

A Study of Gender Identity and Resistance in the Select Works of Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract: Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) is among the most outspoken voices in contemporary Indian writing in English. A poet, novelist, translator and activist, she has built a body of work in which gender, caste and political violence are examined together. This paper studies gender identity and resistance in her select works: the poetry collections *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010), and the novels *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). It argues that Kandasamy constructs gender identity as a contested, performed and politically charged position, not as a natural essence. Her resistance takes several forms: the deliberate use of the female body and of erotic language as a means of protest, the reworking of myth and epic from a woman's and a Dalit's standpoint, formal experimentation that refuses linear, authoritative narration, and the transformation of writing itself into an act of survival. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Gopal Guru, and Sharmila Rege, the paper shows that Kandasamy's feminism is inseparable from her anti-caste politics and her Ambedkarite and Periyarist inheritance. The study concludes that her writing extends the range of Indian feminist literature by connecting intimate domestic violence to the wider structures of caste and patriarchy.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, gender identity, resistance, Dalit feminism, Ms Militancy, When I Hit You, performativity, intersectionality

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian literature in English has often been criticised for being socially narrow. Its early practitioners tended to come from the upper castes and the educated urban elite, and its themes reflected that background. Over the last few decades, this situation has changed, and among the writers most responsible for the change is Meena Kandasamy. Born Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy in Chennai, she writes under a name that is itself a statement, one that brings her Tamil identity, her chosen identity as a writer and her political commitments together. She has said in interviews that her writing is a form of political action, and her career as a translator of Tamil Dalit writers, including the leader Thol. Thirumavalavan, whose speeches she translated as *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation*, supports that claim.

This study concentrates on one strand of her work: the construction of gender identity and the forms of resistance associated with it. The choice of works reflects the range of her practice. *Touch* and *Ms Militancy* show how she uses poetry to reclaim the female body, to answer mythology, and to declare a militant feminist voice. *The Gypsy Goddess* is a historical novel about the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre and shows how women figure in collective struggle and collective memory. *When I Hit You* is a semi-autobiographical novel about a marriage marked by violence, and it treats gender identity as something under assault and then reconstructed through writing.

The paper asks four questions. How does Kandasamy conceive gender identity, and how does she represent the making and unmaking of a woman's self? What forms of resistance, textual and political, do her works enact? How does she connect gender and caste? And what does her formal innovation contribute to the meaning of her work?



1.1 Objectives

1. To examine how gender identity is represented as socially constructed and performed in Kandasamy's works.
2. To analyse resistance as a theme and as a formal strategy.
3. To study the relationship between gender, caste and political ideology.
4. To evaluate her place within Indian feminist and Dalit literary traditions.

1.2 Methodology

The study is analytical and interpretive. It relies on close reading of the primary texts, informed by feminist theory, postcolonial theory and Dalit studies. Secondary material includes reviews, interviews and critical essays. The novels and poems are treated as literary texts and not as transparent autobiography, although the paper acknowledges the biographical grounding of *When I Hit You*.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Gender as construction and performance

Simone de Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* (1949) that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" laid the groundwork for the modern understanding of gender as a social product. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), extended this argument by proposing that gender is performative: it is constituted through repeated acts, gestures and speech, and there is no pre-existing "true" gender behind these acts. If gender is performed, it can also be performed differently, and this possibility is the basis of Butler's account of subversion. Kandasamy's work illustrates both the social pressure to perform a prescribed womanhood and the possibility of parodic and militant counter-performance.

2.2 Writing the body

Hélène Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), called on women to write their bodies and to break the silence that patriarchal culture had imposed. This "écriture féminine" is relevant to Kandasamy's poetry, which uses bodily and erotic imagery in deliberately provocative ways. Her use of such imagery, however, differs from the European tradition in that it is embedded in a caste-inflected context. In a society where Dalit women's bodies have been subject to violation and to purity-pollution norms, the assertion of bodily autonomy carries different political weight.

2.3 The subaltern and the problem of voice

Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) raised the question of whether those at the bottom of social hierarchies can be heard on their own terms, or whether their speech is always mediated by more powerful interlocutors. Kandasamy's work addresses this problem by speaking as a writer who is herself from a marginalised position, and by using her literary authority to amplify others. She is also aware of the risk that her own voice may become a representative that overshadows the voices it claims to represent.

2.4 Dalit feminism and intersectionality

Gopal Guru's argument that Dalit women "talk differently" and Sharmila Rege's proposal of a Dalit feminist standpoint provide the Indian equivalent of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality. They argue that Dalit women's experience cannot be reduced to either caste or gender, and that a theory adequate to that experience must hold both. Kandasamy's work is constructed on this premise. In her writing, patriarchy and caste are not two separate topics but mutually reinforcing structures.

2.5 The Tamil context: Periyar and Ambedkar

Kandasamy's politics is shaped by Tamil Nadu's tradition of social reform, particularly the Self-Respect Movement of E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar), which criticised Brahmanical dominance and advocated women's freedom, including the right to divorce, the right to inherit, and marriage without priests. She also draws on the Ambedkarite tradition of anti-



caste thought. This dual inheritance explains the confidence with which her work connects women's liberation and caste annihilation.

III. POETRY: RECLAIMING THE BODY AND THE VOICE

3.1 *Touch* (2006)

Kandasamy's first collection, *Touch*, introduced a poetic voice that was direct, sensuous and politically alert. The title itself carries a charged meaning. In a caste society, touch is precisely what untouchability prohibits, and it is also a fundamental human need and a form of intimacy. By choosing this as the name of her book, Kandasamy links the intimate and the political from the start.

The poems in this collection present a woman's desire without apology. Female sexuality, which Indian moral discourse has traditionally treated as a matter of shame and control, is presented as a source of energy and pleasure. This act of presentation is itself resistance. To speak about desire in the first person is to deny the assumption that women's sexuality belongs to their families, their communities or the nation.

3.2 *Ms Militancy* (2010)

Ms Militancy is the more openly polemical collection. The title compresses its stance: the honorific "Ms" indicates a woman who refuses to be defined by marital status, and "militancy" indicates that she will fight. The collection reuses, reinterprets and answers the epic and religious tradition that has defined Indian womanhood. Figures from myth are re-read from the position of the women who were silenced within them, and the sacred texts that assigned women their roles are held up to an ironic, interrogative light.

This strategy of revisionist mythmaking has precedents in the work of other women poets. But Kandasamy's version is distinctive in its explicit link between gender and caste. When she challenges the tradition, she challenges both the patriarchal model of the ideal wife and the Brahmanical ideology that legitimises hierarchy. The poems suggest that the Sanskrit epic tradition is not neutral cultural heritage but an ideological instrument, and that a woman who wishes to be free must speak against it.

3.3 *The politics of the body*

The body is central in these poems. It is a site of pleasure, of vulnerability and of political meaning. Kandasamy's poems use body imagery in the tradition of contemporary Tamil women poets such as Salma, Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi, whose frankness about the female body caused controversy in Tamil literary circles. In Kandasamy's case the frankness serves a larger design. Because caste ideology has attached notions of purity and pollution to bodies, and especially women's bodies, the affirmative representation of the body is a way of contesting that ideology.

3.4 *Tone and register*

The tone of the poetry mixes fury, wit and tenderness. Irony is frequent, particularly when she addresses respectable society's contradictions. This range prevents the poems from becoming mere slogans. Kandasamy is aware that anger must be shaped to have effect, and her control of register, moving from colloquial to elevated, from lyrical to blunt, gives the poems their edge.

3.5 *Poetry as public action*

Kandasamy has consistently treated poetry as public speech. Her poems circulate in protest, on social media and at readings, and they take part in political debates. This orientation places her in the tradition of the poet as citizen, and it also means that she has attracted hostile responses, including online abuse and threats, especially from those who object to her attacks on caste and patriarchy. These responses have themselves become a subject of her writing, and they show how expressions of women's and Dalit voices can be met with attempts at silencing.



IV. THE GYPSY GODDESS (2014): WOMEN, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND RESISTANCE

4.1 The historical event

The Gypsy Goddess is based on the Kilvenmani massacre of 25 December 1968, in which forty-four Dalit agricultural labourers, most of them women and children, were burned to death in a hut in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. The labourers had been organising under the leadership of the Communist movement for higher wages and for dignity, and the landlords retaliated with violence. The legal aftermath was itself a scandal: after an initial conviction, the accused were later acquitted by the Madras High Court, and no one was finally punished.

4.2 Form as resistance

Kandasamy's response to this history is a formally unconventional novel. It rejects realist linearity and uses a shifting, polyphonic structure that incorporates different registers, voices, fragments and playful, ironic passages. This form is a deliberate choice. A single authoritative narrator would replicate the position of the official record, which had failed the victims. By contrast, the polyphonic structure allows many voices to be heard, and it also acknowledges that no single account can be complete. The novel also shows the difficulty of representing atrocity: it uses irony and self-consciousness to mark the gap between narrative and event.

4.3 Women in the agrarian struggle

The novel makes clear that women were at the centre of the labour struggle. Dalit women worked in the fields, earned less than men, and bore the brunt of landlord violence. Their participation in the movement was therefore a form of resistance to both economic exploitation and gendered humiliation. In representing them, Kandasamy avoids the stereotype of the passive victim. The women in the novel argue, mock, organise and endure, and their collective identity is a source of strength as well as vulnerability.

4.4 Gender, caste and class

The novel demonstrates that class analysis alone cannot explain the massacre. The landlords' violence was directed at people who were both poor and Dalit, and the punishment for asserting wage claims was inseparable from the punishment for challenging caste hierarchy. Meanwhile, the sexual dimension of caste violence, the assumption that Dalit women's bodies were available for exploitation, gives the story an additional gendered dimension. Kandasamy's novel is therefore a working example of intersectional narrative.

4.5 Memory and testimony

The book also asks how communities remember atrocity. Official memory, as expressed through the courts and the state, forgot the victims. Popular memory, sustained through songs, stories and commemoration, preserved them. The novel positions itself in the second tradition. By writing it, Kandasamy contributes to a counter-memory that resists erasure, and this is a form of resistance that is specifically literary.

V. WHEN I HIT YOU (2017): GENDER IDENTITY UNDER ASSAULT

5.1 Premise and structure

When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife is a novel about a young woman who marries a man she believes to be a progressive and politically committed intellectual, a university lecturer with Marxist-Leninist affiliations. The marriage turns out to be a site of sustained physical, sexual and psychological violence. The narrator is a writer who, in the course of the marriage, is isolated from friends and family, monitored, and deprived of her freedom of expression. The novel follows her survival and her eventual escape.

The title is a deliberate inversion. It seems to name the husband's violence, and it is taken up in the text as part of a strategy of reclaiming the story. The subtitle alludes to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the



allusion asserts that the narrator's ordeal is also an account of her formation as a writer. The Joycean echo places a woman's experience of domestic violence in the tradition of the Bildungsroman.

The novel has been widely reviewed and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018.

5.2 The husband as ideologue

One of the most interesting features of the novel is the husband's political identity. He presents himself as a revolutionary, a defender of the oppressed, and a critic of bourgeois society. At home, however, he behaves as a tyrant. This gap between public ideology and private conduct is central to Kandasamy's critique. It suggests that progressive rhetoric can co-exist with patriarchal control, and that men who oppose class and state oppression may reproduce gender oppression in intimate life. The novel implicitly criticises parts of the Indian Left for treating gender as a secondary matter.

The husband also uses ideology as a weapon. His authority is buttressed by claims of intellectual and political superiority, and the narrator's objections are dismissed as petty, bourgeois or counter-revolutionary. This depiction shows how the language of liberation can be turned into a tool of control, and how difficult it is for the abused person to resist when the abuser controls the vocabulary of justice.

5.3 Domestic violence and the unmaking of identity

The novel presents domestic violence as an assault on identity as well as on the body. The narrator's name, her habits, her friendships, her writing and her speech are progressively curtailed. The husband tries to redefine her according to his own expectations, and to erase the self she brings to the marriage. Butler's insight that gender identity is formed through relations of recognition is helpful here: the husband's violence is an attempt to deny recognition of the narrator's autonomous selfhood. The narrative shows the erosion of self as a process, not as a single event.

The novel also treats silence carefully. The narrator initially conceals the abuse from her family, out of shame, love or fear. The cultural pressure on Indian women to preserve marriage at all costs, and to protect the family's honour, is a force in the story. The novel thus shows how social norms about marriage and reputation enable domestic violence.

5.4 Narrative voice and form

The narration shifts between first-person, third-person and other modes, and these shifts convey the narrator's psychological state. Sometimes she speaks as an involved sufferer; at other times she stands back and describes herself as though she were a character in someone else's story. This shifting is consistent with the experience of trauma, in which the survivor may feel alienated from her own experience. It is also a formal strategy of resistance: by changing how she narrates, the narrator reclaims authority over the account.

The novel is also fragmentary and reflexive. It frequently comments on its own act of writing, and it suggests that the writing of the novel is part of the narrator's recovery. Writing is presented as a form of survival, a way of imagining a future in which the story can be told. This metatextual dimension makes the novel a study of how a woman uses language to reconstruct herself.

5.5 The role of intertexts

The novel places the narrator's experience in relation to broader traditions: literary, political and mythic. It recalls stories of women's suffering and of women's resistance, and it asks how a tradition that valorises endurance can be reconciled with a demand for freedom. These references make the narrator's story more than a private one. They connect it to the long history of women's silencing and to the equally long history of their speech.

5.6 Escape and reclamation

The narrator's escape is prepared through a mix of strategy and support. Family, particularly her mother, has a crucial role. The narrator's eventual freedom is presented as a result of both her own determination and the solidarity of others.



But the novel does not end with a simple triumphant victory. It is aware of the lasting effects of trauma and of the difficulty of speaking about it. The final act of reclamation is the writing of the book itself.

VI. GENDER IDENTITY: CONSTRUCTION, ASSAULT AND RECONSTRUCTION

6.1 Identity as performance and constraint

Across Kandasamy's works, gender identity appears as something that society expects a woman to perform. The obedient daughter, the dutiful wife and the modest woman are scripts that are handed down by family, religion and community. Kandasamy's poems mock these scripts, and her novels show the price women pay for following or refusing them. In *When I Hit You*, the husband attempts to enforce a particular script on the narrator, and her resistance consists in refusing to perform it. In *Ms Militancy*, the poet adopts a counter-script of defiance. In both cases, Butler's point applies: gender is a repeated performance, and performance can be changed.

6.2 Identity and the intersection of caste

Kandasamy's gender politics cannot be understood apart from caste. In her poetry, the critique of the ideal Hindu wife is also a critique of Brahmanical patriarchy. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, women's suffering is shaped by caste and class as well as gender. Even in *When I Hit You*, where the immediate setting is domestic, the wider social context of caste and ideology is visible. This constant connection sets her apart from feminist writers who treat gender in isolation.

6.3 The writer's identity

A distinctive feature of Kandasamy's work is the interconnection of gender identity and writerly identity. In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's identity as a writer is at stake in the marriage: the husband tries to control what she writes and who reads her. Her act of writing is therefore both her act of self-assertion and the reason she is punished. The novel suggests that for a woman, claiming authorship is itself a political act. This theme reflects Kandasamy's own experience as a woman writer who has faced hostile responses to her work.

VII. FORMS OF RESISTANCE

7.1 Resistance through language

Kandasamy's language is direct and confrontational. She uses profanity, sexual frankness and irony to shock, and she uses colloquial speech to reject the polite register of respectable literature. This is deliberate. The refinement of "high" literary language, she implies, has often been a way of excluding voices from marginalised communities. By insisting on her own idiom, she claims a place for those voices.

7.2 Resistance through myth and intertext

The reworking of myth is a central strategy. By reinterpreting familiar stories, Kandasamy turns the tradition against itself. She shows that the same texts that have been used to enforce women's subordination contain gaps, contradictions and silences that can be exploited. This is also a way of asserting that women and Dalits have a claim on culture and are not merely its objects.

7.3 Resistance through form

The experimental structures of her novels are forms of resistance. The polyphony of *The Gypsy Goddess* resists the authority of a single official narrative. The fragmentation and reflexivity of *When I Hit You* resist the linear, closed forms that might make trauma seem tidy. Kandasamy's formal choices are political choices.

7.4 Resistance through translation and public activism

Her translation work contributes to the same project. By translating Tamil Dalit writers into English, she carries their voices beyond regional boundaries. Her public interventions, from op-eds and speeches to participation in protests,



extend her literary resistance into direct political action. The distinction between literature and activism, in her work, is deliberately thin.

7.5 Resistance and its costs

Kandasamy is candid about the costs of resistance. Threats, abuse and attempts to silence her have followed her public statements. Her novels also depict resistance as painful, uncertain and costly. This honesty gives her writing credibility. It avoids a romantic view of resistance, in which the resister is simply a hero, and shows it as a difficult process that is carried on at personal risk.

VIII. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND DEBATES

8.1 The problem of the autobiographical

When I Hit You is closely based on Kandasamy's own marriage, as she has said in interviews, and this raises questions about the relation of fiction and life. Some readers may consider the book primarily a testimony, while others focus on its formal artifice. A balanced reading recognises both dimensions. The experience is real, but the narrative is constructed, and the distance between them is part of the novel's meaning. It resembles the way testimonial writing by women often blends memory and invention.

8.2 Feminism and the Left

The novel's critique of a Marxist husband has been discussed as a comment on the Indian Left's treatment of gender. Some critics have noted that this reveals a long-standing tension: many left movements have subordinated women's issues to class struggle. Kandasamy's work demands that these issues be considered together, and it insists that the private is political.

8.3 Reception and controversy

Kandasamy's blunt style has attracted both admiration and criticism. Admirers praise her courage and her linking of the personal to the political. Critics sometimes describe her work as polemical or as too willing to shock. The debate is a familiar one about the role of political commitment in art. The paper suggests that her polemical energy is inseparable from her aesthetic, and that to judge her by purely formal standards would be to misunderstand what she is doing.

8.4 Comparison with other writers

Kandasamy's work can be compared with that of Arundhati Roy, whose *The God of Small Things* (1997) also links caste and gender in its depiction of transgressive love. The difference is that Roy's novel is a lyrical family tragedy narrated by an upper-caste-adjacent perspective, while Kandasamy writes from an openly Dalit-feminist and activist standpoint. She may also be compared with Bama, whose *Karukku* shows the intersection of caste, gender and religion, and with Urmila Pawar, whose memoir foregrounds the labour of Dalit women. Kandasamy shares their commitment but adds a distinctive formal boldness and a strongly polemical voice.

IX. FINDINGS

The study leads to the following findings:

1. Kandasamy understands gender identity as socially constructed and performed, and her works show both the pressures that enforce conventional femininity and the acts through which women resist them.
2. Her resistance is multi-layered: bodily and erotic assertion in poetry, revisionist reading of myth, formal experimentation in the novels, and public activism and translation.
3. Her feminism is inseparable from anti-caste politics. She consistently shows that patriarchy and caste reinforce each other, and that any liberation that addresses only one is incomplete.



4. *When I Hit You* shows domestic violence as an attack on the victim's identity, and shows writing as a means of reconstruction and survival.
5. Her formal innovations, particularly polyphony and reflexive fragmentation, are integral to her political meaning.

X. CONCLUSION

Meena Kandasamy's work stands at the intersection of the personal and the political, the literary and the activist. In *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*, she claims the female body and the feminist voice as sites of political meaning and challenges the mythic and cultural traditions that have shaped Indian womanhood. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, she turns to the history of caste and class violence and shows women as central actors in collective struggle and memory. In *When I Hit You*, she examines the way patriarchal violence attempts to dismantle a woman's identity, and how writing can restore it. Throughout, her characteristic insight is that gender cannot be understood in isolation. It is produced within, and reinforced by, structures of caste, class and ideology. Her resistance is therefore not confined to one arena but spans language, body, myth, form and public life. Her work also demonstrates that literature can be a tool of survival, and that a woman's act of writing herself into existence is a form of political assertion.

Kandasamy's contribution to Indian writing is significant for its content, but also for its demonstration of the possibilities of form. She shows that political commitment need not diminish literary quality, and that formal daring can serve the ends of justice. As debates about caste, gender and violence continue in India and the world, her writing offers a model of engaged and uncompromising literature, and it will continue to be a subject of critical attention.

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