. A girl who wishes to get certified as a bride by the boy who comes to see her and his family, is required to behave in a certain way in order to project herself as expected by the would be groom's family which underpins the ideology of the patriarchal society. The poet enunciates her views about this unjust treatment imparted to woman in the following words:

But, when they come to see you  
For a possible bride, look at the floor  
The fading carpet and the unshapely toes  
Of the visitors who will inspect the weight  
Of your gold, the paleness of your complexion  
The length of your hair and ask questions about  
The degrees you hold and the transparency of your past. (127)

Women in our society are subjected to various atrocities and the Sexual crimes against women keep on increasing alarmingly. Given that the fear and the shame that women (victims of sexual assault) undergo and the apathy of the concerned authorities to record such crimes, many a times the sexual assaults on a woman by man don't get reported and recorded. Domestic violence and the dowry deaths also contribute a lot to the victimization of the women in our male-biased society. In a poem, 'My lover speaks of rape', she discusses the victimization the women at the hands of the men:

Green turns to unsightly teal of hospital beds  
And he is softer than feathers, but I fly away  
To shield myself from the retch of the burns  
Ward, the shrill sounds of dying declarations,  
The floral pink-white sad skins of dowry deaths. (138)

The Inhuman treatment given to women in the Indian society is related to the caste as an institution. Endogamy acts as a social barrier which circumscribes the upliftment of the lower caste people. On the other hand, exogamy, if practiced across all castes, classes, and cultures, can help transcend the barriers of caste, creed and race. Since a woman is capable of giving birth to a child, if she marries outside her caste and delivers children, she acts as a gateway to the other castes, those Dalit women who dare to love the upper caste men are brutally assaulted and murdered as part of the retribution for their acts. This plight of a Dalit woman is appositely described by Meena Kandasamy:

Our passionate love,  
Once transcended caste.  
Let it now  
Transcend Mortality...  
Fear not beloved,  
In love-  
Life is not compulsory. (51)

Though the upper caste women as well as the lower caste women are the victims of the gender discrimination, the plight of the Dalit women is far worse than that of the upper caste women. A Dalit woman is considered as 'other' even amongst women of all castes. In her seminal book, *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination*, Meena Anand articulates the situation of a Dalit woman:

One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the life conditions of the Dalits [Dalit] women [woman], her suppression, humiliation, sufferings, dilemmas and exploitation. Her sufferings are twofold [twofold]; she has her own share of universal suffering as a women [woman] and additionally, she is victim of a variety of exploitations, social, religious, economic and cultural as a Dalit women [woman].(Meena Anand, 2005, p.40)

The Dalit women are not only discriminated by men and women of other castes but by the men of the very caste to which they themselves belong. They are quite often subjected to the domestic violence and are deprived of their basic rights. Theirs is such a plight that they become the lame and meek victims who can't protest against the injustice done to them. This predicament of a Dalit woman is pointed out by the poet in the following words:

How can I say  
Anything, anything  
Against my own man? (56)

To recapitulate, gender discrimination is an omnipresent social evil which is very much prevalent in the society even today. Meena Kandasamy espouses the cause of the gender equality in her poetic discourse in *Touch* (2006) by dissecting the matrix of female suppression and expressing her concerns about it. Hers is an acerbic attack on the social malaise of the systematic domination of the female sex. Through her witty arguments and polemical style of writing she attempts to champion the cause of the gender equality.

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