

ARE THEY EVEN CONSIDERED HUMAN? : ANALYSIS OF FEMALE OBJECTIFICATION AND GENDER STRUGGLE IN THE NARRATIVES OF MEENA KANDASAMY

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Abstract

Every day, women around the entire world face different forms of oppression and harassment for simply being women- from being catcalled by men on the streets possibly being physically abused, sexually assaulted and no surprise in getting raped. The paper analyses the idea of new woman and their war against the prevalent patriarchal structure of the society through the narratives of young writer, Meena Kandasamy. Women even in the present era and age are not allowed to rebel or rage and if they do they are tagged as hysterical, thus it examines the plight of the women who step forward to speak and the hurdles faced by them. The methodology employed in the paper is qualitative as it examines a collection of poetry and a novel by Meena Kandasamy. The paper focuses on the two narratives of Meena Kandasamy titled, Ms. Militancy, which is a collection of poetry and When I Hit You, Which is a novel about marital abuse. The findings of the present study suggest various problems and obstructions faced by the women in India when they try to militate against the subjugation and their predicament in the society.

Kandasamy's attempt to dig out the inscribed voices from history and to reread them retrieves the diffusive traces of suffering and pain which are often overshadowed by the facade of empathy shown by the dominant existing socio-political discourse. The paper acts as a medium to propagate feminism through words and act of writing of the author. The selected narratives embody a long withstanding fight against the stringent subjugation and atrocities undergone by the non-dominant gender in the society. The objective of the paper is a resistant against the socially ingrained and prevalent system which enables dominant gender to subjugate non- dominant gender.

Keywords: Feminism; Meena Kandasamy; subjugation; new women; marital violence; patriarchy.

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be
cook, Be a quarreller with servants. Fit
in.”

An Introduction by Kamala Das

Women have attained the site of equality is still a disbelieved fact in India where thousands are aborted, numerous are raped, countless are abused and almost the silent majority is prejudiced, subjugated and objectified by the dominant gender and the society, Women in India are still grappling against phallogocentric society and the harsh suppressing reality of the current civilization. The complication and problem has reached such a zenith that these subalterns are still not heard. Thus the paper blows trumpet of new women who is trying to rise above the disbeliefs of the society. The paper in the forth set chapters discusses female objectification and how the protagonist and female characters herald towards quest for identity through the narratives of ultra feminist writer, Meena Kandasamy. The research objectives behind writing the paper are:

a) To examine the hardships and emotional stress of women who have been abandoned by the cultures and traditions of the society.

b) To find out the incidents of marital abuse, rape and suppression of a female writer when she vocalizes her views on feminism.

Hegemony of the dominant gender is still strong over the non-dominant gender and thus are continually out casted from the society. The rage of women through their feminist writing is tagged as hysterical and is often disregarded forms the hypothesis of the study.

1. Meena Kandasamy: An Ultra Feminist Writer

Kandasamy is one of the boldest voices of the angry young Indian woman today. Born in 1984, she is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist who is based in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Most of her works are centered on feminism and the anti-caste. Her poetry is “about the female self and body in ways not ‘allowed’ by this discourse.” (“Meena Kandasamy”, n.d.) . In an interview by Duarte, Silvia (2010), she says, “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.” Meena mirrored the society and prevailing evils in the most transparent way. Her poetry is endowed with the harsh realities that support hegemony and existing binaries. In her novel, *When I Hit You*, she asserts:

I am the woman with wings, the woman who can fly and fuck at will...I am the woman who is willing to display her scars and put them within exhibition frames. I am the mad of

moon days. I am the breast-beating woman who howls. (Kandasamy, 2017)

Her collection of poetry *Touch*, published in 2006, is themed around Dalits, untouchability and casteism. *Ms. Militancy*, published in 2010, is an explosive and rebellious retelling of Tamil and Hindu myths that promote subjugation of women. Being herself a survivor of an abuse marriage, she has listed self-suffered account of incidents in her novel *When I Hit You*, (Kandasamy,

2017). There is fierce and rebellious foreplay of words in her narratives. The Indo-Anglian poet, Kamla Das, in praise of Meena's verses says, "She wore a fabric rare and strange, faintly smudged with the Indianness of her thought that saw even the monsoons come leisurely stroking like decorated temple elephants" in her foreword to Meena's *Touch* (2006). Her writings have shown the rigid militant assault that is done on women thus subjugating them to the ground where they are crusaded, crushed and are labelled hysterical when they try to dig out of the pit. *Ms. Militancy*, (2010) and *When I Hit You*, (2017) not only touch upon the aesthetic considerations and sensual human bonds of affection and desire but refers to the rigid construction of hegemony that relegate them to a sub-human level as their mere rebellion is considered to be hysterical. The paper analyzes the objectification and subjugation of women in the selected poems from *Ms. Militancy* (2010), and the novel *When I Hit You* (2017).

2. Commoditization of Flesh in *Ms. Militancy*

Scanning "Princess-in exile", *Ms. Militancy*, poem shows the quashing of women from the times of Ramayana in line with the oral tales and recorded, Sita had to go through Agnipariksha to prove her chastity (Kandasamy, 2010, p. 45). The same account of subjugation is shown in the poem. In her piece of poetry titled, "Nailed", *Ms. Militancy*, Kandasamy posits that women are locked inside home with the fear that they would surpass men. The modern club of men and women that frames a society tries to stitch her lips and thus pushing her into a room of silence and darkness. In "Nailed", *Ms. Militancy*, Meena beautifully puts her emotions into words saying, "Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry/they silence her." (Kandasamy, 2010, p.37). Kandasamy orates an anecdote of Miss Success-Village who was thrown into a well for she teased and tormented her husband's celibacy. She militates society and culture that has abandoned our Kali inside the temple shrine for:

She was black and bloodthirsty, so even Kali found herself shut,
Inside her shrine.

They were relatively low-risk, so most other women were locked Up
at home. (Kandasamy, 2010, p.37)

In her poem, "A cunning stunt", *Ms. Militancy* (2010), she talks about the linguistics that promotes alluring a woman to get trapped inside the net of a man's sexual desires where he epithets the genital of a lady. Kandasamy by reversing the same act, names him as

‘word- monster’ who posits that the word ‘yoni’ connotes the place of birth, it is a source of new life, it is the place of origin thus befitting his lady to entertain his desires where after all this word-play, she writes:

And he opens my legs wider
and shoves more and shoves
harder and I am torn apart to
contain the meanings of
family, race, stock and caste
and form of existence

and station fixed by birth. (Kandasamy, 2010, p.11)

She talks about the brunt of community honor a woman’s sexuality has to bear, and that her decision should benefit everyone in the society barring her own self. The trauma and aftermath of such an activity where she is bound to choose as per the society leaves her frightened and she says, “I cannot walk away. I am frightened” (Kandasamy, 2010, p.12)

The vantage of patriarchy and prejudices carried towards women is shown in Kandasamy’s “Celestial Celebrities”, *Ms.Militancy* (2010), in which she embarks, “because they had established a reputation for being wild and unrestrained and indiscriminate when it came to men” (Kandasamy, 2010, p.16) i.e. men in this society are given privilege to be at the top, centre, rule the society and also to be at the upper strata of society.

“Dead Woman Walking”, *Ms.Militancy*, by Meena Kandasamy (2010) is a verse that chronicles the predicament of every woman who is objectified, jilted and ditched in a married relationship due to her husband’s mounting libido for flesh. She delineates the anecdote of a woman who ventures towards quest for identity. Kandasamy defines the upheaval of a ditched wife by saying, “I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors.” (2010). She talks about how a man’s desire for pristine flesh drove him ditch his wife when she asserts:

Once I was wife: beautiful, Married
to a merchant shifty-eyed.

living the life, until he was lost in listless doubts of
how, what I gave him was more delicious

than whatever, whatever had been given to me. (Kandasamy, 2010, p.17)

The poet explains how the desire of this man to get unaltered, untouched and fresh flesh made him ditch his own wife whose love carried no meaning while juxtaposing it with his mounting desire for bodily pleasures, to which she adduces, “he hitched himself to a fresh and formless wife.” (Kandasamy, 2010, p.17) The society she says failed in understanding the trauma of the lady because of the deep rooted prejudices carried against women and thus no one in the society can empathize and understand the predicament of a battered lady who gets ditched by her lover and asserts, “some called me mad, some called me mother but all of them led me here, to this land of living dead.” (Kandasamy, 2010, p.17)

How a woman's body is being commoditized is shown in Meena Kandasamy's piece of poetry titled, "Flesh finds a form of address", *Ms. Militancy* (Kandasamy, 2010), in which the word 'goddess' is used as a metaphor for his tender darling where he as poet applauds the budding and blossoming seductress vision of her body. The 'He-poet' says:

Of his goddess: Her breasts, to him, Are
golden globes, and
Cone-shaped copper vessels, and
Big as the mount Meru, and Grown
so heavy they threaten Her slender,
creeper-like waist... And calls this
beautiful goddess:

'Mother' (Kandasamy, 2010, p.23)

Kandasamy propounds that this Hindu poet dreams of his goddess in a way that commoditize the body of his goddess but to the surprise at the end calls her 'mother' i.e. supreme and divine Hindu goddess 'Mata'.

3. The Picture of Sexual Violence in India

Sexual violence is terrifying in India. There is not only rape that is committed but brutal beating, assault, object penetration and what not that is not practiced on the victim. This clearly shows that rape is in no way a desire but a tool to tame, subjugate, suppress and terrify women in our society. The perpetrator is not perpetually a stranger or unknown but can be a person in a relation, inside the four-walls of the house or even the person with whom one shares bed with. The question thus rises: Is India really terrifying and unsafe for its own daughters to dwell in?

The NCRB data posits that crimes against women have recorded a whopping 83% increase from 2007 to 2016. The total crime rate-number of crimes per one lakh of the population-against women has gone up from 16.3 in 2007 to 53 in 2016. Rapes have risen by 88% since 2007.

Crime under the category of 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' have seen a 119% increase. (n.d., 2017)

Saachi Sharma in "FIRST POST" says that one of the biggest misconceptions around rape is the "other-ing" of both the criminal and the victim-that a "certain" type of woman gets raped. The overwhelming complicity of perpetrators in familial positions of power, or those who are known to victims, is grossly understated. The report states:

The 2015 National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data on the proximity of offenders to victims (the most recent data available) shows that in 95 percent of all rape cases, the offender knew the victim. For example, 27 percent of rapes are committed by neighbors, 22 percent involves the promise of marriage and 9 percent are committed by immediate family members and relations. The data further stated that atleast two percent of all rape cases

involve live-in partners or husbands (former partners or separated husbands rape within marriage is not recorded), 1.6 percent are committed by employers or co-workers and 33 percent are committed by other known associates (Sharma, May 9, 2017).

4. Data on Sexual Violation across the Globe

It was not before 2012 that female exploitation was much highlighted in India. According to the report by CNN that was supported by UN women, it stated that no country in the world is safe for women. It said that 35% of women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence. The #MeToo and its many iterations had shown the uniformity of problem that was practiced in the streets of London, Mumbai and Washington that had shown the masses that there are many who have experienced sexual abuse. In 2017, the world had made one thing clear that sexual harassment is everywhere. 120 million girls have experienced forced sex or other sexual acts.

Almost 750 million women and girls alive today married before their 18th birthday. According to the data collected by UN Women and as reported by CNN, it stated that 37% of Arab Women have experienced some form of violence in their life time. In Egypt, 99% of women when surveyed across seven regions had experienced sexual harassment. According to UNICEF (2016), data collected by CNN, 43% girls are married before the age of 18 in Nigeria. Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (2012) stated that 1 in 5 women in Zimbabwe reported that the first time they had sex was forced and against their will. By the sources of Stop Street Harassment (2014), 65% of all women who were surveyed in US, had experienced street harassment. In the United Kingdom, 64% of women have experienced sexual harassment against their will in public places as reported by Stop Street Harassment (2016). Actonaid (2015) data as reported by CNN stated that 84% Brazilian women reported having been sexually harassed by the police. UN Women (2014), stated that more than 90% of women and girls in Papua, New Guinea have experienced some form of violence on public transport (Senthilingam, 2017).

5. When I Hit You: Analysis of Husband's Taming Policy

When I Hit You or *Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (Kandasamy, 2017), chronicles the occurrences of Meena's own abusive marriage. The novel, written in first-person narrative propounds the incidents of subjugation, quashing, quelling and marital rape. The acts that are enforced by her husband on her leave an everlasting traumatic effect on her. The manifestation of women as objects is shown as she writes, "I skip the kohl around my eyes because he believes that is worn only by screen-sirens and seductresses. I wear dull T-shirts and pajama-bottoms because he approves of dowdiness." (Kandasamy, 2017, p.13) .She gets married to a revolutionist who respects women if seen from the outer lens on when she says, "I must learn that communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind the closed

doors.” (Kandasamy, 2017, p.22) .The first episode of mental abduction is when he restricts her to be on facebook and handles all her professional and official accounts. She is not allowed to vocalize even a single word with anyone outside the four walls of the crib. She lives a life of an abandoned woman inside four sides of the bricks and cement. The censure a married woman gets by her own parents is rendered when she her lips are stitched the moment they say, “Your husband is doing this for your own good...” (Kandasamy, 2017, p.34) upon which she writes that every atrocity she faced right from her childhood was given legitimacy by the words, ‘your own good’. She asserts:

‘Your own good’ was what justified my teenage neighbor putting his fingers inside my eight-year-old vagina...When I hear ‘your own good’ I am reduced to being a child again I do not argue anymore. I go silent. (Kandasamy, 2017, p.40)

Kandasamy narrates the first incident when she gets abused and how everything remains still at their places and no one can be called for escape. The weapons are none but her own households which are decorated by her and she says:

I can catalogue the weapons of abuse that have gathered around the house. The cord of my Mac-Book which left thin, red welts on my arms. The back of the broomstick that pounded me across the length of my back. The writing pad whose edges found my knuckles. His brown leather belt. Broken ceramic plates after a brief journey as flying saucers... I did not know that this was the exemplary life waiting a newly married woman. (Kandasamy, 2017, p.40)

Being mocked upon her writings and her aspiration of being a writer, he calls her mad and blames her feminist bent for their abusive marriage and brings down other up roaring feminists of the literature world by objectifying them on which he says:

Three inches of cleavage, two books of poetry, plenty of sex and depression-that’s all it takes to make woman a famous writer. Beginning from Sylvia Plath to Kamla Das, that is the only trajectory you have all followed. (Kandasamy. 2017, p.83)

Rape is the term which is always associated with a stranger who is the rapist and an unmarried girl. The idea of marital rape is never paid attention as a married woman is always silenced by the cultural construct i.e. the pious bond of marriage where a legal ownership is given to the husband, where a husband can objectify his wife’s body the way he desires, where there is no perplex challenge of consent as marriage means a green card to consent thus leaving myriad of such women being raped not by the strangers but by their own husbands and their lips are thus stitched by the societal construct of marriage. She asserts:

I never understood rape until it happened to me... The man who rapes me is not a stranger who runs away... he is not the masked assaulter... he is the husband for whom I have to make coffee the following morning. (Kandasamy, 2017, p.92)

The tale of an abandoned and battered life is portrayed where a wife becomes husband’s hit bag when he gets frustrated, where her screams are not heard by anyone around and are not

loud enough to make a husband stop, where sex and abuse become a tool for the husband to subjugate his wife, where the heavy work load allotted by the boss comes out as heavy punch on his wife, where a taming policy thus continues. Kandasamy in *When I Hit You* says, “Sex, actually rape, becomes a weapon to tame me. Your cunt will be ruined, he tells me. Your cunt will turn so wasted, so useless you will never be able to offer yourself to any man.” (2017, p. 92).

Kandasamy very well explains the fear of a wife that prevents her to take any serious step, the terror and trauma she faces, to which she writes, “The fear makes me withdraw into myself. The terror seizes me like a spint the minute my legs are spread.” (Kandasamy, 2017, p.93) .Sex for her husband seems to be punishment for all her moans, “A rape is also a punishment. Sometimes, the punishment for saying no...This male psychosexual logic looks at

penetration as punishment.” (Kandasamy, 2017, pp. 93-95) .Kandasamy in her work explains as to what makes a woman or what made her stay in her abusive marriage for four long weeks and why she didn’t resist during the very first incident that thereafter became her husband’s habit and taming policy, that she puts in words as:

What makes a woman stay in a marriage that she should have left the day before it even Happened? The need to prove a point- to those who publicly bet that a woman writer like her cannot stay married for more than four weeks... To add to the list there is fear; the pressure of family; and, also, hope... Hope prevents me from taking my own life. Hope is the kind voice in my head that prevents me from fleeing. Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage. The hope that things will change for the better tomorrow. The hope that he will eventually give up silence. (Kandasamy, 2017, p.99) .

Conclusion

The hardships and emotional stress of women who have been abandoned by the cultures and traditions of the society thus still prevalent in the society and their voices are stitched by various means that is well explored in the study through the narratives of Meena Kandasamy. The hegemony of dominating gender is such up mounting that no space to speak for the rights of women is left, where myriad go through the trauma of abuse, rapes, subjugation, commoditization and thus lead a life of subaltern. Media plays a major role in commoditization and objectification of women’s body. The body of a woman is shown in various item-numbers, advertisements and comics to allure the heightening desire of a man thus, portraying her body as an object. The eported rape of a young girl in Delhi in December, 2012 bought attention of everyone to such a crime that had always been ignored and less paid heed from past years and centuries. Marital rapes in India, thus brings us to the question: If marriage in India is contract for legal sex where no consent is asked. The national print media TOI (Times of India), stated:

While most of the developed world has penalized marital rape, surprisingly, there is no

law to protect married women against marital rape in India- Home Affairs minister Haribhai Chaudhary had said that marital rape can't be made a criminal offence in India because of high illiteracy rate, poverty, extreme religious beliefs and the very 'sanctity' of marriage. (Sharma, 2017)

The trauma of a woman regardless that she is married or unmarried is same as the gender goes through same victimization. The statement given by Priya Nanda, group director of social and economic development at the International centre for Research on Women is well justified and quoted, "The reason men don't want to criminalise marital rape is because they don't want to give the woman the power to say no" (Sharma, 2017). Women even in the present era and era are not allowed to rebel or rage and if they do they are tagged as hysterical, the plight of the women and feminists who step forward to speak face obstructions created by law and society. In the concluding pages of *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy says, "For the first time in my marriage, I'm not afraid. I know that my words have stripped away his manhood, they have shamed him to impotence." (2017, p.115). However even though India is excelling in the multi-disciplinary fields and promoting "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" but discrimination is still highly visible in rural and urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal tradition of power/sex still prevails. Make India- A safe India- A better India.

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