

## Caste and Social Hierarchy in Meena Kandasamy's Select Poems

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### Abstract

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, writer and a social activist from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Kandasamy's poetry from her collection *Touch* explores and criticizes caste system and social hierarchy in India. She intertwines personal experiences and strong images to challenge the unfair treatment of lower-caste communities and the rigid social hierarchies through logical arguments. The present paper attempts to unearth Kandasamy's quest as a social reformer and a dissatisfied Indian with the caste hierarchies to topple down the caste and power structures. The age-old caste system and the marginalization of people have cursed the society, hampering its development. The poet touches upon the issues of untouchability that still prevails in Indian social psyche. Kandasamy's poetry vocalizes her role as a social activist who questions the Brahmanical social structure that fights for equality. Her poetry becomes a powerful tool to reform society.

**Keywords:** caste, caste system, social hierarchy.

**Introduction:** Meena Kandasamy is a well-known Indian poet, novelist, and activist who is known for her writings on issues of caste, gender, and social injustice in India. Her writings explore how people face and resist oppression. It showcases her strong commitment to social change. In her collection of poems *Touch* (2006), Kandasamy examines the deep inequalities and violence caused by the caste system. She also brings to attention the struggles of the marginalized. Her satiric and emotional language amplifies the issues of caste system in Indian society. Her later work, *Ms. Militancy* (2010), continues this exploration, adding themes of feminism and resistance. This collection configures her experience with political messages to challenge the age-old unfair social norms. Kandasamy has received several awards for her impactful work, including the prestigious Herman Kesten Award (2022). Her poetry and activism drive important interrogations about caste and social justice. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, vocalizes his views on the rigidities of caste in India, "Castes are so distributed that in any given area there is one caste which is major and there are others which are small and are subservient to the major caste owing to their comparative smallness and their economic dependence upon the major caste which owns most of the land in the village." (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 167)

### Illustration:

Poetry is one of the most powerful tools to propagate the ideas and nurture them in the society or the wider reading class. Meena Kandasamy, a sensitive female poet from Tamil Nadu upholds the notion of untouchability and proliferates the same through her poetry. Her poems are short, like snippets from an album, each brings forth a different pang of the poet. For her poetry becomes a powerful tool to express her brisk attack on

the age-old caste system that prevails for centuries in India. She uses poetry as stronger tool to educate the masses in India on compartmentalization of castes and the successive impacts of the caste system. In one of her interviews Meena Kandasamy propounds the crux of her poetry, not in prose, but through a poem that is self-explanatory about her passion-her poetry which is her identity:

“My Poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears,  
My poetry screams in anger, My poetry writhes  
In pain. My poetry smell of blood, my poetry  
salutes sacrifices. My poetry speaks like my  
people, my poetry speaks for my people”. (SWM, 2011)

Kandasamy’s poem “Touch” vocalizes the age-old caste system in India attacking the concept of untouchability in the Brahmanical society. Touch is both a forbidden desire and a painful reminder of caste oppression. The caste system enforce restrictions that suggest physical connection burdened with cultural and historical baggage. Meena’s reference to “undeserving hate” points the systematic injustices that strip away humanity based on their caste identity. In past touch conveyed hate for the untouchables, but now, the parametres have reversed as touch conveys the hate by the untouchables for the savarnas. Ultimately, she pens down her insights in lines that leave a lasting impression:

“Touch”  
But, you will never have known  
that, touch—the taboo  
to your transcendence,  
when crystalized in caste  
was a paraphernalia of  
undeserving hate. (Line 36-41)

In “Becoming a Brahmin” Kandasamy sarcastically provides an algorithm for converting a *Shudra* into a *Brahmin*. The poem offers a sarcastic take on the rigid and illogical structure of caste system in India. The instruction of steps resemble a process that dehumanizes both-the *Brahmin* and the *Shudra*. She uses clique to represent the absurdity of the caste system, where social status is determined by birth and inner-caste relations are severely subjugated. The ironic sets continue to undermine the patriarchal authority and folly notion of purity attached to the Brahmin caste:

“Becoming a Brahmin”

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.  
Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.  
Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.  
Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.  
Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.  
Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin. (Line 3-8)

This small stanza not only explicates the idea of the poet to eradicate caste system in the country, but gives the idea of exploding the age-old caste system. Further, the poet critiques the stiff and hierarchical caste system, stressing unsurely to conversion of an outcast into the upper caste. The use of term “algorithm” suggests a rigid approach to change social status that vary with root and historical rigid system of caste. It highlights the irrational traditional system which pinpointthesocietal norms and injustice of castediscrimination. The poet showcases how society forces lower caste people to change their caste into upper caste which gives them security and prestige in society. “Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin” (Line 12) In fact, the poet provides a solution to reform the society by making it casteless. Subsequently, she questions the society whether India should await another Father of Nation to reform India. Indians needed Mahatma Gandhi to free India from the British rule-the colonial power. Likewise, do Indian need another Father of Nation to free the nation from caste system? Kandasamy is anticipating a new hope of casteless society, “Awaiting another Father of the Nation/ to produce this algorithm.” (Line 13-14)

Kandasamy sounds as a social reformer and an activist who not only approves the supremacy of the upper caste, but she satirizes the compartmentalization of the same. In India, no doubt, the upper castes relish their supremacy for generations in oppressing the lower castes. Kandasamy opines that the upper castes in the country should now allow the lower castes to live their lives with dignity, without any interference. In modern times, where the world is becoming a village, the upper castes should allow the lower castes to live with their rights. The poem, “Dignity” vocalizes her plea for dignity:

We will even let you wallow  
in the rare happiness  
that hierarchy provides.  
But, don't suppress  
our rightful share of dignity. (Line 14-18)

Kandasamy'spoem“Ekalaivan” unearths the story of a peripheral character from *The Mahabharata*, wherein a lower caste boy is excluded from accessing traditional education by Dronacharya,the upper caste teacher. Consequently, as Ekalaivan learns archery on his own by constructing a statue of Dronacharya. Therefore, Dronacharya demands to forfeit his right thumb. This showcases that the upper caste and educated never allow the lower castes to upgrade themselves. The poem expresses the anger not only of the poet, but also of the lower caste that has been oppressed for centuries to explode the caste system by triggering a bullet or hurling a bomb. Though the poem is very short, it talks volumes of meaning. The poet states that the Ekalaivan who are taken away their right thumb, can explode the system by using their left hand. Hardly two lines explode the myth of Ekalaivan and the helplessness of the lower caste that has been complaining about the loss of the right thumb. The poet advocates that the industrious and talented Ekalaivan in the present times should use the alternatives:

“Ekalaivan”  
You don't need your right thumb,  
To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb. (Line 7-8)

As a social activist Meena attempts to search for certain solutions to eradicate the age-old caste system in India. From her perspective, love-marriage is one of the best suitable solution to resolve caste system. In love marriages castes are wiped off. Love marriages topple down the established social hierarchies of class and caste. In her short poem “Last love letter” she advocates how passionate love resists caste system and facilitate to establish a casteless society. She also knows that love marriages bring death and honour-killing. But, they facilitate in toppling down the caste system in India:

. . . Our passionate love,  
Once transcended caste. (Line 1-2)

Her poem “Maariamamma” chronicles the poet’s ideas about the pomp of the upper caste. She critiques how all compliments are associated with the upper caste. The upper caste exhibits that their girls are pure, virgins and goddesslike. In reality they are not so. Meena knows that these girls from the upper caste are much exploited by their fathers in their parochial normative society. These girls never enter the slums. The poet asks Maariamamma why she has stopped visiting the slums. Doubtfully, she asks whether she has joined their gang? In this allegation, the poet calls the upper caste as ‘gang’ who thieve away several rights of the lower caste, exploit and ravish them. It seems that Maariamamma is a girl from the lower caste who has been exploited by the upper caste, she may be a keep, who becomes a temporal member of the upper caste. The poem brings to light three categories—the upper caste, the lower caste and the bridging caste—the caste of Maariamamma, who being a young and beautiful female used by the upper caste. The poet addresses the upper caste as ‘roosters and goats’ who symbolize sexual machos who are ready to perform sexual acts with any female. Maariamamma is a prey of these who distances from her own caste.

Kandasamy explodes the image ‘Mahatma’ in her poem, “Mohandas Karamchand” bringing Gandhi down from his pedestal of ‘the Father of Nation’. It is Gandhi who labled the untouchables as ‘Harijans’- the people of the God. According to Meena, this lable itself made the lower caste more significant in the casteist society. Entire nation respect and worship Gandhi but the poet attacks Gandhi being a “gone half-cuckoo” which means a person who had no complete idea about the outcasts. The poem begins with a repetitive question “Who? Who? Who?” amplifies her anguish against the Mahatma. Gandhi led the nation to get freedom from the British rule but he failed in making his nation free from caste system. She satirizes Gandhi for expelling the untouchables with a goody-goody name-*Harijans*. Kandasamy mocks as she writes ‘Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo’ which means she is bidding adieu to ‘Hey Ram’ the last words by Gandhi. The last word in the same line, ‘boo’ underscores the poet’s utter hatred towards the glorified ‘Hey Ram’ that has been ruling millions of minds, books and ideologies. The word explodes the glorified image of Gandhi.

“Mohandas Karamchand”  
Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,  
You dubbed us pariahs—“Harijans”  
goody-goody guys of a bigot god

Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo. (Line 12-15)

The poet expresses her utter hate for the casteist structure of Indian society and the glorification of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. She expresses how caste is a fixity. It fixes a person like a specimen fixed in a pan for dissection. The upper class dissects a person from the lower caste as they never allow him/her to forget the caste. For a member of lower caste the stigma of untouchability haunts like a ghost that can neither be seen and nor be evaded. The members of the upper caste always insult, pinch and mock the untouchables. Meena pens down:

Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.  
It haunts us now, the way you do  
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two. (Line 25-27)

Similarly, she goes to extreme of comparing caste to a disease emphasizing its destructive nature of the disease that spreads pain and suffering without any expectations for compassion. She reinforces the idea that caste is devoid of humanity, mechanically enforcing suffering and oppression. Meena exposes the tragic irony of how devotion—often associated with spirituality and reverence—lead to the fatal acceptance of caste oppression. She critiques the societal norms that perpetuate the idea that Dalits must endure sufferings as part of their duty or devotion, consequently normalizing their plight. Dalits spend their lives in devoting for others. Upper caste towers like gods wherein the Dalits spend their lives without being treated by the upper caste. Being a Dalit is like a deadly disease, emotionless and dry that pushes a person to death. In her poem, “Prayers” she states how it is a tradition that Dalits die carelessly:

“Prayers”  
Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll  
Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion. (Line 21-22)

Additionally, Meena expresses of the anger and pain caused by casteism and societal indifference in her poem “Shame” that serves as a scathing critique of a society that allows such injustices to persist. She criticizes how the fourth pillar of democracy—the press is so indifferent with the brutal rape of a Dalit girl. The gruesome injustice against a girl is carelessly captioned in the newspapers. The name, the trauma and the psychopathology of the victim is neglected. Both the upper class and the press are criminals here who should be ashamed of their crime. The press shields the identity of the upper caste criminals by making a blanket statement about the outcaste community:

“Shame”  
But, the criminals have  
already mainstreamed—  
Their Caste is a classic shield.  
“Dalit Girl Raped”  
is much too commonplace. (Line 7-11)

Kandasamy explores the complicated concept of justice in Hindu society divided by caste. The poem “Justice is. . .” about the unending possibilities of the meaning of Justice. The title is open ended, and, therefore, it is suggestive of any possibility. For the Dalits, justice is injustice. The poem brings several heavy words from Dharma that asserts justice, integrity, veracity, righteousness and legitimacy. These words are used for writing and they are never used in practice. The poem echoes George Orwell’s quote, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal.” In India where caste is the identity, the Dharma and the justice are with the upper caste, obviously. She writes:

“Justice is. . .”  
 Dharma they say means  
 Justice, Integrity, Veracity,  
 Righteousness and Legitimacy.  
 Almost enough meaning for a word. (Line 9-12)

Finally, Meena seems to be grappling with the constraints of societal expectations, particularly those related to family lineage, caste, and the pressure to conform to traditional norms of marriage and family. Also suggests a sense of frustration and desperation, as the speaker feels trapped by these societal expectations. According to her caste system is insanity. Overall, Meena appears to be a personal and philosophical in projecting her experiences, inviting the reader to consider the complexities of identity and the search for meaning in a society governed by rigid societal norms. Caste decides the fate, career, marriage, life and children. Kandasamy writes how caste is deeply rooted in Indian psyche:

This insanity deludes you as you fret and fume over  
 descent—pedigree—wretched caste, and above all proper  
 marriages and the legitimate sons  
 and then it all comes to you (Line 23-26)

**Conclusion:** Kandasamy’s collection of poetry *Touch* is a sharp appraisal of casteism and the ever bleeding wound of being a lower caste. It is said that Ashwathama, a mythological figure from *The Mahabharata* is cursed with an ever fresh wound in the forehead. Similarly, in India, the outcastes and the Dalits are always subjugated due to their societal status. The upper caste has always been exploiting them. The social hierarchy, the power structure and the cultural norms are governed by the upper caste by pushing the lower castes in the peripheries. Caste is like the skin, identity and blood of a person. As an activist or a social reformer she propagates that love marriages or explosion of the casteist by the oppressed can be the solutions to solve the age-old problem.

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