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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 39: Meena Kandasamy

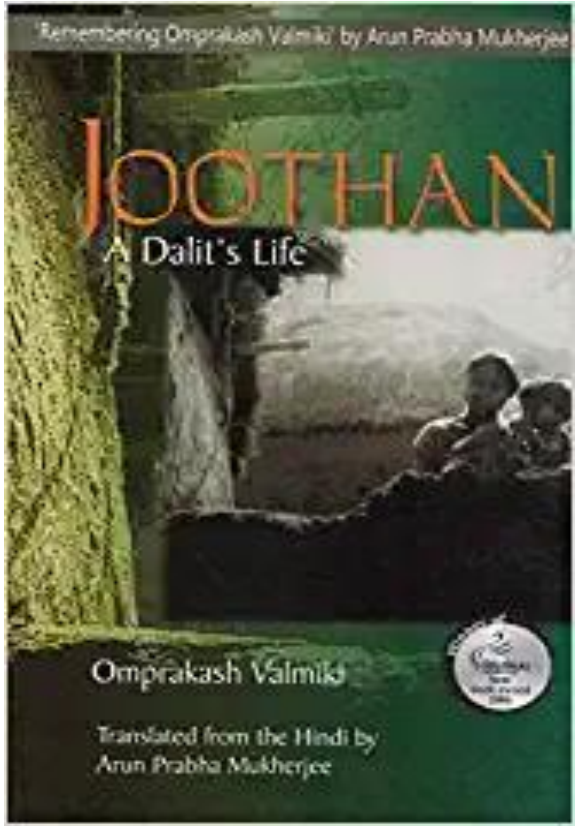
BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Dalit Literature

- Dalit writings emerged in 1960s, talks about the lives of Dalit.
- Traces the discrimination and atrocities which Dalit community faced.
- Explores the social reality of our society.
- Includes ideological insights of Ambedkar.
- Delineates Dalit consciousness
- Dalit literature spread across languages like, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi, and English.



Contd…..

- Women have been victimized in the patriarchal and caste-based society on a greater level.
- Women writers like, Bama, Babytai Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Sujatha Gidla, Meena Kandasamy, and others are writing for the ‘voiceless’ women of Dalit community.

“Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in Dalit literary conferences and institutions.” - Gopal Guru

Meena(Ilaveni) Kandasamy

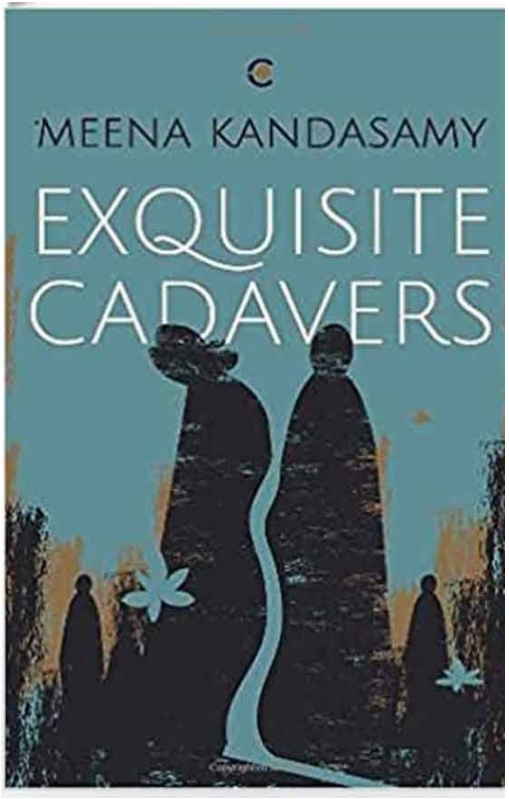
- Born in 1984 in Chennai, Tamilnadu,India.
- A Ph.D in Socio-linguistics.
- Writer-in- residence at the university of Iowa's International Writing programme in 2009
- Charles Wallace India trust fellow at the University of Kent in 2011.
- Novelist, poet, translator, academician, journalist, and activist
- Translated many books of Dalit writers into English.
- A prominent voice of Dalit writings.
- Also an actor who was visible in the Malayalam film, *Oraalppokkam.*
- Writes against the systematic subjugation of women.



Contd…..

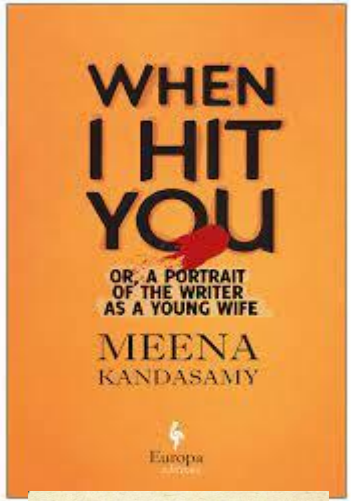
- Hailed as the first Indian Dalit poet writing in English.
- She edited *The Dalit*, a bimonthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network.
- She writes her “womanness, Tamilness and low/ outcasteness”.

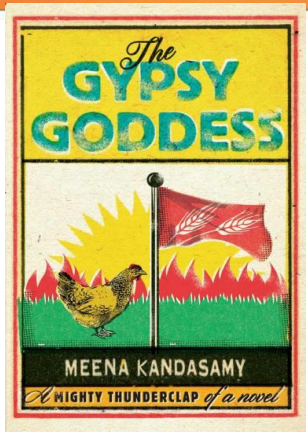
She says, “…… my gender, language and castelessness were not anything that I had to be ashamed of… I wrote poetry very well aware of who I was. But I was also sure of how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be taken on my own terms… I wanted to be totally bare and intensely exposed to the world through my writings. I wanted it to be my rebellion against the world.”



Kandasamy's Literary Corpus

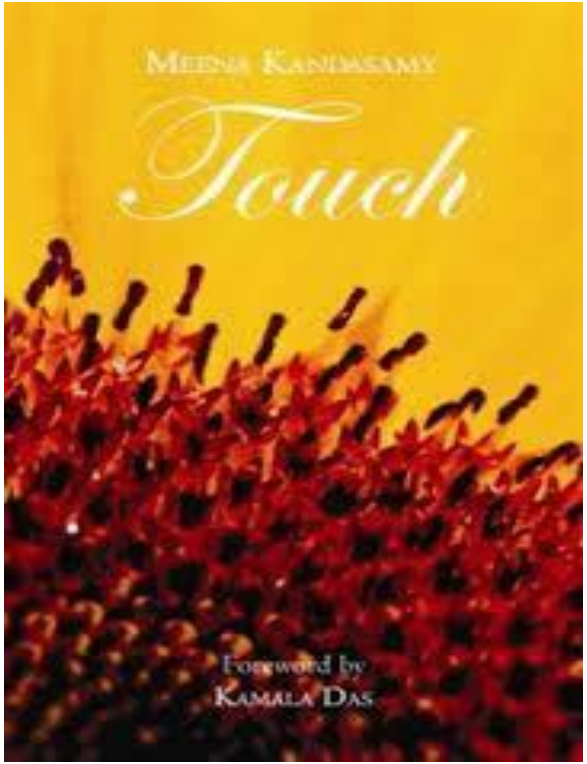
- Poetry Collection
  - *Touch* (2006)
  - *Ms. Militancy* (2010)
  - *We Are Not The Citizens* (2018)
- Novels
  - *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014)
  - *When I Hit You* (2018)
  - *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019)





Touch (2006)

- Her first poetic collection, having 84 poems.
- Divided into seven sections, namely *Bring him to worship you*, *Touch, Add some spice*, *To that more congenial spot*, *Lines of control*, *Slander is a slaughterhouse*, *Their daughters*.
- Critiques the male-dominated social framework.
- Addresses the question of women's identity.
- Delineates celebration of love and demand for gender equality.



“ Touch”

You will have known almost
Every knowledgeable thing about
The charms and temptations
That touch could hold.
But, you will never have known
That touch– the taboo
To your transcendence,
When crystallized in caste
Was a paraphernalia of
Undeserving hate. (“ Touch”,32-41)

“ The poet in me will not exist without the activist in me.. .writing lets me be an activist.” (Kandasamy)

General Themes of Her Poems

- Voice of the ‘voiceless’
- Marginalization of a major section of society
- Dalit consciousness
- Voice of resistance
- Depiction of Dalit women in her writings
- Caste and gender issue
- Women’s liberation
- Love is an essential element of her poems.

But, when they come to see you
For a possible bride, look at the floor
The fading carpet and the unshapely toes
Of the visitors who will inspect the weight
Of your gold, the paleness of your complexion
The length of your hair and ask questions about
The degrees you hold and the transparency of your past.
(*Touch*, 127)

“Maariamma”

We understand
why upper caste Gods
and their ‘good-girl’ much-married, father-fucked,
virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses
borne in their golden chariots
don’t come to our streets.

We know the reasons for their non-entry into slums.
Actually, our poverty would soil their hears
and our labor corrupt their souls.

But Maariamma,
when you are still getting
those roosters and goats,
why have you stopped coming to our doors?

Maari, our girl,
since when did you join their gang?

“Mohandas Karamchand”
(written after reading Sylvia Plath’s Daddy)

“Generations to come will scarcely
believe that such a one as this walked
the earth in flesh and blood.”
—Albert Einstein

Who? Who? Who?
Mahatma. Sorry no.
Truth. Non-violence.
Stop it. Enough taboo.
That trash is long overdue.
You need a thorough review.
Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds
We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe.
Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,
You dubbed us pariahs—“Harijans”
goody-goody guys of a bigot god
Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo.

Don’t ever act like a holy saint.
we can see through you, impure you.
Remember, how you dealt with your poor wife.
But, they wrote your books, they made your life.
They stuffed you up, the imposter true.
And sew you up—filled you with virtue
and gave you all that glossy deeds
enough reason we still lick you.
You knew, you bloody well knew,
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.
But they killed you, the naked you,
your blood with mud was gooey goo.
Sadist fool, you killed your body
many times before this too.
Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.

“Advaita: The Ultimate Question”

Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.

Contd…

Will You
Ever Agree?
No Matter
What You
Preach Answer
Me. Through
Your Saints.
One More
Final Question
Can My
Untouchable Atman
And Your
Brahmin Atman
Ever Be
One
?

“Dead Woman Walking” (from Ms. Militancy)

I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors,
with faltering step, with felted, flying hair,
with hollowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes,
with welts on my wrists, with creasing skin,
with seizures of speech and song, with a single story
between my sobbing, pendulous breasts.

once I was a wife: beautiful,
married to a merchant: shifty-eyed.
living the life, until he was lost in listless doubt—
of how, what I gave him was more delicious
than whatever, whatever had been given to me.

Contd….

his mathematics could never explain
the magic of my multiplying love—this miracle—
like materializing mangoes out of thin air,
like dishing out what was never there.

this discrepancy drove him away:
a new job in another city.
he hitched himself to a fresh and formless wife.
of course, as all women do, I found out.

I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to god.

Contd…

I sang in praise of dancing dervishes, I made music

for this world to devour on some dejected day.

I shed my beauty, I sacrificed my six senses.

some called me mad, some called me mother

but all of them led me here,

to this land of the living-dead.

From
www.PoemHunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

“ThisPoemWillProvokeYou”

This poem is not a Hindu.
This poem is eager to offend.
This poem is shallow and distorted.
This poem is a non-serious representation of Hinduism.
This poem is a haphazard presentation.
This poem is riddled.
This poem is a heresy.
This poem is a factual inaccuracy.
This poem has missionary zeal.
This poem has a hidden agenda.
This poem denigrates Hindus.

Contd....

This poem shows them in poor light.
This poem concentrates on the negative aspects of Hinduism.
This poem concentrates on the evil practices of Hinduism.
This poem asserts its moral right to use objectionable words for Gods.
This poem celebrates Krishna's freedom to perch on a naked woman.
This poem flames with the fires of a woman hungry of sex.
This poem supplies sexual connotations.
This poem puts the phallus back into the picture.
This poem makes the shiva lingam the male sexual organ.
This poem does not make the above-mentioned organ erect.
This poem prides itself in its perverse mindset.
This poem shows malice to Hinduism for Untouchability and misogyny.
This poem declares the absence of a Hindu canon.
This poem declares itself the Hindu canon.
This poem follows the monkey.
This poem worships the horse.
This poem supersedes the Vedas and the supreme scriptures.

Contd.....

This poem does not culture the jungle.
This poem jungles the culture.
This poem storms into temples with tanks.
This poem stands corrected: the RSS is BJP's mother.
This poem is not vulnerable.
This poem is Section 153-A proof.
This poem is also idiot-proof.
This poem quotes Dr.Ambedkar.
This poem considers Ramayana a hetero-normative novel.
This poem breaches Section 295A of the Indian Penile Code.
This poem is pure and total blasphemy.
This poem is a voyeur.
This poem gossips about the sex between Sita and Laxman.
This poem is a witness to the rape of Shurpanaka.
This poem smears Rama for his suspicious mind.
This poem was once forced into suttee.

Contd....

This poem is now taking her revenge.
This poem is addicted to eating beef.
This poem knows the castes of all the thirty-three million Hindu Gods.
This poem got court summons for switching the castes of Gods.
This poem once dated Karna who was sure he was no test-tube baby.
This poem is not curious about who-was-the-father.
This poem is horizontally flipped.
This poem is a plagiarised version.
This poem is selectively chosen.
This poem is running paternity tests on Hindutva.
This poem saw Godse (of the RSS) kill Gandhi.
This poem is not afraid of being imprisoned.
This poem does not comply to client demands.
This poem is pornographic.
This poem will not tender an unconditional apology.
This poem will not be Penguined.
This poem will not be pulped.

“Another Paradise Lost”

…I was Nahusa the Great.
My subjects were happy, the kingdom prosperous.
And I ruled for twelve thousand years, until the day

when I decided that I could take leave of life. In
heaven too, I was venerated. But one question had
plagued me all the years of my long life, and it still
tormented me in heaven. I wanted to know why

caste was there, why people suffered because of
their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned
sages there. I asked them what would happen if an
high-born did manual work just like the low-born.

I worried about the division of labor, this disparity
in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel
pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. I had a riotous
history of revolution. The Gods plotted against me,

decided that I was trouble. I was cursed to turn into
a vile snake. I was banished from paradise. For sixty
million years, I shall roam the earth, and then I may
return.” This was a different case of the paradise lost.

In this tale, there was no forbidden fruit, no second
fickle-minded woman. Tradition triumphed over reason
and the good were cast away. I let the serpent go,
happy that he had given my hungry mind a story, or

perhaps, a poem to be written on unfair days. I began
to respect snakes — the challengers of hierarchy.
While I gave him the freedom of safe passage
I vowed never to kill serpents. Much later

I realized brutally that this was just another
occupational hazard for choosing a life
where I was to be showing solidarity
with activists and dissenters.

Retelling Ramayana

…picked herself a random man
For that first night of fervour
This one was all hands and
All heads and he spoke only
In whispers.

By the time she left
This stranger's lap
She had learnt
All about love.
First to last (" Random Access Man")

" My poetry is naked, my poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice, my poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people."
(Kandasami)

On Love

Love, I will promise you a substitute.
I could be that piece of holy camphor
So safely locked away from prying hands.
And dearest, when I burn for you, that single time
Nothing shall remain of me, or of you, except that flash
Of memory. Our blending shall be so sublime, so intense, so total.

Come, consume me,
Devastate me love, if you ever will,
But with a force that I will forever remember. ("Frenzied Light")

As a Poet

- Examines Indian tradition of domination of one particular community.
- Deconstructs Indian myth and religions to find the real cause of discrimination against Dalit community. For instance, in her poem *Ekalaivan*, she critiques Dronacharya for his casteist approach towards Eklavya.
- Also examines the plight of women in our society.

To make her yours and yours alone,
You pushed her deeper into harems
Where she could see the sunlight
Only from the lattice windows.
Domesticated into drudgery she was just
Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave
Who maintained your numbers.
(*Touch*, 112)

Contd…

- Delineation of caste-based discrimination dominates her poetry.
- Critiques Gandhi for naming Dalits as *Harijans*.
- Presents a counter narrative to the discourse of upper caste people.
- Always presents her strong voice against the casteist mindset.

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin/ Begin.

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./ End.
(*Becoming a Brahmin*, from *Touch, 42*)

Conclusion

- A champion of subaltern voice in Indian English Writing.
- Presents an alternative discourse of identity politics and gender equality.
- Kamla Das says about her,

> Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive. "Happiness is a hollow world for fools to inhabit" cries Meena at a moment of revelation. Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips.

Ours is a silence /that waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it
any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions
end in our bemoaning the tragedy.

Sometimes,/ the outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode.

Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.
(*Aggression*)

Thank You

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- ------- , *Ms. Militancy*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2010

- Singh, Rajni. “ Meena Kandasami: The Poet Activist”, *Poetcrit*, Vol. 29, 2016, pp.03-10