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ANALYSING THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S *THE GYPSY GODDESS*

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**Abstract:**

The debut novel of Meena Kandasamy, *The Gypsy Goddess* is a convoluted, non-linear, digressional, and 'postmodern' fictional narrative based on the bloody massacre of 1968 in the Kilvenmani village which is located in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. The use of local phrases; ironic, satirical and unabashed crude language similar to that of Namdeo Dhasal; fragmented phrases for creating a visual impact; breaking the fourth wall to address the audience directly; digressions to not only place the story in a specific temporal and spatial coordinate but also to present the Dalit atrocities to people has been at the centre of this work of fiction. Additionally, the use of language is done by her to rewrite the history as people know it through employing both official and unofficial narratives of history in her work. Interestingly, it is often claimed that "marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions" (Yudianto 4). When we take this argument further, we understand that how they question the structures of power depends on the effective utilization of language. Thus this paper will analyze how Meena Kandasamy uses language to cater to her

purpose and if she succeeds in this endeavor.

**Keywords:** Language, Dalit Literature, Neo-historicism.

It is often claimed that "marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions" (Resa Yudianto 2012). The validity of this argument cannot be devoid of the fact that to question the structures of power, one is dependent on the effective utilization of language. What if you are not a conventional storyteller? What if all you have is the 'truth'? What if your disparate, fragmented, and crude world lacks evidence, coherence, and power? Will you still attain justice in the court of law? Can you attain justice outside the court of law? *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) by Meena Kandasamy is an attempt to grapple with these questions.

According to James Kidd, Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* is "...a novel of self-conscious experimentalism and unmistakable fury" which "throws down a gauntlet to conservative literary and political sensibilities, especially in India"

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(James Kidd 2014). There are glaring postmodern<sup>1</sup> traits which are employed by her. Nevertheless, they do not seem enough to categorise the novel as postmodern. Kandasamy herself rejects this label. “[Most] people are tired of history...” and hence the author claims to be “...constrained to try a new way to chart and plot [her] way past their boredom” (16). Similarly, it cannot be solely confined to the canon of Dalit Literature or Communist Literature or even Trauma Literature even though it borrows some parts of them. The form of the novel escapes all structures though the language techniques and the literary forms utilised by Kandasamy mark the evolution in Dalit Literature of which *The Gypsy Goddess* is an integral part.

The novel takes from a 1968 massacre that happened in Kilvenmani, Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu where forty two plus two (silent) dalit men, women, and children were locked in a hut and burnt alive by *mirasdars* or upper-caste landlords of Irinjiyur on protesting for higher wages.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Featherstone defines postmodernism as “the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface, depthlessness “of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer and the assumption that art can only be repetitious” (Mike Featherstone 1988 203).

*The Hindu* calls Kilvenmani as the protagonist of this “un-exotic book [having] an unusual structure.” (Hirsh Sawhney *The Guardian*) As she writes her debut novel, the poet, Meena Kandasamy resurrects the Author who had died according to Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup>. She employs multifarious techniques to make her and her novel’s presence felt.

“*Subversion lies at the core of her artistic declaration of intentions*” (Dolores Herrero 73)

The title of this work is based on a localised myth of the story of the Gypsy Goddess, *Kurathi Amman*, who is created out of the massacre of seven (or seventeen) women along with their children. It is a tale of violence, death, and injustice. According to the myth, unless the village repents over the unjust deaths it will continue to suffer indiscriminately. The author remarks on the title that “... [in] this author-arranged marriage-without-divorce, [the title and the novel] will stay together” (25) even without a direct connection between them. It resonates with the coexistence of both the official and the unofficial histories as presented to the readers through the novel who themselves occupy a converged liminal space between the inside of the novel and the outside. Though the author declines the possibility of a deeper connection between the title and the narrative of the novel, they do uphold the

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes’ *Death of the Author* talks about the absence of the authorial voice in works of fiction following the postmodern literary phase.

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value of poetic justice which forms the bedrock of both the author's intention while writing the novel as well as the myth of the Gypsy Goddess.

The novel has three parts, 'Breeding Ground', 'Battleground' and 'Burial Ground' that have symbolic meanings where the first part lays the background of the narrative, the second one deals explicitly with the ongoing battle between the oppressor and the oppressed, and the last part puts all the curiosity of the reader as well as the narrative to rest. Different chapters take different literary forms like the novel commences with a letter by the head of the Paddy Producers' Association, a communist pamphlet features in between, a prisoner's declaration is also utilised to portray the individual story which paves way for the novel to use trauma narrative, official reports find a mention in the novel to ascertain 'authenticity' and, an imaginary interview occurs in the work where Kandasamy asks questions by herself and answers them for the reader. Journalistic Epilogue is written to make the world of the novel coincide with the real world. Thus, "when Kandasamy deploys her pen — or indeed her keyboard, and her passion, her anger, her rage at the ease with which the villagers were blamed for what happened to them [...] she turns the very notion of what makes a novel on its head" (Urvashi Butalia 2014).

*"... this is a rural novel and it is considered a sign of insolence in Tamil culture to throw your weight around"(31)*

Primarily, the novel has sporadic use of local phrases which place the work in a specific spatial and cultural context as the author herself acknowledges using *Taminglish* (21) instead of English. "All of fiction's artefacts used in this novel – lining, holing, filling, mixing, planting, staking, topping, weeding, watering, manuring, threshing, winnowing— are borrowed from a peasant's paradise" (19). Predominantly, an agrarian village, Kilvenmani is built through its agrarian metaphors, proverbs, and myths. Proverbs used by characters like, "...the crow who attempted to walk like a swan never managed to mimic its grace, instead he lost even his natural gait" (113), or "[you] see, even if the hen knows it is day, it is the cock that must crow" (114), or "...in flesh and blood" (103) provide a local flavour. The myth of the "notorious, anklet-wearing vampire" (90) which Maayi's husband tames or "the tax-free lands that local kings showered on the Brahmins" (105) help Kandasamy attain realistic traits for the world of her novel. Sometimes Kandasamy provides translations to the reader, for example when she writes, "...a *thodanadungi*, a Tamil insult [with]...its literal translation: a man-with twitching-thighs" (57) or , "our *thalaivar*, our village headman" (78), or "kallukkaasu, a regular ration for drinking arrack" (40); but most of the times the readers are left unguided. Phrases like "white *banian*, white *vehti*"(69) which are used to describe the attire of the old man in Gopalkrishna Naidu's house, or phrases like "can-you-do-

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it *panrengala? panna mudiyuma?*” (79), *“ingadhaan”, “satthiya vaakku”, “enneramum ithe pechuthaan”, “ayyo ayyayyo”*, *“avan summa pesikita irupaan”* and *“bandobust”* (84) are all left untranslated. This untranslated language symbolises both the untranslatable sorrow of the people of Kilvenmani in addition to the exclusionary world of these people which Kandasamy makes the readers peep into while they stand on the outside of this locale.

*“My language is dark and dangerous and desperate,/ In its eagerness to slaughter your myths” (Meena Kandasamy 2010)*

The language of the novel weaves a world like that of Namdeo Dhasal’s which is “a loathsome and nauseating universe” (Dilip Chitre 11). The work talks about how the people of Kilvenmani bear the agony of the massacre where in one such incident, a survivor, Periyaan’s distress is accounted. “...[In] the nights, when [Periyaan] was drunk on arrack, he would begin to scream. Gopalakrishna Naidu, come here and get fucked....The screaming went on, all night long. Come here. Get fucked. Come here. Get fucked” (99). Kandasamy calls herself a “crazy bitch” (35) for trying to steal poetry which is “...fucked up by flattery and falsehood” (15) into this novel. Regardless of her warning herself, her poetry stealthily grows like weeds in the landscape of the novel. According to her, “...women cross all hurdles, talk in circles, burst into tears, break into cheers, teach a few others, take new lovers, become earth mothers,...” (35)

and hence are at the centre of protests while the man who is at the centre of power in the novel, Gopalakrishna Naidu is called a “ruthless fucker” (80). She writes, “Fuck these postmodern writers”(27) while herself employing some of their literary forms as the last chapter is highly fragmented lacking any continuity which echoes in the work as well.

*“Riddled with self-doubt, I stopped trying to make my story fit into this [read Postmodernist] form” (Kandasamy 33)*

But then why does she write in a postmodern, fragmentary, disjointed, and self-reflexive manner?

Answer- In the face of mounting amnesia, there is an urgent need to consciously establish meaningful connections with the past. Postmodernist fiction is part of this memory project. Its innovative forms and techniques critique the notion of history as grand narrative, and it calls attention to the complexity of memory. (Anne Whitehead 82)

Hence, *The Gypsy Goddess* also has traces of a Memory text which tries to bridge the gap of almost half a century, thereby occupying an interstitial space of both being within and without the two temporal frames of 1968 and 2014. As a Memory text it evokes numerous intrusive and uncomfortable questions. In the chapter titled “Seasons of Violence”, the author conducts an imaginary interview of herself with the critics. Kandasamy raises both metaphorical and literal questions to her

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readers throughout her work. Towards the end when the people of Kilvenmani feel dejected by Communists as well, they cry, “Was this our sacrifice for staying with the red flag? Why were our people in jails when it was us who had died? Were they running a state or a slaughterhouse?” (103) The use of questions as a postmodern technique is to awaken the passive readers and make them think and question about the happenings of the world they inhabit as “[this] is not the time to be a spectator....Comrades, let us never forget that the future will only contain what we put into it now!” (46) She ironically claims this novel not to be postmodern but the work is fragmented, non-linear in spatial and temporal aspects, self-reflexive, and non-conventional in every way possible.

*“This is utterly useless information at present, but it might come in handy at a later date. Try and remember this” (54)*

The novel draws on, what in theatrical register is termed as, the ‘Brechtian effect’ which signifies the breaking of the fourth wall to address the audience directly. There is a perceived dialogue between the author and the readers which is captured when the author consoles the readers “...that to make up for the form being frivolous, the subject shall be serious” (18), or when she asks them to keep her posted as the captions have to be written (37), or when she provides for the background music for visualizing Gopalkrishna Naidu walking from his car (29), or even when she asks “the nail biting reader” to join “the nervous author in

elaborating the rest of the story” (51) as she understands that hers is “no ordinary reader” but the one “who rights the wrongs...[and] fills in the blanks...” (120). She establishes this notion of her readers through questioning them first, thereby making them think for themselves. She questions her readers so that they commence to think of this world of Kilvenmani and feel included while at the same time making them feel like an outcaste by doubting their loyalties. “Who knows who you work for, to whom you owe allegiance?” (123)

*“... to make up these monologues-dialogues-speeches-soliloquies on demand causes great discomfort to me as a writer...” (56)*

The meta-fictional element drawn on by the author resonates with breaking of the fourth wall. As the reader stands aware of being in the hands of a “devious author” who is working towards “disorienting the reader” (48), they would question more. Intertextual references to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and contemporary spaces of Twitter, Face book, Democracy Now, Wikipedia, and Google Maps are stated which situate the reader in the contemporary time, away from the backdrop of this work of fiction. Consequently, when the author shall claim that “[the] beginning is meant to disappoint and devalue the great importance placed on grand entrances” (15), or refuse to narrate the story linearly introducing Maayi towards the middle of the novel (51), the readers shall question, “ what happened

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to the rules of a novel?" which according to Kandasamy, "are hanging on [her] clothesline over there"(62). The 'over there' is yet again left ambiguous and undefined for the reader to imagine for themselves in this labyrinth of convoluted narrative.

*"We display the novel through a series of rushed frames"(51)*

The fragmentary form of writing finds its reference in the official list of the forty two burnt bodies and the mention of two (silent) cases of *habeas corpus* who elude the official list. Their descriptions are impersonally and factually recorded where the policemen find it difficult to form the death certificates of the unrecognizable charred bodies.

Sharankumar Limbale claims that Dalit literature does not have a subjective tone or an individual voice. It is always collective. (Sharankumar Limbale 2004). There is a visible shift in how Meena Kandasamy views Dalit Literature. As the introduction to this paper mentions, Kandasamy breaks the conventional norms associated with Dalit Literature by breaking each one of them and presenting to her readers, a Neo-Dalit Literature, a label which she would escape from yet again by providing a counter argument to it. Thus, in opposition to the official listing is the individual trauma of the survivors as recorded by Kandasamy in the penultimate chapter titled "A Survivor Guide". She makes a shift from the distant collective to the personalised collection of individuals,

the official to the personal, the moment of destruction to the story of survival and healing; and helps us understand the coexistence of the two or the inevitable and necessary succession of one after the other.

Moreover, the novel plays with the first, second, and third person narratives and does not constrict to the collective 'we' as observed in:

1. "I was the first to come and tell everybody..." (74)
2. "It was a suffering that *we* had never undergone so far" (52).
3. "...now that *you* have swallowed the pulp, you can leave the peel intact" (52).
4. "Sundaram [...] complained of how *she* had to go and plead to Ramanuja Naidu..." (56)
5. "And then *they* shared more stories" (56).

Contrary to this formal and fragmented language is a form utilised in the chapter titled "Mischief by Fire" where a two page long narrative of the massacre is hurled in one long sentence that lacks pauses about which Dolores Herrero observes that the "...distorted grammar is a laudable attempt to pay respect to the incommensurable anguish experienced by those traumatized survivors..." (Herrero 79) which Kandasamy does with the help of a continuous account of the massacre by employing a technique used in novels dealing with the theme of trauma where they utilise the dichotomy of the silence or fragmentation as to coexist with the continued and uninterrupted memory of the gory past as it is also a means of healing and dealing with the enormous effect that

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the trauma or the massacre causes to the people where on the one hand their speech is disoriented and fragmentary while on the other hand there is a need to vomit the traumatic experience out through verbatim to which Kandasamy claims that “[perhaps the judge] wanted a single story [such as the] ‘Once upon a time there lived an old lady in a tiny village’ story [but]...[the people of Kilvenmani as well as the author] are not able to tell such a story [as a] story told in many voices is seen as unreliable” (110) which Kandasamy contests through her novel ironically.

*“...facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events” (Linda Hutcheon 57)*

The Bakhtinian ‘heteroglossia’ is employed by the writer when she provides the reader with multiple voices like the voices of Gopakrishna Naidu, Maayi, Ramalingam, or the author herself to name a few. This ‘heteroglossia’ then create a binary of the “we” versus the “them” or the “oppressed” versus the “oppressor”. Aniket Jaaware states that “the non-dalits [manage] to eat the dalit, without ever really having to eat with the dalit” (Aniket Jaaware 281). Where the people of Kilvenmani are devoured by fire and the ones who are left to mourn are imprisoned on charges of killing a *mirasdar* named Pakkirisami Pillai, “...the landlords, with blood on their hands, walk the streets with their heads held high” (116). The last chapter is an exemplar of this duality where both the official and

unofficial histories and stories of the landlords and dalit peasants of Kilvenmani are provided to bring to the fore the inhumane reality of the massacre stemming from the landlords’ malicious avarice for power, land, and capital.

The author mentions the old American newspapers having headlines about the Kilvenmani massacre as an act of “Rural Terrorism” (18). She mentions the various labour strikes in different mills which result in no better conditions. The pressing issue of unemployment is also taken up by her where there are no jobs in 2014 Tamil Nadu due to closing down of mills, non-payment of salaries of teaching and non-teaching staff including the food distributors of Mid-Day Meal Scheme thereby stepping into a vicious cycle of malnutrition, unemployment, lack of resources, dwindling economy, and rising inequality (44). There is a direct attack on the DMK which was the ruling party of the times. One cannot simply dismiss this novel as apolitical. It is consciously socio-political. The novel takes the statistics of land acquisitions in Tamil Nadu through a World Bank report according to which sixty percent of the land lies with the top five percent of people (43-4). In consonance with this is the recent 2019 report of ‘Oxfam International’<sup>3</sup> which claims that India’s top ten percent of the richest people

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam International is a Non-Profit Organisation, a global movement of people to address the issue of inequality in the world.

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own country's eighty percent wealth (Oxford Inequality Report 2019). According to the recent Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019, Unemployment in India is at a forty five year high standing at 6.1% hence proving not much has changed since 1968. "The more things change, the more they remain the same"(19). Even the Commission of Inquiry on Agrarian Labour Problems of East Tanjore District that is set up to investigate the massacre of 1968 fades out surreptitiously. " We forgot the commission and the commission forgot us" (110). A censure motion is also defeated in the Parliament which was to address the killings in Kilvenmani. Thus, ironically it is the 'Epilogue' which talks about the official history of Tanjore that Kandasamy believes the readers to know. She bridges the binary of the 'official' and 'unofficial' here as she explores the lacunae to reach to the 'real truth' which she finds to be pluralistic, contradictory and unpalatable for many but yet necessary to be presented to the public.

*She "render(s) silenced Dalits audible and visible" (Herrero 71)*

*The Gypsy Goddess* then is an attempt to change things, "to fill in the blanks" (19) through 'reporting' of the massacre of 1968 as history. " It is not a history that is available in the police records or the newspapers... But it is a history that we must learn, a history that will set us free, a history that we can harvest"(42). Kandasamy understands the importance of official history as it is what reaches the

masses and holds 'authenticity' which a fiction novel might fail at. Thus by attempting to write this novel, Kandasamy tries to place the private histories and unadulterated truths in the official records. This history is to be found in Ramalingam's witness account of how dalits were beaten, burnt by a mob and then accused of killing an upper caste man, Pillai. Ramalingam's wish to provide his witness account to the police opens up a space of agency for him which is crucial because when official voices are all corrupt and manipulative, the oppressed have to stand up and speak no matter how fragmented, coarse, or foreign their tongue might be. Therefore we see that the penultimate chapter has disparate stories of the different people of Kilvenmani and how they deal or are unable to deal with the trauma. There is Maayi (the Old Woman), Arumugam's daughter who commits suicide swooning over the death of her fellow classmates, Muni whose entire family was massacred or Periyaan who drinks and abuses Naidu as he is unable to face the reality but all collectively defy the oppression imposed on them.

The "act of defiance" is also shown by the dead bodies of those forty two plus two (silent) dalit men, women and children who refuse to burn due to a dearth in firewood. "Inspector Rajavel is angry with the disobedient, stubborn corpses" (86). This protest is in continuation to the one by the agricultural labourers of Kilvenmani who demanded an increase in their wages.



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After the massacre, when the surviving people in Kilvenmani are put behind bars for killing Pakkirisami Pillai, they say, "...[we] did not want [Court's] justice" (118). Thus this defiance of the need for attainment of 'justice' as official law recognises is also in consonance with the chain of events that lead to the murder of Gopalkrishna Naidu in the Epilogue, or the myth of the Gypsy Goddess being actualised, and with the author herself whose writing *The Gypsy Goddess* is an act of defiance and protest in itself.

Thus Kandasamy makes the unofficial and personal stories of these people into official, written, and documented facts thereby creating post-truth<sup>4</sup> and neo-history<sup>5</sup>. Meena Kandasamy is successful in utilising language as a tool to till new thoughts into the mind of the readers by seeding curiosity, individuality and a glocal<sup>6</sup> approach moving towards reality. The harvesting minds of the readers then would be able to understand the gory truth that "... handfuls of rice can consume half a village" (22) but more importantly that the village of Kilvenmani is still ablaze whose fire can only be doused by using water which everyone can touch, feel and drink.

<sup>4</sup> Post-Truth is a phenomenon where emphasis is given on personal accounts of an incident and not much on the factual or official records that are available for it.

<sup>5</sup> Neo-history refers to a renewed and alternate historical account.

<sup>6</sup> Glocal refers to the local elements found in the globalised world thereby helping people connect to their roots in an era of globalisation.

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