

Politics of Narration in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's empathetic portrayal of Kilvenmani massacre in her novel The Gypsy Goddess (2014) reveals the casteism inherent in Indian social order and state machinery. This paper attempts to analyze how her complex narrative technique can debunk the truth of violent, casteist, misogynist reality of 1970s India. The narrative technique of this novel shows elements of historical metafiction theorized by Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon. Such narration is able to dismantle the metanarrative of Indian history revealing its flip side which is contested and non- progressive for marginal people. This novel also seems to be a postmodern text demonstrating incredulity towards metanarrative of mainstream Indian history. The text puts forward Kandasamy's powerful commentary on caste atrocity in post-independence India where Dalit lynching or massacre is a repeated incident.

Keywords: The Gypsy Goddess, Dalit Massacre, Narrative Technique, Historical Metafiction, Postmodernism.

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is based on the horrific incident of Kilvenmani massacre on 25th December of 1968 where forty four Dalit peasants were burnt alive because of their prolonged strike for the sake of a little higher wage. In 7th Anuradha Ghandy memorial lecture titled "No One Killed the Dalits", Kandasamy said the Kilvenmani massacre shows cruelty of higher caste as well as the state machinery. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said-

But the most striking feature of Manu's Penal Code which stands out in all its nakedness is the inequality of punishment for the same offence. Inequality designed not merely to punish the offender but to protect also the dignity and to maintain the baseness of the parties coming to a Court of Law to seek justice in other words to maintain the social inequality on which his whole scheme is founded (Ambedkar 31).

Gopalkrishna Naidu, one of the accused in this case was president of Congress party in Tanjore district, she informs. Kandasamy referred to India's first Dravidian Chief Minister C.N Annadurai's comment about this incident who said "people should forget the night as they forget a feverish nightmare or a flash of lightening" and she also reminded Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's comment that wage is not something one can demand, but it is fixed by market condition ("No one Killed the Dalits"). She also said that immediately after the massacre in the undivided Tanjore district landlords went around saying, there will be hundred more Gopalkrishna Naidu, hundred more Kilvenmanis will continue to burn ("No one Killed the Dalits"). Mass Killing of Dalits is nothing new for a society divided along the line of class and caste. It is due to the victim-blaming, removal of evidence, denial of justice for petty reasons, denial of the case being an incident of caste atrocity, reducing everything into compensation with the notion that lives can be purchased by government money, makes culprits slip from the legal consequences. She explained how Lidice, Guernica have become the villages symbolizing dysfunction and representing horror of massacre; Similarly Kilvenmani also represents dysfunctional zone which fell victim to class and class atrocity of extreme nature. On the judicial hearing, Madras high court acquitted all of the accused in Kilvenmani massacre calling it some sort of accident. It is also noticeable that the police had framed a flimsy case to safeguard the caste hindu landlords. Patna high court also acquitted caste Hindu murderers in the case of Bathanitola (1996); later similar occurrences went unchallenged in Laxmanpur bathe (1997), Tsundur(1991), Kambalapalli(2014) where Dalits were killed mercilessly and the judiciary played role similar to Kilvenmani.

The Gypsy Goddess (2014) commemorates a historical event, but mainstream history of post- independence India likes to forget such incidents as inconspicuous. She politically uses her subjective position to flesh out a forgotten event and let different speakers take charge of the narrative. The voice of the dead and marginalized people is able to challenge the overarching metanarrative of Indian history. She uses her extraordinary capacity of storytelling to play around with narration and unmasks treachery hidden in the conservative, casteist, class-conscious, misogynist social order. The author narrator describes herself as a first generation woman novelist working in second language from 'that third world country' (Kandasamy 13). Her "narration alternates between leading the characters and leading the audience" (Kandasamy 24). This paper attempts to show how Kandasamy's novel exhibits tendencies of historical metafiction; by doing so it helps to dismantle the structural edifice of

Historical narrative. Unlike mainstream historiography, here events of significant past becomes important and not the narrative of general past. According to Linda Hutcheon the imperative of Historical novel is “modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force (in the narrative and in human destiny)” (Hutcheon 113). According to George Lukács “the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates”. The protagonist, therefore, should be a type, a synthesis of the general and particular, of “all the humanly and socially essential determinants.” He believes that in the Historical Novel “usage of details is only secondary, meant for gaining historical faithfulness...” (Hutcheon 113).

Meena Kandasamy's novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) has been modeled on historical incident, it does not fall under the category of Historical novel, as there is none to be called protagonist with qualities of “all the humanly and socially essential determinants.” Rather the text has tendencies of Historical metafiction where the protagonists are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized...” (Hutcheon 18). Kandasamy says “Because I have taken pleasure in the aggressive act of clobbering you with metafictional devices, I can hear some of you go: What happened to the rules of a novel?” (Kandasamy 128). Historical metafiction suggests that there is continuing relevance of a kind of opposition, even if it be a problematic one. Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history. This kind of generic blurring has been a feature of literature and it shows an amount of postmodern tendency. History and Fiction both are deployed by the verisimilitude, not by the objective truth being linguistic constructs. The structure and language are nontransparent and conventional - “they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality...” (Hutcheon 105). According to her Postmodern intertextuality is caused by the desire to bridge the gap between past present and the reader, also to rewrite the past in new context. The aim is not to avoid history, but confronting past literature and historiography directly keeping in mind that those have derived from texts or documents (Hutcheon 118). The novel is full of intertextual references. The narrator says any postcolonial reading of the text will reveal how the old woman named *Maayi* is in many ways similar to *Janie* in the novel named *Their eyes were watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. She also refers to *Ramayyahvin Kudisai*, an excellent documentary on the subject of Kilvenmani massacre. It is a tendency of historical metafiction to carefully consider nature of evidence, documents and how it is used (Hutcheon 122). The narrator says that the novel is not going to be linear narrative based on mere facts; but her job is to disorient the readers' point of view. She will “surmise and theorize, assume and presume, speculate and conflate and extrapolate every detail” revealed by her field research in order to ‘make it fit’ in to narrative mode of her novel (Kandasamy 100). According to Jean Francois Lyotard the doubt for metanarratives is one of the characteristics of postmodernism. In such ‘narrative function’ the great hero, heroic deeds and achieving unreal

goals are lost (Lyotard xxiv). In his essay *Answering the question, What is Postmodernism* Lyotard informs that

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.(9)

The Gypsy Goddess shows postmodern tendencies firstly by presenting apt alternative to the historical novel (historical metafiction), secondly by endowing agency and power of narration to different subjects and thirdly by attempting to present the unrepresentable in an innovative style. In the chapter named “What Happened Afterwards”, the Chief Minister cajoled people by saying people should forget this night as they forget feverish nightmare almost in manner to erase collectively an ‘unrepresentable’ event; the author here takes the task of representing that unrepresentable by searching different mode of presentation. The speakers vary in this novel, from feudal landlord Gopalkrishna Naidu to Dalit peasants of the Cheri. In the chapter named “Season’s of Violence” Naidu is presenting his story; he seems like a megalomaniac leader representing feudal order, demanding peasants to surrender and join his Paddy Producer’s Association. To contest him silently the author narrator steps in to the slippers of Naidu’s legal assistants and gains the fictitious chance of close proximity. She retains her subjective position as a vulnerable, young woman in front of a sexual predator saying-

Did his story scare me? Yes. Did he pull any tricks on me? None that I am aware of. Did we get drunk together? No seeking a share of his scotch was not politically correct thing to do. Did I send him consenting signals, as other women often blame me of doing? No. No. Reader, I have not married him. I was in the mood of some Dostoevsky that day, my mind was swinging with my mood and, reminding myself that men were despots by nature, I maintained an icy exterior, almost as if I was frozen by fear.(Kandasamy142)

For Naidu the peasant movement backed up by communist party is nothing but ruffraff and a conspiracy to uproot him. He says “Communism is actually a killer disease that has infested agriculture” (Kandasamy136). He uses story of his mother’s suicide by drinking dust of diamond nose ring to justify his actions against Dalit peasants. The narrator suggests communist party worked amongst the poorest of poor; they were vocal against the practice of untouchability. In this text an anonymous communist party worker sometimes shares his story. He informs about the victories of Communist party like the Kalappal Agreement, Mannargudi Agreement. The peasant mobilization is not a solitary event of class conflict here in Kilvenmani, but it is part of larger socio-political transformation of contemporary times. In Kilvenmani the peasant community is constituted of outcaste Hindus named as Pallars or

Paraiyars. The social stratification along the line of class and caste is so exploitative that the dominant upper castes never want them to set foot outside 'Pallathery and Pallatheru'. Untouchables are made to work in their fields but prohibited to use the streets if they need to carry dead body of their kin. For slightest act of transgression the untouchables are forced to drink cow dung diluted water years ago, but the feudal tyrants now use cocktail of fertilizers as an innovative method to kill the rebels (Kandasamy 264). They are systematically deprived from procuring basic necessities like water. One untouchable woman does not have the right to pour water from the lake; instead she needs a caste Hindu woman's favour to fill her container. Few years back the coal powered buses did not let them sit with caste Hindu passengers, similar practice was followed in cinema tents. Even in tea stalls the untouchables had to carry container made of coconut shell, as the tumblers of the shop were reserved for the caste Hindu customers (Kandasamy 265). The discrimination along the line of caste is ancient as the narrator suggests; one must remember the time when kings showered Brahmins with tax free lands. Later the landowning Brahmins sublet these lands and started considering manual labour not suitable for their position. Similarly all the groups who owned land imbibed Brahminical attitude towards labour; the aversion to manual labour became characteristics of ruling class (Kandasamy 219). The systematic segregation of caste Hindu landlords and Dalit peasants is caused by this class behavior where in the lower strata manual workers are kept. This landless class in Kilvenmani is not merely victim of caste-based oppression, but victim of the political conflict between feudal conservatism against communist activism. Before the Land Ceiling Act came into being, almost sixty percent of the land was monopolized by five percent of people and these powerful landlords were either members of Indian National Congress or DMK whose feudal funding kept these parties running. While Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi kept making promises to eradicate poverty, the shops ran out of kerosene, the state ran out of coal, there were scarcity of all sorts of amenities; production of food grain failed because of the unfavorable weather. In between the nation went into war with Pakistan. "In other words, the country was in a state of Emergency" (Kandasamy 252).

Her powerful narrative focuses particularly on women's struggle. Women in Kilvenmani are strong; their small talks had the potential to spark a social revolution. The narrator says protesting women do not fear consequences; they fight for a break to tend their infants, they demand daily wages like their men. They protest by smashing pots, or setting fire to the yellow flag of Paddy Producer's Association. These women question whether the harvest belonged to the peasants or to the tyrant landowners. They reap the crops in the middle of the night. Along with their infants they are arrested, made to stand in front of the moving tractors, stripped naked, tied to trees and whipped in front the entire village. "The police punish them by making them kneel and walk a few miles on their knees until they have no choice but to crawl" (Kandasamy 76). It is their body which becomes repository of tales.

Carrying the tales of their cunts and their cuntrees and their cuntenants, women cross all hurdles, talk in circles, burst into tears, break in to cheers teach a few others, take new lovers, become earth mothers, question big brothers, breathe state secrets, fuck all the etiquette and turn themselves in to the truth or dare pamphleteer who will interfere at the frontier. (Kandasamy 67)

Most of the victims of massacre were women, children and elders as the men of the Cheri rushed to help those who were beaten by the 'rowdies'. The henchmen of the landlords appeared at distance and the silence of the cold night was pierced with whistles and gunshots (Kandasamy 163). The people of the Cheri decided their strength lied in their unity; so all of them packed inside huts. The mob tried to enter forcibly but without success. Being furious they set fire to the huts. One mother tries to throw infant out of the hut, but the child is caught, chopped in to pieces and returned to the common pyre. Kandasamy described in Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Lecture how killing of the children is caste Hindu specialty repeated in various massacres. She quotes Madras Highcourt's judgment- "We believe that the dependents of those who have lost their lives in the holocaust will be generously compensated by the government." She explains that the word holocaust somehow suggests that the incident is 'an act of arson' and not murder of forty four men women and children. The Indian Penal code calls it in a funny language "Mischief by Fire" which is also the title of this chapter written in a single sentence ("No one Killed the Dalits"). The racy narrative takes readers to the plight of that night. The survivors of the massacre face a hard time to come in terms with the psychological shock they received though women were immune to the pain of being "kidnapped and carried away and raped and killed and buried in some coconut grove" (Kandasamy 196). One of the female survivors, Letchumi is shattered with the feeling of hundreds fighting inside her body. Arumugam is afraid for his daughter "as she shivers when she is alone" (Kandasamy 201). To journalists' questions, Thangamma never shed a tear and shared her story. She saved her children, mother in law at that night and fiercely fought back Kerosene Govinda who tried to assault her. On the sixtieth day, when the village fed its dead ancestors, Karuppiah committed suicide haunted by memories (Kandasamy 206). Maayi's daughter-in-law Packiam behaved frantically and could not wear anything (Kandasamy 207). The journalists seek Maayi to be photographed because of her eccentric posture like a bird, tobacco filled mouth, falling hair and language of old woman - "She without blouse, she with long dangling earlobes, she with tattoos all over her arms.... But she does not tell her stories to the journalists. These stories are her village's wounds of shame, they cannot be displayed to passing spectators" (Kandasamy 21). In this text several narrators come and share their stories; interestingly enough Maayi or any other woman of the Cheri do not come and take charge of the narrative. One wonders what the first generation woman novelist working in second language from 'that third world country' intends? Is it a choice with some purpose? The question remains open for speculation. In this novel author's own subjective position is placed as the sole woman capable of sharing her point of view by

positing herself in fictitious circumstances, but the rest of the woman only ‘talk’ ‘endlessly’ amongst themselves. Their action is elaborately discussed but their subjective position remains homogenized.

The history of Kilvenmani massacre may have several social and political implications, but mainstream history does not include it as a text. According to Spivak “if the story of the rise of nationalist resistance to imperialism is to be disclosed coherently, it is the role of the indigenous subaltern that must be strategically excluded. Then it can be argued that in the initial stages of consolidation of territorial imperialism, no organized political struggle was forthcoming” (Spivak 79). So the movement of subalterns like the peasants of Kilvenmani could be shrugged off as a ‘riffraff’ or undercut from the mainstream history and political discourse as a thoughtful strategy of the dominant. *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is a text written by a woman who is descendant of Kilvenmani’s oppressed people. In the “Acknowledgement” of the text Kandasamy pays gratitude to her father because he had circumvented an amount of pain to describe to her the events of his childhood; it is something which he always tried to escape (Kandasamy 275). In 7th Anuradha Ghandy memorial lecture she reminded state’s hypocritical stance while providing justice to the people who have lost their family members. Indian judiciary acts like extension of Khap Panchayet when a case does not seem fit for their upper caste mentality. The Madras High court felt that a person possessing vast tracts of land, ambassador car and political position would not kill hungry peasants to satisfy anger though he had actually threatened Kilvenmani to burn into ash ten days before incident took place. The betrayed Dalit people of Kilvenmani took law in their hands and killed this butcher landlord, cut his body into forty four pieces and send each piece wrapped in palm fronds to people who have lost their family members. She writes in the novel her delight along with the people of Kilvenmani hearing the news of Naidu’s murder. Like many others she has also desired for such ending. Though it is hard to imagine a teleological end of a narrative as rooted as this, Kandasamy enunciates “Mudivu kandachu. It has been completed. We have seen the end”(Kandasamy 273). She believes that incidents like Kilvenmani prove state’s intention of denying justice to Dalit people and handing small amount of money in exchange of their lives. It is perpetuating the genocidal hate of the upper castes towards the Dalits. She points out in her lecture how Indian state machinery can send cartoonists and dissenters to jail yet the corporate loots do not face consequences after not paying government taxes. The constitutional values are overthrown daily when hard earned rights of people are not given to them. In present day India, she says, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe atrocity act is called in to question when Dalit lynching has become a daily occurrence; reservation policy is considered as a privilege and not necessity. For national interest the state wants to scrap reservation in higher education when Indian media houses remain completely Dalit free zones (“No One Killed the Dalits”). The novel now

stands as an artistic declaration of Kandasamy's contempt towards the partial, undemocratic failed social system diseased with wounds like casteism.

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