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BREAKING THE TABOOS AND ESTABLISHING THE IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT THROUGH SELECT POEMS OF MEENA KANDASAMY

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“My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on a stranger’s lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs. They belittle kings. They take on the sun. They take after me”

- In preface to *Ms. Militancy*, Meena Kandasamy

Meena Kandasamy born as Illavenil Kandasamy is a young and rebellious Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist. She stands in line of poets who chose to break the taboos of women’s role in the Indian cultural context and gives a new identity to them. Her works concentrate on caste discrimination, gender oppression, sexuality, marital violence and linguistic identity. Meena Kandasamy’s novels include *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017).

The poet’s speakers are all “angry and militant”, fierce and exuberant that she visions a society where women no longer sacrifice their dreams and identity for other’s cause. Her poetry collections *Touch*(2006) and *Ms. Militancy*(2007), in a fierce manner express the caste and gender bias that her poems are not just works empathizing with the oppressed state of the victims but focuses on their empowerment granting them a just identity. This paper throws light on five poems of Meena Kandasamy from the anthology *Ms. Militancy*. In the poems *Dead Women Walking*, *Princess in Exile*, *Hymns of a Hag*, *Mascara* and *Ms. Miitancy*, the poet demythifies the female characters from Tamil classics and portrays them as the revolutionaries and militants of the patriarchal society.

Dead Women Walking expresses the emotional and mental torments experienced by married women in the patriarchal society. They are bound to the customs and rituals that women lead a life at a cost of their identity. Meena Kandasamy, provocative of this concept, demystifies Karaikal Ammaiyar, who was abandoned by her husband and led a deadly life. In this poem, Ammaiyar takes the role of Dalit women who are thrice suppressed by the male chauvinist society. The speaker confesses:

“I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors,
With faltering step, with felted, flying hair” Kandasamy1-2)

Karaikal Ammaiyar, was a great devotee of Lord Shiva, but her husband failed to understand the intense love that Ammaiyar had towards him and considered her to be a mystic. The poet echoes Ammaiyar’s voice as,

“His mathematics could never explain
The magic of my multiplying love” (Kandasamy 12-13)

Ammaiyar was abandoned by her husband that his love for her dissipated and found expression in a “fresh and formless wife” (Kandasamy21). Like everybody, unable to shout the injustice inflicted upon her, Ammaiyar busted into tears. The following lines not only pour down the emotions of Karaikkal Ammaiyar but also draw parallels to the poet’s unhappy married life:

“I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to God” (Kandasamy20)

The words “wept- wailed- walked- went” strongly express the dejection and alienation faced by the speaker. Ammaiyar shed her beauty and sacrificed her senses. People considered her mad for her foolish choice of old age over youth; some praised and called her “mother”, but in the end, the patriarchal world led her to the asylum corridors of “living-dead”.

Having no particular rhyme scheme or metre, Meena Kandasamy makes it clear for the readers to understand the identity crisis of married dalit woman through this poem. Women are considered dead when forsaken by their husbands and are imprisoned in their homes when they choose to live rest of their life in exploring their identity. Meena Kandasamy wants to break this taboo of women being considered as be-all and end-all of marriage life and desires for a society that supports women in achieving their dreams.

Princess in Exile demythifies the character of Sita from the epic *Ramayana*. When the society blamed Sita for not having paid heed to Lord Ram’s and Lakshman’s words, the poet appreciates Sita for crossing the lines and discovering the strangeness of the forest that lay before her. Sita walked-out when her chastity was questioned and when deserted by Lord Ram,

“she sought refuge in spirituality” (Kandasamy1)

Under the shadow of sage Valmiki, Sita brought up her children that years after when Ram made efforts to win her back, she denied him. This act of Sita showcases women’s quest for identity to lead a peaceful life, where she needn’t depend on others to protect and save her from the demons because by then “she had perfected the vanishing act” (Kandasamy6)

Like Sita, Meena Kandasamy wants women not to follow all the rules laid by the patriarchal society. Her varied perspective on mythical characters meets the need of present day women to cross the borders of discrimination, seek their identity and fight against inequality. *Hymns of a Hag* draws the attention of the male chauvinist society by giving women the role of a witch who wishes to drink the blood of men and cast dark spells upon them by flying high on her broomstick. The hag can be looked upon as the poet’s revolutionary woman who wishes to unbend the suppressed souls by handing them a knife, at least an axe, to murder the “Haunting oppressors”. Looking them bleed, the hag dances and rejoices. This attitude portrayed shows how lost and anguished the hag feels that she takes pleasure in seeing men suffer. Meena Kandasamy’s new woman leaves a farewell note and rings a warning bell to those who mute her identity as “Judgment day is long since due” (Kandasamy16)

Putting an end to the image given to women in the Indian society, the hag is least bothered about people who call her by curse words and escapes the bars to unveil her individuality.

Mascara portrays the pathos of a prostitute that it makes one to empathize with her since a prostitute’s act is personified as death in this poem. The poet writes,

“The last thing that she does
Before she gets ready to die
Once more, of violation,
She applies the mascara” (Kandasamy1-4)

The poet dwells into the soul of the lost woman who came as a successor of “an untraceable, mangled, matrilineal family tree of temple prostitutes”. Her eye-catching eyes invite everybody but the dyed eyes “mourn her body’s sins”; her mascara reminds her that dreams of a virgin soul have dark lines.

“Silently she cries
Her tears are black
Like her” (Kandasamy18-20)

The poet resurrects the lost identity of the speaker telling “Cosmetics once were war paints” and so her Mascara lady will no longer be trodden upon by men. She identifies herself proudly with the warrior Goddess Kali who wears a ferocious appearance to avenge her destroyers.

“When she dons the Mascara
The Heavens have heard her whispers
Kali, you wear this too...” (Kandasamy55-57)

Meena Kandasamy makes it crystal clear that the devadasis did not choose to live such a life but it was the society which gave them this position. Her association of Kali with the Mascara lady gives a new

identity to the latter and re-imposes the fact that like Kali she must be rebellious and powerful in destroying the evil spirits and strongly establish her identity.

Ms.Militancy, the title poem of the volume, demythifies Kannaki from *Silapathikaram*. Kannaki was so loyal and devoted to her husband Kovalan, but he betrayed her by finding his interests towards the dance-mistress Madhavi. Still Kannaki accepted him on his return and gave him her ruby anklet. Though this displays the male dominance, the rage that she shows at Kovalan's death is revolutionary. Initially Kannaki is projected as a timid, submissive and a passive typical Indian wife of patriarchal society who felt insecure and dead when Kovalan abandoned her.

"She thought she was dying, ants-crawled

Under flaking skin" (Kandasamy 1-2)

When the Pandiyan King beheaded Kovalan without question, Meena Kandasamy looks upon Kannaki as a great militant who chose to rise and fight against the injustice inflicted upon her by burning down the entire city to ashes.

"-----Ms.Militancy bayed for more blood

Vending vengeance, she made a bomb

Of her left breast and blew up the blasted city" (Kandasamy20-22)

Kannaki thus creates an identity for her through her militant act. The poet dreams of such women who should battle against the impediments that deter them from reaching great heights.

Bussey's Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Identity Development can be applied to the above cited poems of Meena Kandasamy. It states that personal, behavioral and environmental components intersect when an individual decides to associate them with gender. Bussey mentioned that culture and time have a significant effect on individuals' decisions to explore non-conforming identities. This theory can be helpful in determining different depths of a person's gender identity by recognizing that a person can identify personally separately from how they express themselves socially. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy's militant speakers fight for their identities that are silenced by the society in the name of culture, caste and gender, to meet the needs of the hour. So the poet demythifies women characters from Tamil classics who were perfect victims of patriarchal society and brings them to this age with renewed vigour to establish them as successful persona in society. This concept encourages women to be fierce and revolutionary in spirit and seek their identity even when obstacles and hindrances come by their way by breaking the taboos in the Indian culture.

Works cited

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