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Interview

Mapping the Margins: An Interview with Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract: Caste-based discrimination is a grotesque socio-political reality in India. The term "Dalit" (or "untouchable") refers to a person belonging to the lowest caste in the traditional Indian caste system. Inspired by B. R. Ambedkar, a Western-educated intellectual and the chief architect of the Indian constitution, Dalit writers have produced stories of resistance, stories of caste discrimination and social ostracization, and alternative and parallel visions of casteless societies. As an author of contemporary Dalit writings, Meena Kandasamy describes a broad spectrum of Dalit experiences, and she voices concerns that are often unarticulated in the mainstream Indian literary canon. In so doing, Kandasamy not only helps to interpret the reality confronting Dalits but also reclaims their lost voices and identity. In conversation, Kandasamy speaks very much the way she writes—with bluntness and warmth.

Keywords: Dalit, caste system, autobiography, translation, *The Gypsy Goddess*

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, translator, fiction writer, and Dalit activist based in Chennai, India. Unlike many of her contemporaries such as Preeti Shenoy, Kiran Manral, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, her oeuvre is a response to issues related to caste politics, feminism, and gender violence that plague contemporary India. As the first Indian woman writer to champion the cause of Dalit individuals and their com-

munities in an upper-caste majoritarian India, Kandasamy is an outspoken critic of the establishment and a spokesperson for the "others" and underprivileged in her society. She is known for her piercing wit, radical quips, and satirical stabs. Her two collections of verse, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), are vibrant intellectual sites that challenge the patriarchy and interpret the social disparities and political injustices that trouble Indian society. Mature and assertive, Kandasamy's debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), which draws on a real-life massacre, offers a fictionalized version of the predicament of Dalit peasants under the feudal upper-caste landlords in the village of Kilvenmani (in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in southern India) on Christmas day, 1968. Kandasany is the former editor of *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly English-language magazine and, along with M. Nisar, co-authored a biography of Kerala's foremost Dalit revolutionary and civil rights champion, Ayyankali. Kandasamy has also translated the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan, leader of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), or the Dalit Panthers of India, and the works of Tamil Eelam writers. In addition, she has been a British Council-Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow at the University of Kent, a Visiting Fellow at Newcastle University, and a writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. In this interview, Kandasamy discusses her experience as a Dalit woman writer and a translator of Dalit literature; the implications of the term "Dalit" in the modern Indian literary context; and her identity as both a Dalit feminist and a woman writer in India.

There are two major ideas about writing: one, art for art's sake and the other, art for social purpose. Writers like Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy hold different views [from each other]. How would you locate yourself along these lines?

Kandasamy: The idea that there is art for art's sake and art for society's sake is a false dictum. It is easy for literature professors to come and make these differences; some people write for art's sake, some for society's sake. But contrary to this division, like for instance, in the example that you mentioned, both Madhavikutty [Kamala Das] and Arundhati

Roy, brilliant writers as they are, give as much importance to the craft as they give importance to the society that they are trying to represent. The person who is very committed to society will take the utmost care to use the most beautiful words, aesthetics, the loveliest form of writing, to be able to reach out to more people. I do not think that writing for . . . society makes it any less of an art or literature. I [also] don't believe that writing can exist in a vacuum; even if you say that you aren't writing for . . . society, you are making a choice—a conscious choice to distance yourself from . . . society as something about it makes you step away from it. After all, everybody is within . . . society, nobody is outside it.

You are an accomplished translator. For instance, you have translated the works of Tamil Eelam writers, [including] Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, among others. What does translation mean to you? Is translation difficult and fraught in practice?

Kandasamy: Translation is an intense process. When you are translating, you are inhabiting two worlds at the same time. You are trying to understand the complexities of one world and trying to represent it in another. Even if you are working with the source text, you are also working with its culture; you are trying to form something here and put it across to another culture. You are trying to get it across to somebody who does not know anything about the struggle, the places of conflict, or the culture. If you are working with living authors, it becomes all the more challenging, as you would have to satisfy them, too. It is a complex task, to achieve a good translation.

What were the challenges you encountered as a translator of Dalit literature from vernacular/regional originals to a metropolitan language such as English? You might have faced semantic and stylistic differences while translating. Share your experiences.

Kandasamy: While I translated from the Tamil originals, I often asked my father what certain words meant. The experiences of the Dalits were experiences far removed from the experiences of the middle class and the bourgeoisie experience. There are words that cannot even be translated. In D. Ravikumar's poetry, there is the mention of a word, "*eravaanam*,"

which is used to show the place where you place things in your hut between the roof and the walls because it is a safe place to keep things. I never knew that such a place existed as I did not live in a village at any point in my life and did not know the name for such a place in the homes I had been to. There is no English word to describe what it actually means. The "eave" of the roof comes close, but it doesn't fit. These were linguistic gaps which couldn't be overcome. These gaps always exist in a translation.

When I read Dalit autobiographies translated by middle-class people who have no idea of the Dalit experience, the huge gap of understanding and the gap of language is felt. English, after all, is not a local or regional language. In V. Kadambari's translation of K. A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (*The Scar*), she uses the word "*paraya*" [a lower-caste group found in the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu] instead of "*parayan*." In Tamil, the singular form of the word is used so as to insult, while the plural form of the word, "*parayar*," is used to show respect. There is no word that exists in between, the way the translator has used it. The "n" suffix or the "r" suffix does not exist in English, but does . . . in the regional language. How is it that this could be converted? It could be a single word that hold[s] these stories, but they are intense stories, hidden in the words. Translations limit the whole game of mediations, where you are trying to talk from a position of complete ignorance of the reader, or in the least, a reader who doesn't care.

Most of the translations of Dalit works are done by non-Dalits, which is hugely problematic. It is not merely the translation that is problematic but the complete absence of Dalits in the production process. Even the brilliant author is not often consulted. How could this process actually happen outside the author?

How has translation as an experience and as a process tempered your perception as a writer? And what are your observations about translation as far as Dalit identity is concerned?

Kandasamy: As a translator, I encounter the situation in which writing about politics is not seen as literature, which leaves Dalits at a disadvantage. While I translated the works of the Dalit leader, Thol.

Thirumaavalavan, he would tell me that because of the field of his work, because he has to speak, the literature that he creates is not the literature he got from reading books or referring to the works of scholars. The literature he creates does not have the "mood" of literature. Instead, the literature he creates is the literature created from the people he meets, from their collective resistance. "How then," he asked me, "could this work be called literary?"

The people outside the Dalit struggle do not know the Dalit struggle for what it is. When I had to translate [Thol. Thirumaavalan's] *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003), a book of essays, the essays were thirty in number or so, but the footnotes for each essay ran for nine pages, when each essay was merely three pages or so. As a translator, I say this not to show that I had done my work, but rather, with deep humility, that the world we are living in is a completely isolated world. Venmani [the Kilvenmani massacre] would hold a complete memory and understanding for a Dalit person, but need not be so for a non-Dalit person. For a non-Dalit, and especially someone who has no link [to] or understanding of the anti-caste struggle, it is just a noun; there is no history, no anger, no story to be told about Venmani or Theni or Meenakshipuram [villages in Tamil Nadu].

What are the implications of the term "Dalit" in the modern literary context? And how do you characterize contemporary Dalit politics?

Kandasamy: The very word "Dalit" is under much debate and discussion in the modern context. Recently, Dalit politics have come under criticism in the same context. But this question is the beginning of approaching Dalit feminism or literature. Some criticize current Dalit politics, believing that it is merely trying to satisfy the aspirations of elite and educated bourgeoisie in the society instead of serving the Dalits in their class struggle. But instead of recounting and repeating the language of Marx to understand the condition of the Dalits, what is to be done is to see it for what it is, which is the caste struggle, included within which is the class struggle. But then, putting caste within such a paradigm is not easy. I believe that instead of saying that Dalit politics has taken the convenient or the brahmanical approach [upper-caste ways], what

is more important is to see the revolutionary aspects of Dalit politics, the struggle that Dalits were fighting . . . even before *The Communist Manifesto* came into being or the Russian revolution happened.

Yet you are called a Dalit writer when there are [those] who believe that you are a non-Dalit. How do you respond to such critical pronouncement[s]?

Kandasamy: I have been extremely honest, as the jury is out there, and the jury . . . has to decide. Until then, I really cannot say anything. It's for the people to decide. I've been very honest, especially in making known the fact that my parents are from two different backgrounds. My mother is a *shudra* [the fourth and lowest of the traditional social classes in India]; she has been waging a war against IIT [the Indian Institute of Technology], [so that they will accept] reservation.[2] She has openly gone to court and filed a case and has openly called herself an OBC [Other Backward Class], so I have nothing to hide. My father belongs to a more mixed background. His father comes from the *andipandaram* [a migrant community that belongs to the Scheduled Caste] which, according to the Ministry of Social Justice (another metaphor from the Indian State), is classified under "Nomadic Tribes." Nomadic Tribes, Semi-Nomadic Tribes, and the Denotified Tribes (or the so-called Criminal Tribes of the British colonial era) have all been flattened by the Ministry of Social Justice, and every state in India reserves the right to classify these tribes as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, or Most Backward Caste. It is not a straight[forward] classification at all. These people do not have a settled life; they do not come under the blanket of caste. All these nomadic tribes cannot be called *adivasi* [indigenous people in India], either, as they don't stay [in] one place; *adivasis* are settled in some place. There is a commission which said that the population of the nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu after independence was half a million, about 400,000 or so, a minority.

In Tamil Nadu, it so happens that this caste involves itself in begging, reading horoscopes, or some priestly work related to death and other things, [and] they are classified as the Most Backward Caste. In Kerala, these same *pandarams* are Dalits or Scheduled Castes. Another *pandaram* in Kerala comes under Scheduled Tribes. Those who know

Malayalam know that even today, "*pandaram*" is a very common caste slur. It literally means "beggar." It's used in conversation; I have heard even comrades use it without flinching. At times like that I hang my head in shame. The history of stigma envelopes the nomad.

These people have an interesting origin. They are originally Telugu speakers who migrated to Kerala via Tamil Nadu. Their history is interesting as they are not even related to one place. My father, I can say, is from Tanjore [a town in Tamil Nadu], but how long has he been there? The past one generation? The past two generations? Before that, where was he? Where were my ancestors? There is a complete dislocation. There is also [the issue of] the terms of alienation . . . not being in the same language in which you operate and also the history of caste. If you go back to Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, there are photographs of *andipandarams* begging for their livelihoods. For me it becomes very interesting to see how the community is classified today. So now, you decide whether this is Dalit or not. Again, in terms of development, you can say that there are no IAS [Indian Administrative Service] or IPS [Indian Police Service] officers, no politicians from my community. Also, what is special about this minority community is that it adopted the deaf, dumb, or the so-called handicapped of the land-owning caste-Hindu community and brought them up as their children. So even the caste purity didn't matter to them. It was a very heterogeneous group. For this reason, I think it is up to the people to decide what is right. You really know that this is an intensely marginalised community; there can be no two opinions about that. The question is whether they are Dalit or not. What exactly is Dalit? Is it merely the scheduled castes, or does it involve other marginalised sections, too?

Another interesting study would be that of the *narikkuravar* or the gypsy community of Tamil Nadu, who are classified not along with the Dalits but along with the Most Backward Castes. It's the same type of anomaly to call a tribe . . . a "caste." How can the nomad people be classified in the same lines as the *Kallar* or *Thevar* [two related castes of southern India]? There are many tribes [who], just by the virtue of their nomadic nature, are added to this [category].

I've been honest about what my dad's caste is, and what my mom's caste is. I come from a privileged background, but this is my background. I align myself with the Dalit struggle, I identify with it, but the whole question of my caste is something that other people have to decide. I can only perceive this truth and tell you what it is; I cannot go one step further in saying that this is the effective answer.

How would you trace the literary genre of autobiography as part of Dalit literary expression?

Kandasamy: I wish to address [at] the outset the left's critique of the Dalit autobiography. The strongest voice amidst this was the voice of Anand Teltumbde. He critiqued the Dalit autobiography by bringing forth the role of neoliberalism and markets in making the Dalit autobiography the default language of Dalit literature. The Dalit autobiography has become what the Indian middle-class consumer wants to read. As autobiographies, they are often criticized as the literature of compassion. Dalit autobiography has become the site where the middle class nurtures its sympathy.

Could you elaborate [on] the middle-class position in [the] Indian literary scene vis-à-vis Dalit literature?

Kandasamy: The middle class in India has something similar to "white guilt," [which] it overcomes [with] tokenisms. That is why it reads Vasant Moon's book, which provides an evocative incident in which he never got ghee, or saw it, until he was a teenager. They say, "Oh, I have read this book, and what a sorry state of affairs it is." But contradictory to what they say, the middle class are the first to oppose the reservation policy or bring in the idea of a "creamy layer" [a term used to refer to the relatively wealthier and better educated members of the Other Backward Class]. What I mean here is that they want Dalits to remain Dalits—they want them to remain impoverished, unhealthy, [and] oppressed so that it maintains their own status quo and allows them to offer their sympathies. Rarely do we see them celebrate Dalit resistance in the same way. Rarely do we see them consume a Dalit manifesto or war-cry in the same way. Technically and structurally, the autobiography

is the least political thing; that is why the middle class, to some extent, read[s] it. The middle class does not have a keen interest in the Dalit struggle, nor does it in the least want to recognise it as a struggle [that is] political in nature, at all. They are happy as long as it remains at the level of the individual chronicle.

Dalit histories are maligned and distorted. To quote B. R. Ambedkar, "If you want to destroy a society, destroy its history and the society will get destroyed automatically" (qtd. in Attri). What are your observations?

Kandasamy: Dalit histories are not taken or recorded. When the Dalit Panthers . . . started laying claims to the Dalit history of Tamil Nadu, . . . when they said that they wanted to go and commemorate the death of the many Dalits who had been martyred in Kilvenmani, the Marxists completely opposed it. The VCK cadres were actually beaten up. This did not happen long ago; just ten years or so has passed since this incident. This is the caste society that has pervaded for a long time, which has annihilated the history of the Dalits. It is important to write the lived stories of the Dalits into history, so tomorrow people cannot completely erase . . . their stories. The novel, by default, tells you that it is fiction; it tells you that it is not real, and yet it is based on reality. All political writing involves people at the grassroots. We live in a world where "literature," whatever it means in its purest sense, has become reserved for the drawing room chatter of middle-class intellectuals.

In your novel about the Kilvenmani massacre, The Gypsy Goddess *(2014), one of the chapters ends in cursing, thus: "Fuck these postmodern writers." Why do you say so? After all, you have resorted to the same postmodern techniques in your work.*

Kandasamy: I was meaning it in the most sarcastic, ironic manner. There is the whole game about the title, and it runs for about six pages or so. I'm playing with the idea of the title, and at the end of the rather elaborate exercise, I'm like, "I'm sorry to waste your time." In response to which the reader says, "Fuck these postmodern writers." That is supposed to be the response of the reader when s/he comes to know that s/he has been taken on a ride. That is why it has been italicised.

When it comes to writing, especially postmodernist writing, there is no apparent sentence structure. In some cases, the readers find it challenging even to comprehend. In traditional writing, the sentences are structured, running to a maximum length of one or two lines. We term it "sophisticated." Yet in The Gypsy Goddess, you have sentences that run a page long. Is that not sophistication?

Kandasamy: Why is that sophisticated? That's how people talk. For instance, if you set fire to a hut, that is how people would respond; they would speak breathlessly and tell you what happened. I don't think it is sophistication; it is the opposite of it. Sophistication is when you edit, when you make it a product for somebody else. Sophistication is a man in a suit with a BBC accent; it is a woman who sips her tea while she complains of the sun in her eyes and the bad service in the restaurant. Sophistication is not the enumeration of suffering or the anger of the people. These are raw.

I think the word "sophisticated" is not the word. I think the word that needs to be used is "complex." When I use sophistication, I mean it as a middle-class trait. I do not know what the word means for you. Coming to your question about that chapter in *The Gypsy Goddess*, it is literary writing; it is more advanced and complex, of course. But it is experimental. It goes against the conventional style of writing. For me, to use it as a kind of tool of writing, it is to explore the idea of long sentences which people would actually use while they are speaking.

Who are your favourite writers?

Kandasamy: Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, the poet Kamala Das—the usual suspects.

In your first collection of poetry Touch*, Kamala Das in her foreword . . . and showers praise on you. To quote her: "Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology of verse." What do you feel about her observation, and what does Kamala Das' writing mean to you?*

Kandasamy: I think it is a deeply humbling experience to hear that from her, a writer of such stature. Her writing is potent and beautiful, so when she says that, it is like she has given me a gift. Her writings are very influential as she was one of the first writers to put the body at the centre. In many ways she did not adhere to . . . society, was a very radical person—a fact I really like about her. Moreover, her writings tend to look at herself from completely outside of social mores, and in this way, poke fun at . . . society's hypocrisy. She is a very honest writer.

Are you a feminist? If so, could you define feminism? Kamala Das had said that she wasn't a feminist and, in fact, she never accepted the title. What is your take on this?

Kandasamy: Yes, I am a feminist. There are so many definitions. For me, feminism is in the fact that women and men are equal and that they should hence have the same rights. I will not compromise on this. If you care about society and want everybody to be equal, you cannot but accept this fact as natural. Regarding Madhavikutty's [Kamala Das'] stance, that was her choice; it is anybody's choice to accept a word or not to accept it.

Your poems are simultaneously blatant, awkward, militant, and radical. You speak and write everything in an unadorned and blunt way, like Kamala Das and many other confessional poets in the West. Do you consider yourself [to be] a confessional poet?

Kandasamy: I'm not sure I can call myself a confessional poet as the element of autobiography that comes into my writing is very limited; it's not a lot. There are a few of my poems that are confessional in nature.

Of the several poems that you have written, which are the ones that are dear to you?

Kandasamy: I like a lot of poems in *Ms. Militancy* and some of the poems which a lot of people like. For instance, . . . "Scewtiny" and "Once my silence held you spell-bound." The audiences love them, so because of that, [they] become all the more close to me.

Notes

1 Interview edited by the author with Kandasamy's permission; additional edits for clarity made by *ARIEL*. We also wish to thank Brigitte Clarke for her professional assistance.

2 Reservation is a measure of reserving seats in educational institutions and government jobs to favour the economically disadvantaged Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

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