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**Reading the Wound: Violence, Trauma and Resistance in Select Poems of Meena Kandasamy**

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**Abstract**

The poetry of Meena Kandasamy has transformative ability in its being a profound attestation to the resilient spirit of resistance. This results through the complex journey of suffering from violence and trauma. Her poetry serves as a catalyst for social change and resonates with deep sense of urgency to challenge the harsh realities of injustice. In the poem “Dead Woman Walking” the speaker has lost everything only to have a dead life by shedding all her six senses. The experience and indifferent treatment she underwent in her marital life was so frustrating and painful that her once sane mind gets traumatized with the manifestation of physical disorder. In the poem “Facing the Music” the speaker gets ‘shell-shocked at the lynching of her lover and in “Firewalkers” the perpetuity of violence, oppression against marginalized women and their trauma have been addressed. Such troubling experiences in the form of trauma have destroyed their coping mechanisms and made them feel powerless against the dominating presence of patriarchy. The theorizings of trauma by Ruth Leys, Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth have been used to analyze the selected poems by Kandasamy. This paper aims to shed light on the mental strains and emotional distress shown in the poems “Dead Woman Walking”, “Facing the Music” and “Firewalkers” by Meena Kandasamy. It will also explain how Meena Kandasamy shows sources of personal trauma and social trauma in the lives of Indian women. It will analyse how her work aims to give women a “new identity” in a society that enforces segregation and hinders their empowerment. The paper also offers a critical analysis of how resistance can take complex forms in the face of overwhelming oppression and violence.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, personal and social trauma, new identity, empowerment, segregation.**Introduction:**

Meena Kandasamy emerges as a formidable presence within contemporary literature, particularly for her fervent and perceptive critique of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. Her contributions are notably significant to the Dalit literary tradition and

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the wider realm of social activism. By centring on the experiences and adversities of marginalized communities, she not only amplifies their narratives but also confronts the deeply ingrained societal norms. Her poetry frequently mirrors her indignation and vexation over the systemic injustices encountered by Dalits and other marginalized groups. In her literary endeavours, Kandasamy attempts to deconstruct the prevailing narratives dictated by upper-caste viewpoints and to reconstruct the history and identity of Dalit communities. This endeavour encompasses both a reclamation of Dalit history and a critical examination of the societal structures that perpetuate inequality.

Her literary activism not only serves as a critique but also as a catalyst for readers to reflect on and confront the systemic issues. She perceives poetry as a dual entity, serving both as a personal medium of catharsis and a conduit for her righteous indignation. This dual role empowers her to confront and scrutinize the injustices befalling marginalized communities. Meena Kandasamy's poetry powerfully critiques how gender, caste, and political oppression intersect in Indian society, especially for Dalit women who face systemic challenges. Her work gives a voice to these women, challenging patriarchal norms and political systems. Kandasamy addresses their struggles, advocates for their empowerment, and calls for social change. Her poetry is impactful, breaking the silence on women's experiences and offering a new view on femininity. It serves as a crucial tool for raising awareness and inspiring action.

Kandasamy's poetry deeply reflects her Dalit and Indian English literary heritage. She empowers women, giving voice to their identities and struggles, while tackling the psychological pressures they face. Her work tirelessly champions her marginalized community, consistently portraying the tragic plight of the subaltern. When interviewed on her poetic works Kandasamy said "My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people."

Poems from *Ms. Militancy* (2010) talk about the people from margins. They criticize the domination of patriarchy. Kandasamy reveals women's psychological pressures, emotional trauma, and the revolution in resisting them. She declares - "This tongue allows me to resist rape, to rescue my dreams. It is not man-made...My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths." (Kandasamy 8-9)

Her poetry delves into the use of violence perpetrated by patriarchal society in the physical and symbolic form. To be precise, this violence is directly linked with casteism and gender oppression. The horrendous experiences of marginalized women have been portrayed in her poems vividly. She uses her poems as a medium to vent out her angst against the domination and oppression of the patriarchal society with its diabolic intent. Her narrative of

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the experiences of women shows their traumatized self in search of identity through putting some resistance against the maltreatment of women by the despotic male-dominated society. Trauma is a complex phenomenon that obscures the distinctions between the mind and body, between memory and forgetting, and between speech and silence. It navigates through the realms of the internal and external, the private and the public, and the individual and the collective. Ruth Leys contends, “[t]he history of trauma itself is marked by an alternation between episodes of forgetting and remembering...” (Leys 15). Judith Herman also suggests that the intellectual history of trauma is traumatized, marked by ‘episodic amnesia’, ‘periodically forgotten’, and ‘periodically reclaimed’. Therefore, Mark Micale and Paul Lerner assert that trauma “is nothing if not elastic”.

In her book, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth discusses the complex link between trauma, crisis, and survival. She points out that trauma is not just about the initial event but also includes its aftermath and the time it takes to recognize its effects. Caruth argues that trauma is closely related to the journey of understanding and coping with the traumatic experience. She views survival as a type of crisis, as it involves dealing with the realization of the trauma's impact, which often comes later and is more intense. This delayed understanding of trauma makes it harder to grasp its effects. Surviving a disaster doesn't mean the end of suffering; it can lead to a new, ongoing crisis. Therefore, Caruth suggests that the importance of trauma goes beyond the event itself to include the continuous, often confusing process of understanding and living with it. This view challenges simple or linear ideas of trauma and survival, recognizing that the aftermath of trauma is complex and involves many different aspects.

The poems “Dead Woman Walking”, “Facing the Music” and “Firewalkers have been taken from the collection *Ms. Militancy* (2010) by Meena Kandasamy. Meena Kandasamy shows sources of personal trauma and social trauma in the lives of Indian women. In the poem “Dead Woman Walking” the poet shows the personal trauma in the speaker. Considering herself dead, though physically alive, the speaker has internalized that she is walking in the asylum corridors. The poet's depiction of the traumatized experience of the speaker in conjunction with the manifestation of enfeebled physicality has been very provocative. This sets the tone of the poem. Here, the use of negative words like ‘faltering step’, ‘hollowed cheeks’, ‘welts on my wrists’, ‘creasing skin’ and ‘seizures of speech and song’ displays the mental strains and emotional distress of the speaker.

The speaker was once beautiful and she got married to a dishonest merchant. Her marital life got bereft of love under the insidious spell of increasing doubt. Her husband's indifferent and ungrateful attitude was very frustrating and painful which is evident in the line “his mathematics could never explain the magic of my multiplying love”. This pushed her back so heavily that she said, “i wept in vain, i wailed, i walked on my head, i went to

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god” (Kandasamy 20). The position of women in society has been reduced to such an insignificant status that the poet has used small ‘i’ to describe them and their experiences. In this poem the poet has used the symbol of the dance of the dervishes in a very creative way. In this dance the viewers can see the dancers slide into a meditative mode connecting with the divine. The whole process takes place through an ecstasy. Here the speaker “sang in praise of dancing dervishes” symbolizing her attempt for the union with God. Throughout her marital life she has shed her beauty and sacrificed her six senses under the unbearable burden of traumatic experiences.

Kandasamy has depicted sources of social trauma in her poem “Facing the Music”. The poem offers a nuanced understanding of its themes and imagery. Kandasamy’s depiction of the woman grappling with her lover’s lynching sheds light on the intersections of caste, gender and the psychological aftermath of violence. The poem’s exploration of the woman’s emotional state is intensely poignant. By describing her condition as “too weak for suicide, too meek for murder,” (Kandasamy 3). Kandasamy challenges traditional notions of strength and courage. This suggests that suicide, often viewed as an act of ultimate despair or bravery, may actually require a kind of strength the woman lacks. Her survival in a “death-in-life condition” highlights a profound sense of ongoing trauma and helplessness.

Kandasamy’s portrayal of the woman’s efforts to keep her lover’s memory alive, despite his physical absence, reveals the deep emotional and psychological scars left by such violence. Her attempt to imagine him as still being present, though as a ghostly flicker, reflects both her grief and her inability to fully forget. This ghostly presence symbolizes the haunting nature of her loss and the way it continues to shape her existence. The poem’s critique of societal norms is evident in its examination of the caste dynamics that led to the lynching. The notion that a lower caste individual could pollute an upper caste person through marriage exposes the deep-seated prejudices that justify acts of extreme violence. By focusing on how the blame is placed on the woman, Kandasamy highlights the systemic misogyny and victim-blaming mentality that often accompanies such crimes.

“Firewalkers” is an appalling portrayal of the struggles faced by impoverished women who are exploited by individuals from the upper classes, challenging the traditional image of the Goddess. Maari is depicted as an exploiter who derives pleasure from the suffering of her devotees. She is a figure of mania who requires blood to soak her hair, while her followers—the dream-chasers, the fire walkers—sacrifice their bodies to be burned and whipped. Through the use of the myth of Maari and Draupadi the poet has shown oppression, violence and the functioning of trauma in the women of marginalized community.

Meena Kandasamy’s poetry, through the use of diverse forms of resistance, castigates the patriarchal structures and becomes an apt medium for the celebration of resistance and active agency of women who oppose the harsh social norms. She speaks for

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the empowerment of women and the need to create a new narrative by deviating from the traditional narratives which have suppressed, marginalized and silenced the voices of women.

The poetry found in *Ms. Militancy* by Kandasamy serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle of women striving for self-identity within contemporary Indian society. Within this context, the works of Dalit women critically interrogate the prevailing social order by underscoring that numerous social practices are profoundly rooted in caste and gender disparities. Discrimination continues to be a grave issue in our society. In several respects, the Dalit feminist perspective bolsters the feminist discourse by effectively challenging the dominant worldview and patriarchal critical narratives.

Overall, Kandasamy's poems are a powerful commentary on the intersection of personal and societal trauma, caused by the use of violence against the Dalit women. They challenged conventional views on courage, and exposing the deep injustices rooted in caste and gender discrimination. To conclude, in the journey of the women's survival from trauma they live with the trauma and Kandasamy argues that this suffering gives them a new identity and makes them more powerful. Thus, they put resistance against violence and oppression through the manifestation of the pain from the wound and through the cycle of remembrance and partial forgetfulness.

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