

Masculinity, Caste and Gender: An Intersectional Feminist Reading of Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract

The facets of repressions or resistance have been a perpetual confrontation in the structures drawn by social and cultural hierarchies and this is primarily due to the intervention of Patriarchy. Being the controlling ascendancy, compounded discrimination of womankind is often, drawn by Male members of the society. The text taken for study, "The Gypsy Goddess", by Meena Kandasamy is set against the backdrop of the 1968, Kilvenmani massacre in Tamilnadu. This meta narrative unveils the caste-based hierarchies where patriarchy predominantly converges to disseminate violence against Dalit community women. By employing the lens of Intersectionality, the study analyses the multiple operations of hegemony in tandem. Besides, this paper also probes into the concept of Hegemonic masculinity that legitimizes male dominance not only over women, but also on oppressed 'other' men. The text examines the entanglement of patriarchy, gender, and caste through the lens of Structural Intersectionality (Crenshaw) and Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell).

The oeuvre articulates how felonies of the hegemonic class can be shrunk to demeanors, even after public incinerations and mass killings. In conjunction with, basing the narrative on the inevitable tapestry of social and cultural infusion, Kandasamy silhouettes the resilience and fortitude of Dalit farmers, especially the women peasants who set off to fight back any oddity. Behind the multifarious factors of oppression which in turn depoliticize the carnage of forty-four lives, there 'lies' cultural control. The cultural marginalization thus shapes societal attitudes. With limited or no access to mobility, economic resources and education, there are yet, many caste-based snares under culture and society, exercised by patriarchy. Consequently, the text articulates a clarinet call of history repeating itself which is detailed in the analysis. Nevertheless, the narration emphasizes the action for change by dint of the portrayal of female fraternity.

Keywords: Caste, Culture, Dalit, Feminism, Hegemony, Intersectionality, Masculinity.

Introduction

Since times immemorial, the biological dichotomy of masculinity and femininity exist whereas the inception of patriarchy in the social system is undated. Many centuries back, women hold equal power in the kingdoms, poets' assembly, warfare, domesticity and ministry. The history of chess,

which evolved in the sixth century A.D, conveys the supremacy of the all-powerful queen. Besides, recounting of history and literature, reveals the inevitable Counsels of poetess like Avvaiyar in the poets ‘assembly, and in combat, the valour of Veeramangai Velunachiyar of Tamilnadutells the accounts of brave and brainy women ever lived. However, History shows an inverse proportion of women when compared to the male counterparts which indicates that from pre historic times to till date, androcentric bias is being practised. “Charlotte Perkins Gilman coined the term androcentrism in her book *The Man-Made World or Androcentric Culture* published in 1911. She identified the concept of masculinity being perceived as the normal or standard, and femininity being perceived as outside of the norm or even deviant”.(<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/women-s-studies-and-feminism/androcentrism>) Besides, the pivotal role played by women in the aforesaid areas, there usurped a heist in history on the experiential role of women and this lacuna is unable to be articulated in verbal exactitude. Thus, the facets of repressions or resistance have been a perpetual confrontation in the structures drawn by social and cultural hierarchies and it is no exaggeration that this is primarily due to the intervention of patriarchy. Eventually, in the process of seeking choice of freedom in many aspects, women’s voice was perpetually muffled and their long pending targets were being pulverised and there by the concept of patriarchy, perhaps become the central element to feminist thought and the feminist movement. Feminist theories and practice reverberate the repressions and muffled voices of the female for an expansive period and consistently upended the labels associated with women, like ‘feminine’, ‘silent’, ‘docile’, etc. Feminist thoughts emerged in the 18th century and had grown through various waves and with many metamorphoses. Feminism as a movement have reached Fourth wave feminism. Feminism is historically categorized into four waves:

- First wave: Focuses on women’s right to vote
- Second wave: Promotes women’s liberation
- Third wave: Speaks about diversity and intersectionality
- Fourth wave: Seeks to empower women utilizing digital media.<https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>

Having its ‘theoretical’ rudiments from the West, Feminism worked as a single frame axis supporting all the women. However, in the long run, not all the advocacies of the singular feminism seem supporting ‘wholly’ all the women in the world. The inception of intersectionality theory and practice repelled from the single axis or already existing feminisms. One of the key thinkers, Kimberley Crenshaw, an American Civil rights advocate and a scholar of Critical Race Theory witnessed how the law responds to the issues that excluded a group of women attributing to their race. She probes into how Black race women are not inclusive in the hands of legal system. Crenshaw asserts the theory of Intersection pertaining to the feature that is resonated by the great writer George Orwell, in his *Animal Farm*. “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”(112 Orwell). Prof. Crenshaw probes into the anti-discrimination laws and the judicial systems that attempt discrimination and are biased in terms of the intersecting factor of a women belonging to a Black race. Thus, Crenshaw and other key thinkers of the theory articulates that compound discrimination arises for a woman of colour, not only under laws and penal codes, but also other realms like education, employment, and social institutions like marriage, etc. Thus, the various forms of inequality often operated together brought in the concept of intersectionality and it advocates that marginalised categories do not get reflected in the main stream feminism. Thus emerged the theory of Intersectionality and Intersectional feminism. Some of the key thinkers of Intersectionality are Patricia Hills Collins, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua and Alice Walker.

Research Problem

The paper aims to articulate the voice of intersecting discriminations in South Asian fiction which is reverberated in the Black Feminists ‘theory of Intersectional Feminism.

Review of Literature

Black women have long described the multiple oppressions they face, using terms such as “interlocking oppressions,” “double jeopardy,” and “triple jeopardy”. The concept of intersectionality has been adopted across the social sciences to help understand how people hold multiple subject positions and how these relate to social cleavages. The following texts catalogues the myriad subjugations that turn into compounded discrimination of womankind which appear obstinately deep-seated under the legal, social and cultural rungs. *Women, Race and Class* (1981) by Angela Davis, *Sister Outsider* (1984) by Audre Lorde, *Intersectionality* (2016), by Patricia Hills, *Ain’t I a woman?* (1981) by Bell Hooks, *Critical Race Theory* (1995) by Kimberley Crenshaw, *Combahee River statement*, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Next Wave: New Directions in Women’s Studies) (2018) Jennifer. C. Nash and so on.

South Asian Writings and Intersectional Feminism

The concept of intersectionality is prevalently seen in many South Asian novels especially by women writers in the past two decades. The intersection of various factors like domestic violence, deprivation in education, communal violence, caste discrimination, minority issues, disability, sexuality, etc are widely twined with gender (here, women). Thus, the concept of intersectionality is a parallel existence in South Asian countries which is ultimately voiced out in many literary texts. Novels and poems penned in English and translations of regional texts into English echo the existence and need to explore the intersectionality in the region. In South Asian countries India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh, the issues like caste, community, race, class and nation are potentially tangible. Along with patriarchal dominance within, issue like caste, race, religion, nation, ethnicity overlaps to produce double or triple marginalisation. Patriarchy as a hegemony factor is an embedded in the social, political and economic system. Incepting from domesticity, hegemony elevates up to social stratifications. Thus, the polarised gender called female/woman is vulnerable under the masculine hegemony and intersections of hegemonic contexts. The literary narrative taken for study facilitate the understanding of the Intersectionality of gender and caste and the operation of masculine hegemony towards the daily waged peasants, especially women peasants. According to Chakravarti (2018), Dalit assertion was deeply influenced by the radical Black Panther Movement and drawing from the experience of cultural oppression, the Dalit Panther movement of the western India has foregrounded the caste question (135) And Dalit feminists formulated the position of three-way oppression of Dalit women.

- as subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes.
- as labourers subject to the class- based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and middle castes who form the bulk of landowners;
- as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (135, Chakravarty)

The Gypsy Goddess, by Meena Kandasamy

“The gods in these lands outnumber the people. The demons in these lands outperform Satan”. (28 Kandasamy). In her debut novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, Meena Kandasamy ropes in the readers to comprehend the fusing of masculine hegemony glued with ‘gendering caste’ (Chakravarty). Basically, emerging from Black Feminism in which women and her articulations of rights and Liberty disappeared from history, movements, social space and domesticity, it is no exaggeration that many literary texts (similar to history), have deliberately unclipped numerous sheets of history. The text taken for study deftly speaks the plight of a community of Dalit agricultural labourers who live and work in inhuman conditions. The novel has bagged ample approbations for the forcefully penned theme on the Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968, Nagapattinam (then, Tanjore District). The ruthless, inhuman carnage was already recorded as novels, stories, movies and short documentaries. The Tamil movie *Kan Sivandhal Man Sivakkum* (1983) directed by Sridhar Rajan

was inspired by the nation award winning Tamil novel, *Kuruthi Punal* (1977) by Indra Parthasarathy. Nevertheless, the authenticity of giving “an experience’ (though not a witness of first-hand information) over ‘speculation’ (coined by Limbale) is profound and substantial in the brazen attempt of Kandasamy.

Approach/Methodology

The analysis of the text is taken under the lens of Intersectional Feminism, precisely the application of Structural Intersectionality. Also, the text is analysed with the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity, throwing light on other divisions of masculine hegemonies as found in the reading.

Structural intersectionality is used to describe how different structures work together and create a complex structure which highlights the differences in the experiences of women of color with domestic violence and rape. Structural intersectionality is a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw that describes how multiple forms of inequality can compound and create obstacles for people.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been used in gender studies since the early 1980s. Gender activists have used the concept to inform interventions to change men’s relations with women. Hegemonic masculinity is part of R. W. Connell’s gender order theory, which recognizes multiple masculinities that vary across time, society, culture, and the individual. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalized ways of being a man.

In the given text, Intersection of Dalit (caste), Poor peasants (Occupation) and Woman (Gender) intersects as multiple levels of oppression. On the other hand, hegemonic masculinity is exercised by the landlords towards subordinate masculinity and the women peasants as well.

Analysis

Meena Kandasamy’s oeuvre, *The Gypsy Goddess* metaphorizes the land, Nagapattinam (and Kilvenmani) as ‘she’ and the ground is personified as a woman of resilience and repression suggesting the oppression of hegemonic hands to the defenceless rungs in the social strata. Attributing the qualities of women to Nagapattinam or Kilvenmani, the novel is structured metaphorically as a ground/soil and it is compartmentalised into four divisions namely, “The Background, The Breeding Ground, The Battle ground and The Burial Ground”. Evidently in the introductory remarks, Kandasamy accentuates that the work is purely recording the cruelties and indifferences thrust on the poor farmers, i.e. dalit agricultural workers and eventually set ablaze on a broad day light at Ramayya’s hut, and the how the carnage was politicised and later forgotten for many years. “Just because this is a novel set-in rural India, do not expect a herd of buffalo to walk across every page for the sake of authenticity. (26 Kandasamy). The word ‘perpetrator’ is too thin a word to the antagonist, Gopala Krishna Naidu, the head of Paddy Producers Association and a land lord belonging as a member of the then Congress Party. Backed up by historical evidences collected meticulously from the members who witnessed and the vestige population that remained after the massacre, the novel is highly a reality with little fiction. The orientation of the Dalit peasants towards Communism and their demand for higher wages had infuriated many land lords, especially, the land lord Gopala Krishnan Naidu. Infliction of unmentionable cruelties like “feeding Saanippal”, ripping the clothes of the women farmers, pummeling both men and women farmers to get away from communism and to beat black blue for demanding increase in their wages are recorded by the uncompromising pen of the author. Kandasamy parodies the western imitations in her style and thus provokes the readers into a native affinity. “Tamil in taste, English on the tongue, free of all poetry and prosody dished out in a dandy prose. (11 Kandasamy).

Hegemonic masculinity operates at two levels throughout the text. The male, dalit farmers were brutally attacked, and some were reported as missing and some were assumed to have run away from the village and these subordinate or marginalised masculine characters were thus tortured under Hegemonic masculinities, i.e. rich landlords. Simultaneously this hegemonic masculinity threw their rough hands to rip the saris

of poor, women farmers, to force saanipaal to their dried tongues, and to cease the daily wage of “one measure of rice”. Not only from the clutches of the caste baits, but also the polemical approach and power of policemen left them in dire dreariness and felt that every kind of protest was impeded to proceed further (in the initial stages). “On 14, April 1965, untouchables around Keevalur district dismantled a temple chariot in a protest.Sannasi, suspected master mind of this protest, was abducted the next day, and his body turned up two weeks later in Karaikkal. Police have closed the case as a mysterious death” (35). In spite of the grisly atmosphere and daily miseries, with the backup of communism in their mind, the ‘oppressed’ people started many agitations and campaigns and hardly knew that they are harbingers of a sad state of their upcoming days. On the other hand, they were ready to face any kind of opposition and anger, but did not want to wither their resolution on their objectives. Many such events ignited hatred and the already existing ill treatments became severe on them.

The Kalappal Agreement was the first landmark victory in our struggle. As the working people rallied around the Communists, the landlords were forced to strike a compromise. This deal fixed the daily wage at two measures of paddy and opened the door to an increase in the harvest wages. Today this agreement is famous because it was the first to put an end to the cruel practice of whipping and the forceful feeding of saanippaalto labourers as punishment. (87 Kandasamy)

Owing to much resilience and too much fortitude, the Dalit farmers, especially the Dalit women farmers became stoic to fight back any oddity. When women take to protest, there is no looking back” (75 Kandasamy). To add flame, the police system too inclined to controls and influential circle. “The landlords punish these shrill voiced women by stripping them almost naked and tying them to trees and whipping them in front of the whole village. The police punish them by making them kneel and walk a few miles on their knees until they have no choice but to crawl. But nothing breaks them. They are bold beyond the bruised skin and the bleeding knee”. (76 Kandasamy)

This happens in the history to a Dalit woman by and large, just because she is a woman, and a woman under lower rungs of caste. The following extract of BBC news 2021, reports a similar sequence of actions when a Dalit woman is attacked or raped.

The aftermath of the recent rape and murder of a woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, allegedly by upper caste men, played out the way it usually does when a Dalit woman is attacked: police are slow to register a complaint; investigations are tardy; officials raise doubts there was a rape; there are insinuations it had nothing to do with caste; and authorities appear, perhaps, to be complicit in siding with the upper caste perpetrators of violence. Even some of the media, from newsrooms dominated by upper caste journalists, question why sexual violence should be linked to caste. (Biswas)

COFEM (Coalition of Feminists for Social change) blog records a survey as follows

Out of 200 million Dalits in India, 50% are women who disproportionately suffer from caste oppression and GBV. National Crime Record Bureau reported that every day at least ten Dalit women are subjected to rape in India. Additionally, between 2009 and 2019, the incidences of rape of Dalit women increased at a disturbingly high rate of almost 159%. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg – the majority of these cases are underreported for numerous reasons, including social stigma, political pressure, fear of retaliation, and the prevalent culture of impunity, especially when the perpetrator belongs to a ‘dominant’, oppressor caste.

The demands of the oppressed farmers are not sky high and their minimal demands for livelihood infuriates the paddy land lords who have bent the bones of these poor peasants and ill-treated them just out of ‘motiveless malignity’ devoid of gender. The exploited team did not claim authority or greater heights but a means of source for their everyday food. Don’t they have every right to claim for their food putting so much work in the field from day to night? Kandasamy evinces that there is no literal clock they follow to do their work in the fields. They start to the paddy field even before the sun rises and comes home at the last ray of the day. “The elders of Kilvenmani are clear about certain things: we are not asking for the land. We

are not asking for homes. We are asking for work because we need food. We are asking for food, for our six measures of paddy, because we are going hungry- because what we have, what we are getting paid, is not enough for our stomachs. We may die of starvation but until our demand is met, we are not giving up the strike". (113 Kandasamy).

Discussion

Under failing political support, biased police force and legal system, the helpless farmers take a refuge and continue their protest under the roof of the comrade Ramayya. The documentary entitled "Ramayavinkudisai" expresses the agonies and cruelties underwent by the peasants under the subjugating predator Gopalakrishna Naidu and other land lords. In this short film, Mr. Pazhanivelu re-counts his first-hand narration of the burgeoning problem they met one by one. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBOooa4-orc>).

The toxic masculinity of the landlord/s towards the poor peasants was not biased yet when the victim is a woman, there were many mysteries which the author says she cannot pen them on a paper. In another chapter of 'Breeding Ground', many women in a row, (Sundaram, Muniyan's wife, Thangamma, Paapa, a heavily pregnant woman, Letchumi et al) unveil the way they were harassed. (116-117) Muniyan's wife Thangamma records how her pregnant sister was pummelled by a gang of twenty armed men, possibly working for Gopalakrishna Naidu. Pattu was more worried about the victims' sad state of affairs after being beaten up and thrashed and lashed. Even the general practitioner had treated the injured men with turmeric (117). Rasathi of Velankanni committed suicide by drinking Polydol for she was afraid and ashamed of all the evil that would further bring upon her people. "Rasathiof Velankanni had been attacked by a landlord, and the elders of her caste had decreed that he must seek apology and bear her medical expenses, but the landlords had taken offence and crippled them through social boycotts and 200 men came in six tractors to rampage through the cheri and two days later Rasathi committed suicide...." (117 Kandasamy). One of the singular characterisations of the text is that exponentially each and every character met is pivotal and significant and there are no chief protagonist or protagonists except for few antagonists. Sharmila Rege's article, "Brahmanical Nature of Violence against Women" in the book "Dalit Feminist Theory, A Reader", says that in the case of lower caste women, the labour outside their family is crucial for the survival and it leads to stringent controls on their labour mobility and sexuality and "this renders them 'impure' or lacking in virtue. In several instance the rape of Dalit women may not be considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper- caste men have had to Dalit Women's sexuality." (111 Arya and Aakash Sing Rathore).

The author has a cynical look on the vindictive villain, as "was he not suggesting something when he said that crabs, like concubines, must be tasted on the sly?" (141). Before meeting the landlord for any authenticity, she understood from sources that he was a philanderer. One villager described Gopalakrishna's house as being dark as a harlot's den of passion..." (143). Another woman "claimed that there are five ponds around Naidu's home.... Pallars and paraiyars and other lowered castes are not allowed to walk past the street where he lives." (144). Meena Kandasamy puts her inference in two ways and depict the wickedness of the landlord.

Observation: He seldom smiles in the middle of the work, but when he does, his rice white teeth shine.

Direct Interference: He does not chew tobacco or betel-nut like any other vulgarly rich landlord-villain, who licks the corners of his mouth to titillate women. Indirect Inference: He wants to present a clean image. (144-145 Kandasamy)

Thus, the author projects the chameleon colouration of the villain who heralds the root cause of Kilvenmani massacre.

Of the forty-four fully burnt and half - burnt corpse, 21 were identified as woman by the police Rajavelu (151- 156) which include girl infants or children. Few bodies were identified as "sex unidentifiable" (154).

The trauma after the incident killed each kith and kin of the region slowly. Day by day. “Karuppai’s memory seized him at a weak moment and drove him to take away the only life he had” (206). Maayi went too traumatic that cloth gave her aversion and she tore of every cloth that veiled her and they kept waiting for her recovery. “Caught by the hair, pushed to the ground, stripped naked, and beaten up. Scars on her left cheek, a sickle split on the right side of her hip, red welts on her palm from fighting the men. Maayi, as Packiam’s mother-in-law, knows that night too well to wonder what went wrong”. (207). The pathetic condition of being both emotive and numb was all left in them with the dusts after arson. Ramayya’s wife who gave refuge on the nightmarish night, was nine months pregnant when they gave shelter at their home. The named and unnamed women carried resilience, resolution and anger but destined to be ashes in the sky. The communist party has erected an emblem at Kilvenmani with 44 pillars commemorating the sacrifice and daring rebellion of the dead souls that were set ablaze with no iota of humanity. It is also observed that the male members of the village who are mostly pallars and parayars (as mentioned by the author) do fight against every kind of atrocity they faced. Yet the powerful hegemony (masculinity suppressed them using power and police atrociously and the male members had to die or struggle as ‘marginalised masculinity’.

Conclusion

Thus, the text advocates how patriarchal hegemony plays havoc in the life of many named and nameless women whose Gender intersects with their caste, especially when they are voiceless and poor. Thus, multiple or compound discrimination is exercised on women when other factors like race, status, disability intersect. The Gypsy Goddess, points out the injustices of the privileged, shams of the authorities and power politics in the lives of innocent peasants, predominantly female of the species. “Caste violence has become an important element in the political life of contemporary Tamil Nadu. We may define caste violence as systematic, organized and sustained acts of physical and cultural violence directed against the less powerful, marginal, and in a hierarchical sense lower social groups by members of the dominant landed group” (1 Subbulakshmi.A)

To sum up, the oeuvre articulates how felonies of the hegemonic class can be shrunk into demeanours ever after public incinerations and mass killings. Besides, basing the narrative on the inevitable tapestry of social and cultural infusion, Kandasamy, silhouettes the resilience and fortitude of Dalit farmers, especially the women peasants who set off to fight back any oddity. The cultural and societal marginalisation multiply the compound discrimination is exercised on women when other factors like race, status, disability intersect. The Gypsy Goddess, points out the injustices of the privileged, shams of the authorities and power politics in the lives of innocent peasants, predominantly on the female of the species. The novel exposes the social structures that enforce Dalit marginalization, creating a cycle of exploitation and injustice. Nevertheless, the narration emphasises the action for change by dint of the portrayal of the female fraternity.

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