

“The struggle to annihilate caste will be victorious”:
Meena Kandasamy in Conversation with Ujjwal Jana

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Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) is a poet, translator and creative writer. As a bright, emerging poetic figure of Dalit writing in English, she articulates the voice of the dalits, or marginalized, through the mainstream protest literature of the present time. In an exclusive interview, Meena Kandasamy talks about the polemical nature of her writing, her preoccupation with the theme of caste annihilation, social exclusion and marginalization, and her views on translation as a mode of representation of and resistance to the gruesome and systemic social oppression the dalits have suffered throughout the ages. When asked her opinion of the influence of other significant Tamil writers, such as Bama and Sivakami, she nullifies the possibility of comment because, all of them write from the same Dalit perspective and cultural milieu. Kandasamy, however, sees herself less as a vernacular writer than as a writer writing in English to reach a global audience. Indeed, she prefers being “located only within Indian writing in English” and wants the whole world to listen to the often silenced voice of the dalits and the socially ostracized. She thinks that “contextualizing [her] work within Tamil Dalit literature is quite risky” and, instead, admits to the influences Erica Jong, Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath, and Kamala Das have had on her writing. In what follows, she candidly speaks of her anticipation of the changes in the dominant sociological paradigms that have shaped dalit life and culture and that are newly envisaged by the dalits.

UJ: Let me start by asking you a preliminary question; what makes you choose poetry, not any other literary genre, to articulate your profound concern for what we call today the subaltern or the marginalized?

MK: My writing has been labelled “extremely polemical,” so it makes a lot of people wonder why I am writing poetry in the first place. Though I have dabbled in various literary genres, I think I choose poetry very consciously. First, because poetry is intricately connected with language, and since language is the site of all subjugation and oppression, I think poetry alone has the power of being extremely subversive. Because, on several levels, it can challenge a language, its patterns of thought, its prejudices and its enshrined, encapsulated inequalities. Though languages

may have their hierarchies firmly in place and though they tend to be degrading to women and Dalits in the Indian context, they are a level playing field. I can offer my resistance through language. We can announce our revolution through poetry. Second, because it offers me point-blank range. I would have to be far more subtle if I were to convey the same through fiction, and very often, there are chances that my subtext is glossed over. And thirdly, a real poet can never escape her politics.

UJ: When did you actually start writing and what operated as the driving force behind that? Is there any autobiographical reflection in your writing?

MK: I started writing in my teens. I essentially wrote about issues that concerned me at that time: reservation policy, women's issues, casteist mindsets. I wrote about a variety of things because there was nothing I could do about them. Like I always say, I write out of my helplessness. I write because I want to rebel, and this is the only way I know how. I write because, if I were to be silent today, I will be condemned for my silence tomorrow. I think it lets me have the thrill of being a guerilla fighter without the fear of succumbing to bullets.

My earliest poems were so militant. My love poems were to come years later. When I was seventeen, I started editing the little magazine, *The Dalit*, and the exposure it gave me pulled me headlong into activism. Yes, my writing is very, very autobiographical. It stems out of who I am, and what happened to me. I am extremely conscious of the fact that I am a woman and that I am a feminist. I hate the fact that I am made of four or more castes clamouring to be claimed; but I know I am casteless and, to become that, you have to condition yourself. I am also immensely proud of the fact that I am a Tamil, and that my language has resisted Sanskritization in the face of much oppression. My language gives me the power not to bow to pressure. At the same time, I am ashamed of the fact that I am Tamil because, after all, this is the language that has given the English language the word for outcast.

UJ: Your first collection of poems, *Touch*, which revolves round the theme of love and caste, is your best and most mature work written in deep and poignant language. It also alludes to the classical story of Ekalavya. How do you try to appropriate this epical character in the contemporary context?

MK: Ekalavya (Ekalaiyan in Tamil) is the typical Dalit (and it is easy to imagine him in the contemporary context): he's actually better than the best when it comes to talent and hard-work, he doesn't have access to the best resources, his success is envied by caste-Hindu students and 'upper' caste teachers, who have the power to crush him. I think modern-day Ekalavyas are being forced to pay a bitter guru-dakshina to educational institutions. Sadly, I feel that the price they pay is much greater than a

thumb. If one looks at the statistics, we can see that student suicides are much more rampant among the Dalit students. Why does this happen? Why are our boys and our girls forced to pay with their lives? It is simply because caste ensures that only a particular group of people should be allowed access to education. So, when Dalits are getting into institutes of higher education, there is a great degree of academic terrorism and it is taking its toll. My poem essentially tries to invoke the militancy of Ekalavya's character, and to remind him that there are a lot of ways in which he can get back at the system, or reduce it to its knees. It was written as a call to arms. It was meant to tell anyone who has faced academic oppression that they shouldn't grin and bear it, that they should revolt. Dalits are being systematically kept out of education. They aren't allowed to enter it and, where they are allowed, they aren't allowed to exit with degrees. It is a tough choice between Do Not Enter and Drop Out.

Those who are into folk studies have asked me why I chose a failed folk-hero. I answer that I want to make a hero out of him, I want to recast his story, I want to sculpt his success. I want to tell the oppressors out there that we won't take it lying down, that we would never meekly sacrifice our thumbs. It is to give a message that we will get back, we will hit back.

UJ: For sometime you edited *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly alternative English magazine. This is a very bold and courageous attempt to address the problems related to caste, social hierarchy and Brahminism. Do you look at your writings from an activist's point of view or from an academic perspective?

MK: I feel for it, so I write about it. And I make sure I supplement my arguments and shape it according to academic criteria, because it has to be scanned and scrutinized and accepted. And I will tell you that I am having trouble with this question. What exactly is an academic perspective when it comes to writing? Is it to be aimed at paper presentation in a national seminar, or to read loftily enough to win a Ford Foundation grant, or ensure me a promotion? Sometimes, I am put off by the suffocating theorizing that goes on in academia. Yes, you are discussing the subalterns, but do we know that we are being discussed? Or are we being kept informed? In the process of being objective, we are objectifying ourselves.

UJ: I think you are the first Indian woman writer writing Dalit Poetry in English. Does it set a new tone for mainstream Indian writing in English? Is it a parallel and alternative mode of writing?

MK: No, I would not attach labels like parallel or alternative. Believe me, what I am writing is pretty mainstream. The so-called mainstream is something that has been hijacked by an elite minority. As a consequence, their culture, their practices, their view-points are being identified as

mainstream. The real India, crumbling under its caste system and its corruption, isn't present in their writing. I could just say that voices of women and men from the oppressed castes and minorities will give credibility to the mainstream. It will give the mainstream image a makeover, make it authentic and real.

UJ: Why do you write in English? Do you think English and not Tamil (your mother tongue) will convey your message to the corridors of the world more easily?

MK: Well, that was a very practical problem for me. I studied in a Kendriya Vidyalaya, where people taught you only the national languages, Hindi and English. And, moreover, we studied with all these north-Indian kids, so very few people conversed in Tamil anyway. So, Tamil was being looked down as gauche, vulgar, of the masses. During my 12 years of school I hardly remember speaking half a paragraph in Tamil. We would even pronounce Tamil nouns with such an English accent that I now squirm to think I am the same girl who did such stuff. Even if teachers spoke to me in Tamil, I would tell them to repeat it in English. You can understand how much the inferiority complex about my own language had gone into my head. I wanted to be accepted. I didn't want my Tamil origins to wreak havoc over what I wanted to say. But then, when I started saying things, I realized that Tamil, my language, my identity, my culture, it was all over me. It was the only point where I could start. Until I reclaimed my roots there would only have been silence or drivel. Which is possibly why you felt that there was so much of Tamil thought and themes in my poetry. Our bizarre language policies, and my parents' laziness, had ensured that I was denied my mother tongue. When I was fifteen or so, I started taking Tamil seriously. I taught myself how to read and write a language that I had so far only spoke and understood. Coming to the second part of your question, writing in English is not a conscious choice. It was the only language I knew well enough to write. And, like I kept saying to you, it is better to write in any language than to be smothered into an uncomfortable silence. But, somehow, this loss has been my gain too. Writing in English has not only let my voice reach the corridors of power, but it has also ensured that my poetry has been translated into five Indian languages so far.

UJ: You have translated some dalit writings from Tamil into English. How do you look upon translation as far as dalit identity is concerned?

MK: If you look at Dalit writing, our publishing industry has seen to it that we only get stereotypes. They want sad, all-holds-barred autobiographies, they want novels that depict the langour of dalit lives, but they are not interested in anything militant. They are not interested in something that stops being a tale of woe. One of the driving factors that led me to translate Dalit writings was that I didn't get to hear the anti-caste strain in

most of the Indian writing in English. The kinds of issues the Liberation Panthers' leader Thirumavalavan touches upon, caste annihilation, anti-Dalit atrocities, state terrorism, violence against women, Tamil nationalism and so on, are actually crucial to us as a people. These are things all of us have to be concerned about and it's not something that has a limited scope, say within the Tamil language, or within Dalit activists. So, I was thinking, isn't Thirumavalavan's voice something that the English-reading elite should hear? It's a voice that is capable of disturbing them. The points that he puts forth, whether in his literary essays or in his rousing speeches, have the power to shake up the system. I honestly feel that India recognizes only "upper" caste Cambridge/Harvard educated political analysts as "intellectuals"; and I was putting forward Thirumavalavan as an alternative. I think translations into English are very important because caste is a national issue, and people everywhere can learn and benefit from the experience that their brothers and sisters have faced in Tamil Nadu.

UJ: How does history work in your writings to articulate the marginalized and the long suppressed voice of the dalits?

MK: While my poetry challenges mainstream narratives, I have been using biography as a tool to retrieve our lost history. If caste oppression is 2000, or 5000 years old, then our history of resistance is as old as that too. If they can celebrate their victories, we can celebrate our victories too. I essentially think that our history of resistance has been bulldozed away, it has been erased. What is imperative is that we reconstruct it, we draw our hope and sustenance from it. This year, a biography of Kerala's Dalit revolutionary leader Ayyankali was released. Would you believe it if I said that he pioneered the first workers' strike in the history? Ayyankali was a civil rights' champion, he established the rights of Dalits to use public roads. He dressed much more stately than caste-Hindus at a time when Dalits were forced not to cover themselves above the hip or below the knee. He entered the People's Assembly as a representative of the Pulayar people even as the caste system kept up with its craziness and maintained that Pulayar people could pollute at sixty four feet away. History plays a central role in my writings.

UJ: Were you influenced by the contemporary dalit writings in India? Did African-American writers have any influence on you?

MK: Yes, I was influenced by the translated poems of the Marathi Dalit poets. However I wasn't exposed to Tamil Dalit poetry until recently, when I took up the task of translating it. There are many I love among the African American poets, but the most notable examples that come to mind are Gwendolyn Brooks [and] Langston Hughes because it was from them I learnt that poetry was resistance. My other influences are Virginia Woolf, because only after I read her I knew how important my womanness is;

Nabakov, because he makes love to the English language; Conrad, because he has gone where no other writer before him ventured; Toni Morrison, because she reclaims the magic of black men (and women); Rushdie, because from him I have learnt that satire and sarcasm are great survival techniques; Arundhati Roy, for all imaginable reasons and because if you are a woman writing in English in India, everybody (I mean everybody) asks you to strive to follow her trail, so much so that she has been transformed into a really looming presence. Erica Jong, Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood and the whole she-gang. Sylvia Plath, because of the sheer angst and force of her lines. Anne Sexton, because, along the way, she has discovered the perfect poetic formula. The greatest influence is obviously Kamala Das herself, because it was her I-don't-give-a-damn poetry that made me try to write poetry; because it was her success as a woman poet that gave me the courage to emulate her example; and above all, because of her flamboyant lust for life.

(If you would excuse me for quoting from out of the English tradition: Thiruvalluvar because he packs so much in so few words and Sangam poetry because though it is so simple and stark to look at, it is so highly evolved, matching moods and landscapes!)

UJ: Are you influenced by Mahasweta Devi?

MK: Well, I love her work, and I have read her in translation. I adore her, just as I adore Arundhati Roy, because they are women who are using the power of the written word with the firm belief that it can change the world. They are women who write because they know that reading will entice a certain reaction, and that it will not be mere entertainment. And I share that strong, unshakeable belief.

I read Mahasweta Devi's fiction when I was in my teens, and it was the first time I was reading about police atrocities and rape and it left me feeling wounded and raw and exposed. I think Devi helped me learn early on that State terrorism is another oppressive factor that quells the explosive power of the subaltern people: Dalits and Adivasis in particular.

UJ: As Tamil Dalit women writers, how have Bama and Sivakami influenced your work?

MK: Incidentally, though both of them are Tamil writers, I have read their work only in English translation! I wouldn't label them influences, because that is a label that sits comfortably only with someone who is at quite a distance away from you. I have met Bama and Sivakami several times, and always as a friend. They have been extremely encouraging towards me, and in the early days, if I had not had those words of appreciation from these two brilliant women, I don't think I would have got the self-confidence to go ahead. Sivakami was so gracious, she once asked me to write an afterword to her novel, *The Grip of Change*. I am not even half her age. Something like that happens only because of love and

respect and commitment to the same case. Yet, in spite of all the love and the goodwill, I wouldn't say I am influenced by their work (both of them are novelists, I am a poet)—but I greatly admire them. I think contextualizing my work within Tamil Dalit literature is quite risky. I am a Tamil Dalit Woman and I am extremely proud of that. However, I write in English, so I would like my work to be located only within Indian writing in English.

All of us, however, write about the same society. We write from the same perspective: as Tamil women, as Dalit feminists. We share the same social and cultural context. An atrocity like the Venmani carnage, the Melavalavu massacre, the Thinniyam atrocity, the temple entry struggles, the everyday rape of Dalit women, informs and agitates us. We write about it in our own ways. I write in English because I want the Tamil Dalit voice to be heard on a national platform (after all questions of nationalism and caste are common throughout India). And if I work hard enough, and long enough, and if I remain true to my dream of caste annihilation, to my dream of chronicling our histories of resistance, then this voice could also resonate on an international platform. And when casteist people know the world is watching, there is a pretty solid chance that they will be cleaning up, they might even start to shed some part of the craziness that is called caste.

UJ: How do you see the situation of Dalits today and in the future? How do you think that your writings will initiate changes in the sociological paradigm as envisaged by the dalits?

MK: The struggle to annihilate caste will be victorious, and it will owe a great deal to the Dalit people and their relentless struggle. It is not an overnight change, but the change has to come about. I don't think I am an author of history, or an agent of change to comment upon your second question. All that I can safely say is that if people are made to rethink about caste, and if they can be convinced that it is self-defeating in the long run, they will not have trouble letting it go. Caste protects a lot of selfish interests and that is why it seems as if it is here to stay. Next, there is a great deal of animosity against the Dalits because caste-Hindus think that they are beneficiaries of the reservation policy. I think such a manner of harbouring grudges is not going to serve any purpose. If the reservation policy wasn't there, India would have witnessed its first and real revolution. What we also need right now is sanity: realizing that caste is one of the most insane instruments of discrimination and that casteism is actually a real psychological condition. If people understand that caste exists in the mind and nowhere else, all its cruel physical manifestations, like segregation and untouchability, can be erased. And I think it is in the hands of writers to make people think about it. Writers have the power of the written word, and they can plead with people to unite for change.