

**Assertion of Self in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* and
*When I Hit You Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife***

SRINIDHI.K

(17PEN018)

Thesis submitted to

Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women,

Coimbatore-641 043

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master's Degree in English

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Signature of the Supervisor


Signature of the Head of the Department

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Literature is not a mere fragment of life but the quintessence of the totality of life. By holding a mirror up to nature and having a language filled with the awareness of human and universal sensibilities, it impresses the readers' mind and aims at elevating human life to a higher level. With the advent of education, literature has acquired a great growth in diverse literary forms about human life and its experiences.

Indian writing in English gained popularity and is recognized as a literary category because many Indians started writing in English and with this tremendous flow of writing many great works of literature have been created. Though men dominated the scene for sometimes, women also started writing and as a category, this production comes under the broader realm of postcolonial literature. In its early stages it was influenced by Western literature and the themes used to be social or political issues. Later on other issues related to culture and families were also focused. The modern writers take up issues related to family, psychology and try to show the realistic view of materialistic man. The problems of identity, gender and relationship become the main concern of the modern writers. They also deal with the problems faced by the downtrodden, marginalized and the pathetic plight of women especially the dalits who are constantly suffering due to patriarchal domination in the society.

Dalit literature, which emerged in the 1960s, forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature: it is literature written by the dalits about their own lives or literature about dalits by others. It is compared with African American literature because of the

similarity of issues dealt with like racial segregation and injustice and also because the feelings, pain and exploitation are portrayed equally.

The aim of marginalized literature is to express or recognise the cruel experiences the concerned people face and their driving quest for their identity. The writings demand civil and human rights, destruction of hegemony and the active reconstruction of interrupted and interpreted histories.

The independence of India has not brought any functions of bellicose patriotism in the writings of Indians. On the other hand, a world vision in literature has been cultivated by the leading writers of the day. Since literature is one facet of culture and its significance can be defined only by culture, the direction of Literature has been changed a lot with the changing culture of the world and language in particular.

The word 'Dalit' does not appear in any sacred scripture or historical texts of India. The word is derived from Sanskrit, meaning "Ground", "suppressed", "crushed", or "Broken to pieces". It was first used by Jyoti Rao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the erst while "Untouchable" castes of the twice-born Hindus. The adoption of a general term 'Dalit' and 'Untouchable' is both pejorative and illegal. Dalits were chucked out from the four fold Varna system of Hinduism and were seen as forming the Fifth Varna. There are various other terms for these Dalits such as Scheduled castes, Harijans and Adi Dravidar. Dalits are a group of people who are regarded as untouchables and they are oppressed in various ways. The status of a person does not depend upon his wealth but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he had the fortune of being born. Castesim is influenced through democratic and

economic organizations. In the caste hierarchy of Hinduism, Brahmins are at the top whereas Shudras are at the bottom.

Dalit literature started gaining popularity in India with the appearance of the English translations of Marathi Dalit writing. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot, and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature* originally published in three volumes and later collected in a single volume edited by Arjun Dangle, both published in 1992. They were perhaps the first books that popularised the genre throughout India. The term 'Dalit' came to be interchangeably used with scheduled castes.

The source for Dalit writers was undoubtedly the literature produced by the inimitable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the pioneer of dalit movement in India. Being a social scientist and a political thinker, he continues to influence dalit writing. The government tries in all possible ways to promote better conditions for Dalits through improved education, health and employment opportunities. The Dalits are regarded as ritually impure because of their involvement in works like handling leather, butchering, removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and waste. Dalits also work as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Discrimination against dalits still exists in rural areas, though at a minimal level, in private sphere, everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources, and largely evaluated in Urban areas and in the public sphere. Dalit literature can also be compared to African literature because the feeling, pain and exploitation of these people are portrayed equally.

The comparative perspective of Dalit writing led to some self-analysis and encouraged the writers to think of new ways of representing their own selves. It is also felt that only Dalit writers can express their experiences in an authentic manner but not others. Non Dalit writers may be sympathetic to the Dalits but they may not have the intensity of the pain as they are not directly involved. Dalit literature is a literature based on their lives and experiences.

Marathi Dalit literature is the forerunner of all modern Dalit literatures in India. The Marathi dictionary defines the term 'Dalit' as 'Ground' or 'Broken pieces'. Dalit literature has a separate identity from main stream literature. The growing Dalit literature gives a hint to the future unlike the past when they were silenced for centuries together due to caste prejudice and social oppression. Dalit literature in India has both quality and quantity. The real life and experiences are reflected well in Dalit literature rather than any other literature. Thus the creation of Dalit literature becomes unavoidable and inevitable until the nature of the harsh social reality changes. The language as well as images come from their own experience instead of their observation of nature. Dalit literature is a journey from main stream literature to marginal literature, from individual identity to group identity, self-justification to self-affirmation. And it is known as Celebration of and with difference.

Hindu society does not follow the message of egalitarianism or universal brotherhood as it is a caste-ridden society. As a result, the untouchables remain helpless sufferers in their hapless condition without any change down the centuries. Even touching their shadow is considered pollution. As a matter of fact, Hindu spirituality preaches the message of equality among all living beings. *"Dalit Literature :A Critical*

Exploration” edited by Amar Nath Prasad and M.B.Gaijan talks about various aspects of Dalit literature like Dalit literary theory, the growth and evaluation of Dalit literature, Dalit feminism and the Dalits quest for life and individual identity. As Darshana Trivedi in her article “ Literature of their Own: Dalit Literary Theory in Indian Context” says “The Clearest definition of Dalit in contemporary usage has been given by Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Marathi and founder editor of *Asmitadarsh*”. She continues to quote the poet :

To me, Dalit is not a caste
 He is a man exploited by
 the Social and economic
 traditions of this country,
 He does not believe in God,
 Rebirth, Soul, Holy books teaching
 separatism, Fate and Heaven
 because they have made him
 a slave. He does believe in
 humanism. Dalit is a symbol
 of change and revolution.(2-3)

Because Dalit literature deals with Dalit who is a symbol of change and revolution, the literature also tries to transform the society.

Dalit literature rejects canonical literature .The traditional literature provides aesthetic power where it talks about the satyam(truth), shivam(goodness) and

sundaram (beauty) and it is not realistic. But in course of time, literature started holding a mirror up to nature reflecting life as lived by people. But dalit literature is based on reality and for it man is superior to god or even nation. Dalit literature rejects western theories like Freud's psychoanalytic, Derrida's Deconstruction theory and it also rejects Indian theories. Dalit poetry, short stories and autobiographies flourished; but the field of drama was neglected. Dalit literature has to create its own myth and it has to cross its boundaries across national literature if it is to reach a space in worldwide literature.

Dalit community translates human terms more objectively and it shows the personal dimension of untouchability. Until the end of the Nineteenth Century, the untouchables were considered one among the Hindu groups. Till that time the Indian population was divided on the basis of religion namely Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The Muslims in 1904 addressed Lord Minto and specified the Indian population as (1) Hindu, (2) Animist (3) Tribals and the Untouchables.

The practice of collecting data based on caste in the Census was in vogue till 1931. The Census Reports of the years 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941 listed forty major Hindu castes. In the year 1964, the Government recognized 120 castes as eligible for special treatment. Of these, six castes, Chakkiliyans, Kuravans, Nayadi, Pallan, Paraiyan and Valluvan receive special treatment since these six castes are found in all parts of Tamil Nadu and hence they have been considered for such treatment.

Dalitness is essentially the means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. Dalitness is a source of confrontation. Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one's total being. For the Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification. Dalit writers relentlessly expose the

inhumanities and prejudice of caste, society and try to instill a new society and cultural consciousness. Primarily, the motive of Dalit writing is to highlight their disabilities and difficulties along with the atrocities and inhuman treatment meted out to the Dalits.

The Dalit woman suffers double marginalization because she is a Dalit among Dalits and a woman in the patriarchal society. She suffers and she must walk through the burning desert of Casteism. Due to Casteism, the Dalit women are dishonoured and molested. The Dalit Panthers and the Dalit school of Literature represent the level of pride and militance and sophisticated creativity. The Dalit history could be traced to the Mahar movement and the Buddhist revival. The Dalit writers began their work seriously in 1950. Dalit literature is compared to Black literature which it speaks about the sufferings and pains of the Negroes; it captures the light of space literature by writing personal sufferings and by subjecting the writers like Tony Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. The Dalit literature is also influenced by Marxism and American Black Movement and Buddhism.

Bama also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, Dalit feminist and novelist. She is from a Roman Catholic family from Puthupatti. Bama is her pen name and she served as a nun for seven years in a convent and left the convent due to the prevalence of discrimination and began writing. Her famous autobiographical novel *Karukku* was published in 1992 followed by *Sangati* in 1994. She is widely known as a Dalit writer and activist. Bama's *Sangati* has been translated into French and English. *Karukku* and *Sangati* are translated by Laxmi Holmstrom.

Dalit women writers prove to be real heroines, because they are born and brought up in misery. They come out strong because of the struggles they face as well as through their books and activism thus giving an in depth view of life. Women across the world especially in India have met challenges to gain education and for a Dalit woman it becomes doubly hard. Dalit feminism is described as a discourse of content. It recalls the joint oppression of caste and gender faced by Dalit women. Some of the famous Dalit women writers are Challapalli Swarupa Rani, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, P.Sivakami, Gogu Shyamala, Vijila Chiappad, Babytai Kamble, and Bama Faustina Soosairaj with such women writers writing and inspiring people, there is a considerable improvement in the literacy of dalit women from 6.7% to 54.6%.

Since they have been fighting against the discrimination for quite sometime and with only a little success, the women writers realized that they could “fight through books” which focus not only on the general issues related to Dalits but also point out the colossal problems dalit women face both within and out of their community. Their sufferings are unfathomable and inexplicable. Ruth Manorama, a relentless crusader’s views regarding the plight of dalit women found expression in the columns of The Hindu: “Dalit women in India are the Dalits among Dalits and suffer from three -fold oppression – on account of gender as a result of patriarchy, caste ‘the untouchable’, and class – as they hail from the poorest and most marginalized communities”. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also by their own communities due to the practice of patriarchy.

In *Sangati*, Dalit women’s dual oppression on account of gender and caste is described elaborately. Bama’s works are seen as embodying Dalit feminism and are

famous for celebrating the inner strength of those women. In *Sangati* Bama uses the confessional and conventional mode. Bama's *Karrukku* and *Sangati* are significant milestones in Tamil Dalit writing.

Most of Bama's novels are autobiographical, while a few are the reflections of her observations. That makes her writings realistic and authentic both in the original as well as the translations. Tamil Dalit writer P. Sivakami in her novel *The Grip of Change* shows how Paranjothi Udayar ,a high caste man justifies his act of sexually exploiting Thangam, a Dalit widow.

C.S.Lakshmi in article "Cantos in our history" published in The Hindu talks about her meeting with Challapalli Swarupa Rani and the way she expressed her concern for the dalits. She quotes lines from her poem "Prohibited History" portraying the grim picture of such institutionalized form of sexual exploitation.

She writes,

"I get unveiled as a woman,on sale
in flesh market...
But the credit for being labelled a prostitute
even before I took birth
in this karma bhoomi belongs to me..."

Rani's poem brings out the humiliation of Dalit women whose sexual exploitation in the hands of upper-caste men is often deemed 'justified' as they are located at the bottom of an imaginary purity-scale solely created by the caste- Hindu- dominated

patriarchal social set-up. One does not have to go much deeper to understand the political implication of such a wide-spread misrepresentation of Dalit women.

M. Mukundan's *Oru Dalit Yuvathiyude Kadanakatha* and *Pulayappattu* explores the hitherto unseen vicissitudes of Dalit femininity without having these experiences first hand. Mukundan's text is selected on the basis of its choice of a theme and its treatment. Mukundan, a male, uppercaste author chooses to write the story of Bhagavanthi, a Dalit woman and through her Vasundhara, the actor who enacts Bhagavanthi. The book is analysed from the perspective of authorship interfering with the narration of the story, a problem often encountered in Dalit literature.

In colonial South India, people of the lower caste are considered Dalits, whereas the upperclass landlords consider them as their enemies. Caste system in India is closely associated with the ideas of karma, dharma and moksha. If a man is committed to sinful acts, he will be born in lower caste or even as an animal. For Hindus, caste is a big instrument of social control, where caste is determined by birth. One caste is connected with another caste by traditional occupations. Each caste has its own way of living. Caste is an artificial, manmade division of the society in India. A caste is an endogamous group or a collection of similar groups. Such a group has a common name, believes in common origin, follows a hereditary occupation, possesses common rituals, ceremonies and forms of worship and regards itself as distinct and separate from other groups.

The persistence of landlord power, continuing dependence of a majority of households on agriculture in spite of the significant diversification of employment that has taken place, and an apparent stagnation in the agricultural economy after the relative

success of the green revolution in the 1970s. It also brings out a tightening in the labour market and dalit political mobilisation as well as a shift in agricultural wages rates.

Dalit literature has been covered with another term namely Subaltern studies. The roots of subaltern studies are in the social, political, cultural and economic status of the disadvantaged classes in the society. Dalit poetry and Dalit literature are based on the kind of life that they were made to live against their wishes in the Indian society. As Zelliott says “The term [Dalit] represents those who have been broken and ground down by those above them in a deliberate manner In the term and concept *Dalit* itself there is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the *karma* theory that justifies the caste hierarchy”(267).

A dalit feels a kind of kinship and solidarity with the exploited .One of the most popular and classic icons of caste and varna exploitation of India is that of Eklavya depicted in the Mahabharat and the other is Shambuka, a tribal youth slain by Rama, the epic hero of Ramayan, for learning the Vedas. There are a number of dalit poets in almost all the Indian languages who have written sympathetically about Eklavya and Shambuka and have condemned their exploiters.

Ilavenil Kandasamy is an Indian poet, translator, activist and fiction writer. She is living in Chennai, Tamil nadu, India. Her pen name is Meena. Born in 1984 to Tamil parents, both University professors, Ilavenil Kandasamy was named Illavenil by her parents. She had a huge and developing interest in poetry and adopted the name Meena. She completed her Ph.D. in Sociolinguistics in Anna University, Chennai. She wrote her

first poetry at the age of seventeen. She also has been translating books for dalit writers and leaders.

Meena has been closely working with the issues of caste and gender. As an activist she claims her identity as a dalit woman and her works have feministic and anti-caste perspectives that pierce the critique in Hindu and Tamil myths. She has faced many criticisms fearlessly from the Hindu society. As a translator she says that there is no boundary or limit or specific style guide for poetry. She writes in English and also translates prose and poetry in Tamil. As an actress, she debuted in a Malayalam movie *Oraalppokkam*, which is the first online crowd funded independent Malayalam feature film.

Meena Kandasamy has published two collections of poetry namely *Touch* (2006) and *Ms.Militancy* (2010). Two of her poems won laurels in all India poetry competitions. She also edited a bi-monthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network called *The Dalit*. She also represented India at the University of Iowa's International Writing program and was a Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow at the University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom. Apart from her Literary works, she has also spoken about various current political issues related to women right's, caste,corruption,and violence. Her views are expressed through facebook and twitter. She also writes columns occasionally for platforms like Outlook India and The Hindu.

Meena, as a writer focuses on feminism, abolition of caste, and linguistic identity. One of her first collections of poetry was *Touch* published in August 2006, with a preface of Kamala Das, was translated and published in five different languages. Her

second poetry *Ms. Militancy* was published in 2010. “Mascara” and “My Lover speaks of Rape” won her first prize in all Indian Poetry Competition.

It is revealed through her poetry that Meena’s consciousness is firmly yoked to the world around her, a world characterized by ecstasy and pain, love and despair. Meena follows the psychological tradition of Sylvia Plath and Langston Hughes.

Meena Kandasamy’s works have been published in various anthologies and journals including *Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry*, The Little Magazine, Kavya Bharati, Indian Literature, Poetry International Web, Muse India, Quarterly Literary Review, Outlook, Tehelka and The New Indian Express. Meena also made a featured poetry at the city of Asylum Jazz Poetry concert held in Pittsburgh, the 14th poetry Africa International Festival in 2010, Durban and the DSC Jaipur Literature Festival in 2011.

The Gypsy Goddess depicts the plight of Dalit agricultural workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. These workers are mercilessly murdered by upper caste landlords. This book is based on the massacre that took place in the Kilvenmani village on Christmas day in 1968. The book is published by Atlantic books in 2014.

The village landlords forced the peasants to break their backs in the paddy fields or suffer beatings as punishment. Because they were leading a miserable life, the Communist Party begins to gain traction, and thus a small spark of defiance is spread from villager to villager. As the communities across the region took a stand against the landlords, the landlords were determined to break them; Party organizers suffered grisly deaths and the flow of food began to dry up. But the villagers became bold and strong

enough to resist more fiercely. Finally the landlords descend on the village of Kilvenmani to set an example to the others. *The Gypsy Goddess* is an originally brilliant and ferociously angry novel.

In *When I Hit You:Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, Meena Kandasamy not only writes about the experience of domestic violence and abuse within marriage as she herself was a victim of it, but also about her response to what was happening around. This was a highly educated, intelligent and articulate young woman probing the conceived ideas about victims of domestic abuse. It won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018. It deserves to be appreciated for its literary uniqueness and merit; it is also relevant to note that it comes out at a time and era where the silencing, harassment and abuse of women is reaching a tipping point in the west.

When I Hit You :Or,A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife is based on the author's own experience of marriage and is a momentous story of domestic abuse. After a courtship of mansplaining, then two weeks of marriage, the husband burns himself with matches until the young wife deactivates her facebook account. Intellectual and physical cruelty is also explored ingeniously. The narrator's husband trying to dissuade her from writing says that articles about female sexuality in English are pandering to "vulgar imperialist culture". He keep deleting every email she receives so as to "set her free". He prevents her from writing poetry about his abuse fearing that it will create a "material basis" which their relationship cannot transcend; then he starts writing his own dreadful poems about abusing her which he feels will serve as his therapy. Finally, the narrator begins standing up for herself, and as a vegenance he rapes her every night.

Ayyankali :A Dalit Leader of Organic Protest explores the life and activities of Ayyankali from 1863-1941, written by M.Nisar and Meena Kandasamy. *Ayyankali* the foremost dalit leader and revolutionary, who challenged the brutal caste codes and organized the untouchable masses to fight for their dignity and their rights. This book chronicles his organic protest in Travancore and provides a critical analysis of the social reform movements in Kerala under the colonial rule.

As a translator, Meena has translated many books for the first time from Tamil to English. The following are the translations. *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* which contains the honest and uncompromising views of Thirumaavalavan, the leading Dalit intellectual and elected representative of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal or the Liberation Panthers of Tamil Nadu.

Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers written by Thol.Thirumavalavan, analyses the various roles of Hindutva , an ideology of Hindu rights in sustaining the dominance of the caste system. He speaks provocatively about the need to counter Hindutva with a tamil identity that can reach beyond the region to other oppressed peoples.

Why Were Women Enslaved written by Tantai Periyar, brings out the views of periyar who felt that women should be granted their rights so that they could be liberated and respected as fellow human beings.

Desires become Demons:Four Tamil poets :Malathi Maithri, Salma ,Kutti Revathi ,Sukirtharani is also translated and edited by Meena Kandasamy.

And she also came up with essays and biography, 2nd Collection:*Balathsamga Samskaram*(Rape Culture)translated by PS.Manojkumar.

In an interview with Sampsonia Way Magazine, Meena said that “My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people. There are many books written by Dalit writers or by others on dalits, dalit feminism and the related issues. The following review of literature gives a few of them .

Zakir Abedi’s book *Contemporary Dalit Literature, Quest for Dalit Literature* highlights major literary works of Dalit writers, Gujarati Dalit Literature, Tamil Dalit Literature, Subaltern Consciousness.

S.P.Swain in his article “Roots and Shadows-A Feminist study” points out how women struggle for their assertion and rights in a feministic perspective.

In another article on “Shobha De’s Socialite Evenings-A feminist study” he talks about women’s responsibilities in a family and about the patriarchal world, where men consider themselves superior to women. The same writer’s article on “Articulation of the Feminine voice: Jaya in Shashi Despande’s *That Long Silence*” focuses on how woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.

Murali Manohar’s article, “Women Empowerment via Job/Career in Some Indian English Women’s Novels” deals with the need for women to have access to jobs and to become economically independent so that they could resist dependence.

Shashi Despande in her article, “The Dilemma of the Woman” emphasizes the right of every women to express herself in the way she wants to.

Anupam Bansal's article "Assertion of Self and Socio-Economic Empowerment of women in the fiction of Shobha De" stresses the need to recognize woman as an individual.

Natasha Bajaj in the article "Gender Clashes in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" talks about Patriarchal bondage; the article also explores the complexity and subtlety of Indian Society and displays Kapur's women characters are in conflict with the patriarchal society.

"Kali: The Epitome of Women in Arupa Kalita Patangia's *The Story of Felanee*" of Elba Mandrelle and Purnima Bhatnagar deals with feminism movement chiefly directed against the sufferings of women in the patriarchal structure.

Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* was the first anthology of Dalit Literature and deals with Dalit Literary movement in Maharashtra and consist some English translation of more than eighty prominent figures in Marathi Dalit Literature

The article "Dalit Existence And Environment in the Literature of Margins: 'Poisoned Bread'" by Arjun Dangle by Jayshree Singh deals with the relationship between nature and human nature and the declining sense of culture with regard to dalit's existence and harmonious sustainability of the environment.

Wandana Sonalkar and Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal in the article, "Dalit women in India; At the crossroads of Gender, Caste and Class" talk about the Dalit women and their sufferings on account of Gender and Caste and also about the ways through which human development is possible.

Tanu Kashyap, "Feminist Study in Meena Kandasamy's Novels; 'When I hit You: Or, A Portrait Of The Writer As A Young Wife' and 'The Gypsy Goddess'" talks about the feminist and gender inequality.

Meenu Jose in her article “The Twice ‘Broken’ Selves of Dalit Women; A Study of Select Novels of M.Mukundan and P.Sivakami” deals with the authorship and authenticity of Dalit Feminism.

Kanak Yadhav’s article, “Gentlemen Killers: The Politics of Remembering in Meena Kandasamy’s *The Gypsy Goddess*” brings out the political violence and the struggle faced by the Dalits to assert themselves.

Y.B.Damle in his book *Caste; A Review of the Literature on Caste* highlights about various explanations of caste in terms of their origin and continuance.

Anne Waldrop in “Dalit Politics in India and New meaning of Caste” focuses on the Dalit Political mobilisation of India.

Navsarjan’s article “The Situation of Dalit Rural Women” deals with the sufferings of women as Dalits, poor and subordinated in the society.

John Harris, “Land, Labour and Caste politics in Rural Tamil Nadu in the 20 th century Iruvelpattu” deals with the persistence of landlord power, continuing dependence as a majority of household on agriculture.

Dr.S.K.Paul has explored and evaluated the growth and evaluation of Dalit literature in a very lucid and interesting way. He is of the opinion that the lack of real sincerity and commitment at the political level would lead to grave imbalance in the society.

Dr.Anita Ghosh, in her scholarly writing analyses Dalit Feminism and the plight of Psycho-social description of the Dalit. Brutal patriarchy is the main discourse in Dalit community which appears in Dalit feminist discourse. D.Padmarani raises the voice of distress in the light of age old rites and customs. The dalit encompasses the hapless segment of India, the

Untouchable communities, Adivasis, Nomadic Tribes and the suffering masses who were lead to dehumanized and degraded lives.

Dr. S. S. Bhandari critically Jim Corbett's well-known book "My India" which is dedicated to the poor and deserted people of India. Corbet has expanded the large segment of Indian society called Depressed or Dalits. Dalit literature is abundant with the suppressed voice of the Dalits, their self-experiences of injustice and atrocities, their furious expression on the Brahminical traditions.

Many women do not enjoy autonomy because they are vulnerable and dependent on their male partners and allow them to make all the decisions. Although it seems that women are progressing on many fronts, in terms of power relations, it is still unequal because our law application is unequal and our laws are patriarchal. The present project entitled *Assertion of Self* in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I hit You: Or, A Portrait Of The Writer As A Young Wife* analyses the two novels taken up for the study. The first chapter – Introduction gives a brief history of Indian women writers in English, the major works, themes and techniques used by the writers along with the short biographical background of the writer.

The second chapter – Triumph of the Individual, deals with the struggles faced by the agricultural labourers, how they resist unitedly the landlords who had every mechanism under their control and how they tried hard to live their lives in dignity asserting themselves. It also deals with the way the woman writer emerged as an individual overcoming all the hurdles laid by her abusive husband.

The third chapter – Rest to Resistance, deals with the way the agricultural labourers rise to stand up to fight for their cause. It also analyses the way the woman writer resisted the attempts of her husband to intimidate her and came out the wed lock determined to be an

individual with her own rights. The final chapter – conclusion, stresses on the need for the characters to stand up of their own as individuals to lead a life of equality and dignity.

CHAPTER-II

TRIUMPH OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Gender can be regarded as a socially constructed dimension of being male or female. Men and women are associated with distinctive different roles, representations, values and beliefs. A Woman is perceived as a property in a patriarchal society. Men of all castes and classes have certain beliefs, ideas and rules set for them. Meena Kandsamy's novels take up such preconceived ideas about the victims of domestic abuse and slavery. Slavery is one of the reasons of distinctions between the two realities of the upper and lower class and thus the possibility of psychological apathy with regard to gender and sexuality in a slave atmosphere always plays a larger part.

Indian women remain victims in the patriarchal society and women's capabilities are measured against the power that never flowed or accumulated in the hands of the other gender. Women are primarily exploited in the society where the law of the jungles persists; because the more powerful thrive at the expense of the less powerful. The dowry system also adds to the misery of women who already suffer due to male domination and it causes many deaths in the society.

The Gypsy Goddess has been chosen as one of the Independent newspaper's debut of the year 2014 and has been shortlisted / long listed for several awards including the DSC prize for South Asian Literature, the International Dylan Thomas Prize, and the Tata Literature Live First Book Award. *The Gypsy Goddess* has been translated into Dutch, German and French and it has also been commended by writers like Anita Nair, Aditya Mani Jha, Gayatri Jayaraman and Nilanjana Roy.

The Gypsy Goddess debuts the spotlight on the plight of Dalit agricultural workers in the Southern Indian state of TamilNadu, who are murdered by their tyrannical and oppressive upper-caste landlords. These workers had begun their struggle against poverty and corruption, as against their cruel landlords. The story is being told through the memoranda of the landlords' association – the Paddy Producers' Association; the main aim of the Association is to protect their own interests against the organizing Communists, Marxists, pamphlets, police reports, accounts of eye-witnesses, insights into the lives of the peasants along with the voice of Kandasamy herself. The tragedy has drawn on historical documents and survivor interviews – farmworkers are on strike after the landlords murder a popular Communist leader; the landlords try bullying them back to work by imposing debilitating fines and using the police to become their supporters. They intimidate the workers and savagely assault the Dalit women.

The Gypsy Goddess tells the story of an old woman living in a village, who had lost her family due to the massacre, where the women belonging to untouchable class are brutally attacked. It is seen that the old woman was born in Tharangambadi village, the land of singing waves. Kilvenmani, the village in which she was married had tied itself to communism and there after Nagapattinam and its surrounding became the theatre of the old woman's teary and fiery story. Nagapattinam had been a settlement of the Portuguese then had moved on to the Dutch and then to the British with all its resources like rice cultivation and her religion which remained as a memento. In the later period, it metamorphosed and transformed into a sleepy port and self-contained pilgrimage circuit. Since then there are so many legends associated with the place and its religious beliefs. The author narrates,

. . . One temple promises that God will be the Ender of Death; at Sikkal, Murugan receives the spear from his mother before he sets out to battle oppressive demons; bathing at a temple pond in Thirunallaru saves anybody from Saturn's seven - and - a - half-year itch. Religion reverses its role of divisive troublemaker: everybody flocks to the NagoreSufi dargah; everybody with a desperate prayer walks on their knees to Our Lady of Velankanni. . . the bloodthirsty Kali is seated with sakkarai pongal. . . and temple for pubescent Neelayadakshi, the only Tamil goddess with blue eyes. (16-17)

It is also believed that the female gods play their role in every human life, especially in Nagapattinam and so they are treated in a highly religious way. Writer Meena talks about the river Cauvery, the flow of which the poets have compared to the bleeding and blinded breasts of slave labourers in the Delta district. Kilvenmani has become a fertile area irrigated by two tributaries of the Cauvery – Korai Aaru and Kaduvai Aaru – Korai is named after the grass used for weaving mats and Kaduvai, after a Parai drum, a special feature of the region. The place is known for its rice cultivation. The writer ironically says, “Rivers are to rice cultivation what lies are to poets: the life blood, some might say. Some life, some blood, I will hasten to add” (20). The narrator also quotes another incident to bring out the class distinction regarding which she mentions as “she made the mistake of suggesting that Ponnar and Sankar, two local guardian deities, were Arundhatiyars, an oppressed untouchable caste, and a case was

slapped on me [her] by the touchy touchable caste - Hindus seven years after the book appeared”(20).

The narrator then says of what she hears about Krishnammal Jagannathan, the winner of an alternative Nobel Prize, a brave lady who follows Gandhism and non-violence. The old woman becomes an activist after the incidents in Kilvenmani but expresses her unhappiness as she reminisces on her past. She tells that the area seemed to be peaceful in the days when she cooked dosai for Martin Luther King during his visit to India.

In twelfth – century Tanjore, “a slave could quote a price and sell himself”(23). This practice kept continuing but the English invasion resulted in a bazaar of manual labour and the labourers were sent to Coolie Export Depot at Nagapattinam. Sometimes, they ended up as indentured labourers, became bonded to the British plantations and railroad projects. Sadly, even after four-hundred years, tortures of famine and feudalism continue. After narrating the stories of suffering through suppression, the writer presents the tragedy of Kilvenmani. Meena says, “All of fictions artefacts[are] used in the novel” like “lining, holing, filling, mixing, planting, staking, topping, weeding, watering, manuring, threshing, winnowing”(23). In such places the stories grow like haphazard weeds and ideas, like rain through leaky thatched roofs.

The village of Kilvenmani is filled with natural beauty where men and women keep working without any rest with their shoulders sculpted and their sweat sighted; here people also hear mothers’ lullabies, grandmothers’ curse and aunts’ dirges. The popular gypsy women are asked to tattoo people’s arms and legs with an ink extracted from mother’s milk. Meena Kandasamy in a tone filled with sarcasm says “If the Old Woman

were to be believed, the primary agenda of these demons is to cause terror, and the most malicious of them have been known to set fire to thatched roofs. Watch out for these terrorizing demons, going about setting fire to thatched roofs”(28). The words “terrorizing demons, going about setting fire to thatched roofs” are to be noted because that has reference to the tragedy that occurred at Kilvenmani.

Meena Kandasamy divides the novel into four parts – Background, Breeding Ground, Battle Ground and Burial Ground. Aksayapillai in her review of the novel states that, “Kilvenmani, the shy and oppressed village in East Tanjore district, is the protagonist” of the novel and she opines that the satirical chapter “Titled ‘Cutthroat comrades’ introduces the antagonist and prepares the reader for the tragedy – reads like an exaggerated extension of a Tamil feudal film”.

Meena Kandasamy tries to tell the story as a puppet show.

Authority is easy to caricature. The puppets with the overgrown handlebar moustaches are landlords. The puppets with a stoop worked into their backs and a squeal stamped into their voices are the landless. The stiff-necked puppets who march as a pack are the policemen. And the mysterious Old Woman: she’s the puppet with the head that shakes. . . .who beats her sagging breasts to mourn, to make a point, to curse, to cry a call to arms. . . . [With]the fading brown of her eyes, the skin collapsing into wrinkles. (30)

The writer narrates the story of another old woman – Karuppaayi of Thiruchuli village in the Ramnad district, who suffers famine and the loss of her husband and her

three little sons. However, Karuppaayi manages to stay alive by eating handfuls of mud. Seeing her plight, a relief worker feeds her with congee every day.

In 1877, the Gundar River in Ramnad swells suddenly breaking her banks. Karuppayi goes to Tranquebar to find shelter at the home of the relief worker who saves her life. Many others do not have her luck; unfortunately, those who survive the famine are lost in the floods. Over a thousand deaths are recorded in the first week in The Royal Gazetteer. The writer also talks about Irukkai Chinnamma who expires on 15th August 1925 due to the complications that develop out of childbirth. The death is caused due to septic shock, a result of the use of an agricultural sickle which cuts her umbilical cord. The newborn child is then handed over to her grandmother, Karuppaayi, a domestic helper of Europeans in Tranquebar.

Meena explains the trauma which the women undergo due to sexual abuse. It is shocking to learn that Tranquebar witnesses sixty rapes in just three weeks. A fourteen-year-old girl is dragged from her grandmother's home located at the outskirts of the town; the girl hears nothing but her own screams throughout the night. The landlords do not bother to stop the injustice; nor do they hear a word from that young girl during enquiry. No case is filed for such abusive attacks in Nagapattinam. From the preliminary reports, it is known that the rape had taken place on the night of 16th December 1939; the name of the gang rape victims had been withheld for several reasons of anonymity and the girl is referred to as 'She' in the regular reports. This shows how class and caste determine one's fate and chance.

Ravi Kant Tiwari in his article “*The Gypsy Goddess: A Study of The Politics Inherent in the Postmodern Dalit Novel in The Context of the Caste Atrocities During Kilvenmani Massacre Of 1968*” remarks about the attitude of the people in power towards the women who are below them as follows:

Rape becomes a form of assertion of power over not only the women but also over the caste and class to which women belong. The women are objectified and are seen as the tools to assert power over a particular community. Rape becomes not only a form of gender violence but it is also a dominant form of caste violence. Gopalakrishna Naidu, in *The Gypsy Goddess*, sexually exploits the Dalit women, to preserve his dominance over the lower castes. (5084)

From this, it is understood that the women are dominantly victimised and permanently polluted. Women act as mute sufferers and romanticised submissive beings. They are customized within the religious and ceremonial aspects. The novel talks about the fate of Karuppaayi’s grand- daughter who goes to Sannasi, a wandering witch doctor. The young girl feels that he is the strongest man she has ever seen in her life. Sannasi who is a priest gives himself to carnal pleasures, so, his priesthood ends. Sometime later, both get married and the young girl gives birth to son. Thayyan, the witch doctor’s brother who is in exile, longs to have a look at the one- year- old - nephew, comes back to Kilvenmani, but is beaten to death and is doused in kerosene and set alight. Sannasi and Periyaan are whipped mercilessly for having concealed the information about his brother’s visit. Thayyan’s death is reported as an arson related accident in the landlord Porayar’s farm. On April 14,1965, untouchables around the place Keevalur, dismantle a

temple chariot in protest against the reason that they are refused their right to pull it along the streets. Because they touch the chariot, Hindus consider it defiled and retaliate by burning it. Sannasi who is suspected to be the master mind of the protest, is abducted the next day and his body turns up two weeks later in Karaikkal. Keevalur police close this case as a mysterious death. Here it is clearly visible how the judiciary stand support to the class distinction and the rich land lords.

Sannasi's widow steps out on the communist party circuit to avenge her husband's death. One of the comrades in Kilvenmani, regarding her says "She knows what to say when, how to say what, when to start a why, where to cease the talk," but a landlord says of her as "Oh! The old woman? That troublemaking communist cunt? That untouchable whore? Get out of here"(35-36).The author compares the old woman with the character Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* written by the African American writer Zora Neale Hurston.The author says,

both women . . . believe that the dream is the truth.They are both widowed women who learnto press their teeth together,who learn to hush.They are both women who find their wisdom poses a great challenge to others,because, sometimes, God gets familiar with them and tells them secrets about men. They are both women full of life. (36)

Through the portrayal and narration of indomitable characters like old woman and Sannasi's widow, Meena Kandasamy points out the need for women to wake up from their slumber, rise and fight for what is their due.

Janie searches her identity throughout the story; she is often seen without a voice and when it comes to her husband she does not fight back. She keeps separated from the other women in the novel who follow the traditions and do not find a life independent of their men. Thus both Janie and Sannasi's widow seem to have come back from burying the dead; they lose their individuality and are unable to stand up for themselves despite being courageous.

The writer gives an elaborate account of what made her choose the title *The Gypsy Goddess* for her novel. There had been an epic novelist, who penned a racy thriller involving three men and two women; the epic gained popularity and success. At the height of his glory he realized that his characters had outgrown his epic and had become household names. Every day, fan clubs were started for his hero and beauty parlors and massage centers after his heroine. His characters not only sowed love but also hatred. He heard stories of men cutting off the noses of women who had lust in their eyes. His greatest creation, thus, turned into a monster; so he fled to foreign shores. At last he settled down in a Tamil village where he saw men having as many gods as their forefathers. Men, women and children were calling upon their god everytime they had an ailment or difficulty and were leading a lawless life. The villagers welcomed the epic novelist and turned him into a demigod rechristening him as Mayavan, Man of Illusion and Mystery. The villagers consulted the author on every important issue related to the village community and they told him stories. Though he ignored their stories in the beginning, one story about Kuravars, the roaming nomad gypsies caught his fancy. During one of his sleepless nights, he dreamt of seven gypsy women carrying their babies

who lost their way, back to their camp. But, when they reach their home the next day, they are murdered along with their babies.

Some versions say that there were seventeen women and that they along with their children were forced to drink poison. Some other versions say that these women were locked in a tiny hut and burnt along with their children. Yet a few other versions say that the women were ordered to run and had their heads chopped off with flying discs while their children died of the fright of violence seeing their mothers' beheaded torsos running. It is also said that after this incident the women never stepped out of the shadow of their husbands. The novelist who witnessed this cruelty of domination, wanting to teach a lesson to the village elevated the condemned women and their children into one cult goddess. The village was also instructed that unless these dead women were worshipped the village would suffer ceaselessly. Hence, a statue of mud of the Kurathi Amman, the Gypsy Goddess was built. Very soon after the statue's rise, misers had come to ruin, thieves were struck blind, wife-beaters sprouted horns, rapists mysteriously castrated and murderers were found dead in the morning. Kurathi Amman became the reigning goddess. The writer says that the Kurathi Amman loved an animal slaughtered in her honour, every once in a while and that she was content with six measures of paddy paid to her during important occasions. Because Kurathi Amman was rumoured to be her ancestral goddess, the writer named her book "*The Gypsy Goddess*".

Dalit women's predicament can be addressed only by those women themselves; by embracing their identity and by voicing forth their concerns, modern writers try to resonate more of such voices in the margins. Caste is still an inescapable reality in most of the aspects of life in many parts of India. At times, it puts on the garb of culture and

misleads many unsuspecting victims into a vicarious practice of caste. By identifying caste with culture many people act against the interests of the society; practices range from marriage rituals to food habits; caste has its own mark and 'Caste Pride' continues to gain positive undertones in India, oblivious of the social differentiation it creates. Thus ethnicization of caste creates an 'ethnic spectre of caste' haunting the society.

While talking about the list of hierarchies, the author says that according to Professor Gough, "In Tanjore, all the Brahmins were mirasdars, and all the untouchables are landless labourers. The education will be immediate, procedural and perfect". There were "many intermediary castes: Vellalar, Naidu or Naicker, Agamudaiyar, Mudaliar, Chettiar, Reddiyar, Konar, Kallar, Vanniyar, Nadar" (69-70).

Maayi, the old woman is plagued by the plight of untouchable caste such as paraiyar, pallar. The term 'Paraiyah' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'para' which means 'foreign'. One found foreign to the culture of the upper caste had been denoted by the term Paraiyah by the Brahmins and very soon it acquired other kinds of denotations and the term 'paraiyar' indicates those who spoke ill of the Brahmins or the upper classes. It is also said that, those who ridiculed the Brahmins were condemned, oppressed and segregated by the Brahmins in the ancient times, when they had become predominant in the Tamil society.

Meena Kandasamy understood the reality that life is being operated by the recognition of caste and saw that when women involved in protests against the landlords, there is much fighting. Many reasons will be given; at times it will be the tractors or polydol death other times it may be disappearance or strike for higher wages. Sometimes their demands would relate to women alone, like daily wages instead of weekly wages for

women. Sometimes they would demand their right to take breaks to attend to their infants left under the shade of the trees in their cradles. Most of the time, they would fight for everybody.

In the novel, once the women haul the yellow flag of the Paddy Producers Association, and break the flag post after setting fire to it. The writer says,

When they are arrested for such transgressions . . . the police arrest the infants too. The jails are full of fighting Madonna's. . . . They are not afraid of hurt. On any given day, they can out weep the wailing police sirens. . . . 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. (75-76)

The Dalits in the olden days were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools attended by the caste-Hindu children and were not able to receive the benefit of education. They were compelled to serve in the farms of their masters, and were forcefully engaged in the domestic works of land lords. The man power needed for the cultivation of the lands in the country-side was supplied mainly by the Dalits; agricultural work during the past centuries chiefly depended on them. Dalits as slaves of the landlords were employed in the fields and were treated in a merciless manner; they laboured with alacrity, and the landlords constantly watched them denying their privacy to them. The

would not even spare the use of the cane by the workers. However, such days are not yet over. Though many measures are being taken by the Government, untouchability prevails in many places. The untouchable Hindus are still required to live the life of a bygone and dead age, dragging on their miserable existence having poor accommodation, unsanitary surroundings and social segregation. The worst of all is that they are born in debt and perish in debt.

After that everyone in the village get attacked by the landlords; the landlords select particular poorest Cheri so that they could target them. Then their clothes, their house and everything are set to fire. The police are also against the Cheri people and file a case against them. The writer on this fact comments saying, "The police are nothing but a private army on the payroll of the landlords"(77). Thus police prove to be puppets in the hands of the ruling class. Due to such a grievous situation, people seek the help from the party and the party sends out petitions, pastes posters and organizes public meeting and stage protests.

In the novel, Communism plays a vital role in the life of the people of Kilvenmani. The poor peasants toil like beasts without any break till the interference of the Communist party which succeeds in securing a holiday for agricultural labourers. Communists campaign and organize a strike for getting a day's break for the workers and finally every amavasai day is given as a holiday for the labourers to at least remember their dead ancestors on that day. In the name of Green Revolution, the people and the government start depending upon the American fertilizers. The land gets addicted to the chemical fertilizers, gets filled with deadly medicines and gives her poisonous glowing crops. The government does not regret this project as it gets its coffers filled.

The novelist writes about the condition of the people:

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)

Kilvenmani people are asked to pay two fifty rupees fine for continuing the strike but the people refuse to pay complaining that even if the landlords are profited with sack full of things, the labourers are paid only a pittance and the women are paid even less than that. The workers are warned of the attacks, landlord GopalaKrishna Naidu in his anger calls Kerosene Govinda and informs him about the rage of the landlords who instructs his group. The workers are warned that the best way left for them, to avoid trouble is to pay the fine. However, people are not willing to relent; they know that the money is out of hand for them to reach, because even if all the men, women and their children work for a few weeks in the fields it would be difficult to make the money. When the people go to another landlord, he instructs them to hoist the flag of Paddy Producers Association removing the red flag of the Communists. On December 15, the Association organizes a meeting in Kilvenmani, presided by Gopalakrishna Naidu. He publicly issues the threats and warnings, and gives ten day as deadline to the people to reform themselves and give up the red flag. Everybody gets agitated and meet in Pandari Ramayya's house to discuss if they should withdraw the red flag or surrender to the landlords. Women like Sundaram Thangamma, Muniyan's wife Pattu share their stories

and all of them Are determined that they should continue the strike. The women assert to the saying that, “if the men wanted their mothers and their wives and sisters to live with some honour and dignity, they should stand by the Communist and continue to fight these rowdy landlords” (117).

Muthusamy says “oppression must be met with transgression” (120). He asks Kilvenmani people to be brave. All the villagers are very conscious and are aware about the things that take place around them. The author says,

What is being offered to us by the landlords – like the loans they grant us during marriages, like the arrack money they give us once a week, like the promise to provide us jobs when we join their association – these are baits. None of these will change our life. None of these will give us rights. None of these will make us own the land we till. None of these will make us their equals. None of these will make them treat us with respect. They are not waiting to become our brothers. They are using every opportunity to lure us into their fold. We should remain clever . . . and not bite the bait.
(119)

On the fatal day people see what they feared. The ruling class start shooting as they come along shouting and setting fire to the roofs of the huts. Taking the straw from one burning thatched roof to another they set fire to all the huts in the village. The screaming, wails and howls of the poor fill the air and land; the black smoke envelopes people so that they no longer cry for help as their vocal cords are scorched and closed by inhalation. The novelist describes the spreading of the fire as:

and now the fire spreads with fondness and familiarity and the old men and the women and the children are bathed in blisters making touch the greatest trauma and long-ago tattoo of loved ones' names show up on their arms but they are almost already dead as they continue to burn and soon their blood begins to boil and ooze out of every pore sometimes tearing skin to force its way out in a hurry to feel fresh air and the blood begins to brown and then blacken. (164-65)

After this incident, day by day they hear the news of every home being burnt in other villages and news of girls being raped by someone or killed by someone. The mystical story is said by protagonist Ramalingam, who lives in the same village, where he studied up to eighth standard. He telecasts his anger by writing this story in a newspaper saying "Man cannot lie when he has the taste of death on his tongue"(182).

IG Mahadevan takes up this case and is conferring with Sukumaran and Meenakshisundaram; comrades who asking for the dead peoples' bodies to identify to which they belonged to. The official count of the dead is forty- two. After a few months, everybody limp back to normalcy; the news disappears from the headlines. The police, in love with variety of cases generously give everyone multiple sections of the Indian Penal Code. "Life, weighed down by death, weary of destruction, goes on" (195). The author talks about the old woman, Maayi, who is a busy woman. She says that "Sannasi could have brought solace to this bereaved village if he had not been murdered three years before" (198). Maayi could see, "how the anger keeps the people together, injects them with life, provides them a reason to live, pushes them into action"(202). In spite of the disaster and the all difficulties they face, people never give up. The author quotes John

Steinbeck from *The Grapes of Wrath* to bring out the extremity of the terror, “Slaughter and terror did not stop them. How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children? you can’t scare him – he has known a fear beyond every other.”

In *When I Hit You*, the unnamed narrator talks about the social isolation and extreme violence she faces from her husband’s hand. This novel also deals with the theme of gender equality and suppression of women, due to which a woman loses her identity when her personal account is being policed by her husband. The novel also discusses political, caste and social issues. A woman thinks and bothers very much about her appearance, so that she could be pleasing and lovely to the eyes of her husband and transforms herself according to the whims and fancies of her husband and does her duties as a wife besides playing the other roles that are expected of her and her own personal happiness only at the end. Women try hard to make their life meaningful and they try to bring about an awareness that the world belongs not only to men but also to women.

Ambition and dreams of women are fulfilled; Marriages are not always successful and the fairy tale romantic settings do not always consummate, this is the harsh reality that comes out in Meena Kandasamy’s novel “*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*”. In the contemporary scenario people talk so much about ecofeminism, radical feminism and eco centrism. For the last five decades Indian women writers have been voicing forth their concerns over a number of atrocities being committed against women and gender inequalities which are being parceled out to them. For an ordinary Indian woman “marriage” means abundant happiness because in India, marriage is regarded as something sacred and union of two families rather than two

persons. An Indian woman feels that sexually satisfying her husband is one of the vows that she has taken at the time of her marriage and that she is bound to do that. Man on the other hand, does not feel the same way even though he too has taken the same vow because he considers the world as a man's world and he needs to be aggressive in all spheres of life in this patriarchal world. A woman sees her husband as a Lord whereas man sees a woman only as a sexual object.

The novel *When I Hit You or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* gives an example for marital rape. It starts with the unnamed narrator giving a staggering account of the psychological manipulation and marital abuse. The unnamed narrator marries a dashing university professor who behind closed doors proves to be a bullying, abusive monster. He defies her and violently rapes her. Then she finds herself stuck in marriage life which traps her and dismantles her individuality and freedom.

At the outset the writer describes the plight of an young woman, who runs away unable to bare her husband's torture. She says, "I ran away from my marriage because I was being routinely beaten and it had become unbearable and untenable for me to keep playing the role of the good Indian wife". And she continues to say that her mother "does not talk about the monster who was my husband, she does not talk about the violence, she does not even talk about the actual chain of events that led my running way" (3).

At first, she thinks that their love is exuberant but later identifies that her husband's love is like contract of ownership. She relates this information with the issues and plight of the modern 21st century Indian woman who is always reminded that she is nothing but only a woman. She has no right to stand up against marital rape, abuse, violation of her fundamental rights both in her personal or political domain.

Marriage has been an overrated institution in India, making two people come together and take vows for their life until death parts them. Culturally, Indian society views marriage as sacred and ultimate destination for a woman. The Indian patriarchal system demands that the woman should take care of her husband and his family in order to uphold the prestige of the family. She does not enjoy any decision making powers when it comes to her connubial rights. Everything lies in the hands of man. It strongly deliberates the gender bias and sexual superiority of man.

The man does not allow a woman to have any privacy within her life; even though she is well versed in writing. All her social accounts are ceased off and she is forced to live the life of immature person. She is left to be happy with only one thing which is her communication with her parents. Her mother desperately says and shows unconditional love to her daughter and she also says that “marriage is not magic” and her father says “not to talk too much”.

After telling her parents about her sufferings she is taken aback by their reaction; her father is embarrassed by the shame that a possible divorce would bring, and her mother tells her that this is how things are, and asks her to be silent and to accept the situation as the first year of marriage is always hard. The mother makes a spectacle of the narrator’s embarrassment and advises her that time will pass and all her troubles will be forgotten. A crucial aspect this novel is that it brings out the jurisdiction of love and modern marriage.

Throughout history women have paid a high price and are still paying it. Men do not realize that their life will be difficult without women. They leave women to be unsafe on the streets and discriminated at work. At home, they face a worse situation than this

and are off reduced to slavish drudges; they are maltreated in a hundred different ways. Constantly derided, frequently bullied, sometimes assaulted and occasionally burnt to death.

The novel reveals a lot that depends on matters of love. The narrator tells that love is not blind, but that it just looks in wrong places. The narrator escapes the brutality that has been thrust on her and the curfews imposed on her by writing letters to imaginary lovers. The book is a meditation on love, marriage, violence and abusive marriage. The unnamed narrator is trapped in the hands of her misogynist husband, and she cries out the struggle a young writer faces in absolute isolation. The narrator uses her words fiercely, sometimes to play with her abusive husband in order to avoid possible violence, other times to provoke him. Her words are her only shielded weapons. “I slip words between his ribs like a stiletto knife” (165). There is gender difference even between a father and a daughter. In this novel, the father discourages the choice of her daughter where he is not interested to send his daughter to Kerala and grumbles about drugs and alcoholism; however, with her mother’s support the daughter moves to Kerala where the area is full of lagoons and freshwater resembling the beauty of Goa.

A few months of marital happiness and sharing the husband gradually comes out with his dominating nature. He blames her feminism for the distance that is creeping between them. The author brings an incident from Ramayana and compares herself with Sita:

Suspicious King Husband tells Rescued Queen Wife to walk through fire – if she was chased through the period of separation she’ll emerge untouched, else, she will be consined to ashes She comes out clean . .

. but immediately commands Mother Earth to swallow her, outraged by her man's suspicious behavior. She was the First Lady in Valmiki's epic, and in keeping with the social practices of the times, this kind of test was a public spectacle. not so for me . . . not with a Communist husband. (49)

The distance between the husband and wife becomes greater as he wants her to erase everything that keeps her an individual – asking her to come off Facebook and deleting all her mails. The protagonist says, “I feel robbed of my identity. I'm no longer myself if another person can so easily claim to be me, pretend to be me and assume my life while we live under the same roof”(55). The man feels that rape at night is the only solution that will bring her under his control. So rape combined with violence continues every night after night. The woman is not able to say anything in the beginning to her parents because she knows what the tradition bound parents would say. When finally she tells her mother about her stress due to his abusive harassment and tortures, her mother asks her not to be stressed because that will sicken her body and would make her state worse. Her mother tells her that she should distance herself from stress; which otherwise will suck her immunity completely.

At one point of time, her husband fiercely cuts his daughters short hair which is infested with lice. She says her daughter to think that her marriage is a bad tale because her husband is the only man around whom she has to revolve every day, in a new place with a language unknown to her. She feels trapped for two months in the space of the three rooms and a veranda. As her husband works in a college, his books and his stuff are kept in the dungeon room which smells very damp and dreadful. Even amidst all these conditions he wants his wife to be a perfect wife.

The husband always talks about Communism; she gets bored of this. Things go beyond the limit sucking all her freedom and individuality. She starts writing imaginative works; he blackmails her to deactivate her Facebook account by burning himself and hurting himself and at last she loses her contacts and lives a lonely life in a state of anxiety and depression. When she starts questioning her husband, all that she gets back is brutal and violent rape every night. He calls her names like whore, slut and prostitute. The woman cries out saying “the coarseness of my husband’s insults makes me cringe. I’m ashamed that language allows a man to insult a woman in an infinite number of ways”(171).

The life cycle of the unnamed narrator is depicted seriously. In spite of all that the husband does only the woman is blamed because the society is a patriarchal society. The woman thus laments over her plight: “I’m the battered woman, but he is the one who is playing the role of the victim” (183). She stays with him as long as she could put up with his tortures and torments. However, she too reaches her limit of patience. She says that she stays because she has no other choice and until she finds a solution that is attainable. She feels sorry, “This one True Love – which flourished for two, three years – left me wounded. I spent months scooped in bed howling my heart out. In learning to forget him I had to pick up what was left of me, the little fragments of individuality scattered across the scenery of our love, like broken bangles, chipped glass, colourful pebbles” (44). In the eyes of the world, a woman who runs away from death is more dignified than a woman who runs away from her man. She does not face society’s stone throwing when she comes away free.

The society should give women their due importance and dignity. Every woman should be treated equally and they should be allowed to play their roles as mother, wife, friend, daughter individually without any hinderance. The family can be whole only when the values are treasured by both men and women and when they are able to act as individuals without encroaching the territory of one another.

CHAPTER III

REST TO RESISTANCE

Meena Kandasamy by using the postmodernist style of writing wants to break not only the communal barriers but also the national barriers so that progress towards global arena is made possible. With this global appeal, the dignity and identity of Dalits as humans could be proclaimed. Political violence is perpetrated by people or governments to achieve political goals. Non action, political brutality such as refusing to alleviate famine or otherwise denying resources to politically identifiable groups within their territory, counter insurgency and genocide are characterized as forms of political violence. Ethnic conflicts which take place between two groups without the direct intervention of the state, nevertheless, have the backing of the state despite the state's attempts to mediate between the groups.

Dalits have been a driving force in the politicisation of caste. Dalit political mobilization analyses the meaning of caste that emanates through the writings of contemporary Dalit writers and activists. In contemporary India, caste has lost its institutionalised basis in the villages due to urbanisation and industrialization, but its importance has not decreased. The term 'Dalit' was more popular among politically conscious untouchables during the first half of the twentieth century. Dalit activists felt that the term 'untouchable' was derogatory and discriminatory, as it was derived from the Hindu notions of purity and pollution and suggested that untouchables were so polluted that they should not be touched. Abedi Zakir while talking about the conflicts that take place due to caste says, "Interethnic differences based on racial, linguistic, religious and

regional characteristics and other visible markers produce interethnic conflicts because members of that same group emotionally identify with their in group, but feel no such identity with those outside their ethnic group”(36).

The most striking feature of a Tanjore village is the unity of the individual caste group that was usually, until recently, the unity of a single street. The members of a caste within one village are first united by similarity of occupation, of rights in the land, of income, and of ritual beliefs and practices. Caste unity, and the authoritarian role of the landlords are conspicuous marks of village administration.

As Arjun Dangle, in his “Introduction” in his book *Poisoned Bread* says, “it is significant that Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change This literature is closely associated with the hopes of freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity.(xxii)

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature. Marriage is something which is traditionally sanctioned to a woman by the society. But this marriage is not the same to a man as to a woman. Though one has the necessity of the others, it is hardly realized; it has never brought about the condition of reciprocity between the husband and wife.

The political satire in *The Gypsy Goddess* silently exhibits violence witnessed by oppressed communities; it is a memorial text that addresses the erasure of violence against Dalits by enabling acts of remembrance – arevisitation of the Kilvenmani atrocity of 1968 in which 44 (but according to Inspector Rajavel’s account 42) Dalit labourers were burnt alive by landlords. *The Gypsy Goddess*, as an experimental novel depicts the gruesome massacre while official discourse on history silences the violence witnessed by oppressed communities. Indian English fiction has been central in foregrounding ‘silenced’ voices.

Hirsh Sawhney in his review “*The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy review – horrifying events told with exquisite language” talks about the theme of the novel,

The novel doesn’t delve into the inner worlds of characters or possess an actual protagonist. But Kandasamy . . . a critically acclaimed poet, is attempting to immortalize this story of an entire community’s struggle, and perhaps a more traditionally character-driven novel would have undermined this ambition. . . . Readers should trudge through this material to get to this novel’s lyrical, radical core, which offers bold perspectives on the relationship between poverty and power.

In this part of the world where the story is set, there is a belief that all must forget some things to reaffirm a moral universe, to ensure that the ghosts of the past do not haunt people. Here people do not live by history but by narratives and memories that have built-in principles of forgetfulness. It pertained specifically to the history of Partition in India and it can also serve as a reminder of the cultural amnesia surrounding violence against minority groups. When major acts of violence, which have had a

predominant impact in the shaping of public memory, stand forgotten, one can easily imagine that violence against Dalits hardly plays a role in shaping the nation's collective consciousness. Ironically, violence against Dalits gains visibility in the public domain by becoming a part of the ordinary.

Indian public sphere forms itself along principles of forgetfulness, which become a comment on the nation's silent acceptance of its fate. Hence, literary narratives which are off shoots of narrative violence meted out to the Dalits gain legitimacy; they counter the amnesia by enabling the readers to remember, and they also challenge official narratives of the State and the Judiciary, allowing 'alternative truths' to emerge.

K. Satchidanandan in his "Indian Literary Criticism Today :The Challenge And The Response" in *Indian Literature- Paradigms and Praxis* talks about the way Dalit literature set to break new grounds.

Dalit literature has created a new politics by redrawing the map of literature, discovering and exploring a whole new continent of experience that had so far been left to darkness and silence, by helping literature overcome stagnation through a cleansing renewal, by disturbing the sterile complacency of the dominant social groups, by challenging their set modes of looking at reality and their stale habits of ordering established literary canons Dalit writing has thrown over board classical virtues like propriety, balance, restraint and understatement, using a deliberately subversive diction that celebrates dalit values and challenges the middle class notions of linguistic decency. (40)

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, thus, retells the Kilvenmani massacre, which can be located along similar lines to foreground alternative truths. *The Gypsy Goddess* participates in the process of creating collective memory and initiating remembrance among wider audiences through the creation of a literary historiography. *The Gypsy Goddess* is less to do with the political agenda of 'remembering', which no doubt is central to understanding the methods deployed in realizing the same, but it is more oriented towards the ethical underpinnings of such acts of remembering that aim to create a literary historiography of marginal subjects without appropriating their voice. This novel raises ethical concerns given the severity of the massacre and the parodic form.

The story in a nutshell is as follows: the author's fictionalised version of this tragedy has its sources in historical documents and survivor interviews, farm workers are on strike after landlords murder a popular communist leader and the landlords' attempt to bully the workers back to work by imposing fines and making use of the police to threaten the workers and also by savagely assaulting Dalit women. However, the hungry people of Kilvenmani are resolute in their demands for justice. The landlords finally send a goons squad to attack the people who corner many village into a single hut and set fire to it. Thus, 44 villagers had their bodies turned into charred, unrecognizable corpses. As it happens today, the perpetrators of the crime are let off the hook and the loved ones of the dead in the massacre are sent to jail.

Kilvenmani massacre that occurred on 25 December 1968 in the village of Kilvenmani, Tanjore district, received the attention of mainstream media, which people preferred to read only as a clash between peasant groups. The headline of the newspaper

The Hindu (1968, December 27) manifests how the newspapers privileged the class component of the narrative: '42 Persons Burnt alive in Thanjavur Village following Kisan clashes'. Similarly, some other reports perceived the massacre either as an 'agrarian unrest' (*The Hindu*, 1968, December 27) or as 'a clash between two groups of kisans' (*The Hindu*, 1968, December 28). Although there were clashes between the local agricultural labourers and the labourers employed from outside the village, newspaper reports understated the role played by the landlords and also overlooked the caste dimension to the massacre as all 44 deceased labourers were Dalits. The writer says "When the Kilvenmani carnage happened in 1968, the Communists preferred to see it merely as a class workers issue, though all the forty-four agricultural labourers charred to death all were dalits" (28). *The Gypsy Goddess* validates its project of filling the gaps and silences in history.

Whether it is the number of deceased persons which was counted to be 42, instead of 44, inofficial discourse or the events that triggered and culminated in the 25 December brutal massacre (22), Kandasamy's narrative reveals the fissures in official data as well as the secret alliance between the landlords, the State and the Judiciary. Ravi Kant Tiwari in his article, "The Gypsy Goddess: A Study of the Politics Inherent in the Post Modern Dalit Novel in the context of the Caste Atrocities during Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968" comments,

Though it is inappropriate to do so but if we compare the number of dead people from either side (Upper Caste and Dalits) the ratio is 1:44 . . . Kandasamy's use of dark humour becomes apparent when she equates the value of one dead body of an upper caste

person with forty four dead bodies of Dalits. The inequality mocks the Dalits even in death. Caste remains an important aspect of one's identity even after death. Judiciary wants to portray the landlords, 'mirasdars', as incapable of avenging or perpetrating crime on Dalits by themselves, as if by doing so they would fall down in caste and class hierarchy. . . . The implicit play of caste is in order here in the court where justice is served only to the upper caste people by the upper caste judges. (5082-83)

In the prologue of the novel, the collaboration of the landlords and the State is manifest in an official letter that Gopal Krishna Naidu, President of the Paddy Producers Association—a collaboration of *mirasdars* writes to the Chief Minister highlighting the 'nefarious activities' (6) of the Communists as well as explaining the allegations of murder against him: "Although the Communist leaders and the gullible workers who follow them have trespassed on our lands, illegally harvested our crops and caused us immense suffering, we, as the members of the Paddy Producers Association, are committed to a policy of staunch non-violent opposition" (7).

The heightened rhetoric of the letter bears testimony to Naidu's clarification of intent as it serves as judicial evidence which pre-empts the turmoil likely to occur in Tanjore district while also obfuscating the role that Naidu plays in its making. In another instance of interrogating the role of the judiciary in worsening the injustices meted out on the Dalit agricultural labourers by acquitting the accused of the massacre, Kandasamy explains about the court's judgment to reveal how the custodians of the law also collaborated with those who are in power and the biased. In the form of unnamed

witnesses giving their account of the court proceedings, the mishandling of the case is reported and Judges break into poetry and call this incident heartrending.

The Judge slips into mathematics and wonders how all the dead could have fitted into such a tiny space. Such eyewitness accounts created by the novelist find their historical parallel in the work of Mythili Sivaraman as she extensively scrutinizes the court's judgment to reveal the predisposition of justice: The learned judges of the High Court said, there was something astonishing about the fact that all the 23 persons implicated in the case should be mirasdars [landlords]. Most of them were rich men, owning vast extent of lands and Gopal Krishna Naidu possessed a car. However much they might have been eager to wreak vengeance on the kisans, it was difficult to believe that they would walk bodily to the scene and set fire to the houses, without the help of any of their servants. In short, gentlemen farmers proved to be gentlemen killers.

By questioning the facts of the massacre how 44 Dalits took refuge in a single hut which was set on fire by the landlords themselves, the court reinforced the role of the witness to validate these 'truth' claims. The demands also point to the impossibility of bearing witness as one of the unnamed eyewitnesses elucidates in the novel: "We knew that we could not bring back the dead to give witness"(243). *The Gypsy Goddess* bears the burden of giving 'witness'. In contrast to the awareness, that the 'truth', in this case, is forever deferred: buried with the dead.

As seen in the blurb of the novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* is both about a true-life massacre and a novel about the impossibility of writing a novel about a true-life massacre. As Mukerjee in his book review states, "The novelist underscores the dilemma

in getting the novel across to its readers through ‘false-starts’ (Mukherjee, 2014, May 10) and prepares them to leave behind their expectations”.

The author says about the stories of the landlords and how they exploit the women and other people working under them: one landlord was a very cruel man who raped many women in his five villages, and that he ordered the virgins to be sent to him. The other landlord would consume some tobacco or betel nut and tickle women to get their attention.

When Kilvenmani was attacked by the landlords, people were hiding everywhere. The rowdies started shooting, all the people who were ready to throw stones got into some house. The women in the village and in every house got scared and asked everyone not to go outside the house. The village was set fire and the cloud was yellow and black with fire and everybody started screaming.

The author says that even the old women were not spared from the cruelty of the landlords. The old woman, Maayi was found crying along with another woman, they felt shy to come out of the hut because they were stripped of their clothes. Only when they were given a farmer’s lungi were they able to come out. During the burning of the huts, everyone moved to Paappa and Ramayya'shuts. They were united even though the landlords, the police and the legal system itself were against them. One mother in desperation threw her child out of the burning hut but the boy was caught by the leering monsters who chopped the child into pieces and threw him into the burial ground. The author says “Maayi was aware of the anger that stiffened the boy’s hands. She knew the knots behind his nerves, the bones burning in his knees. He had been throwing stones.

Onnu, Randu, Moonu, Naalu, Naapathimoonu, Naapathinaalu. He had been keeping count. He had not forgotten what he had seen” (210).

Meena Kandasamy acknowledges the linguistic failures of writing prose that is ‘Tamil in taste, English on the tongue’ (12). By centralizing the difficulties of her endeavour, the narrative also serves to authenticate the role of the writer who is from the Tamil region, herself in the telling of this story. It is full of myriad conventional starts and their dismissal commenting on the readers’ expectations, the politics of critical acclaim and prizes, and pen ultimately, the sense of boredom that might inhabit the novel. She says, “Most people are tired of history, and are tired of history repeating itself, so I am constrained to try a new way to chart and plot my way past their boredom” (14). The narrative’s self-pride over its artistic liberties not only reinforces the impossibility of narration but also raises ethical issues about the whole process of narration itself. “It prides itself on its ability to disappoint” (30).

These departures are not only about the content of the narrative but also about hunting a catchy title, forcing the writer to take immense narrative liberties and dwell in their aesthetic pleasure. Living in a territory that specialized in the development and deployment of torture devices to disfigure breasts, a lotus-eating bard deflected the demand for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to the United Nations on this issue by playing with the people’s imagination; she linked love to life and life to livelihood and livelihood to the land and the land to the local river and then, with a smiling simile, she compared the lazy white river to a pearl necklace on the bosom of the earth. “you, dear reader, to join me and look beyond the trauma, with the aid of such romantic imagery”(19).

Narrative disharmony can be located in the ideological urge to ‘look beyond the trauma’. Hence, the resistance offered to various tropes of storytelling is also a reflection of the latent demands that the subject matter puts on its narrative. In this case, it is the burden of revealing the ‘truth’ behind the massacre, creating a collective memory and allowing the various witnesses to find their ‘voice’.

Beyond fragmented and bumpy starts there lies another voice that speaks of the massacre and dwells into bringing the many voices that emerged in its aftermath. After defamiliarizing the reader, Kandasamy goes on to reveal a highly evocative narrative which documents the haunting memories of the massacre. Despite the anxious overtones, *The Gypsy Goddess* manages to create a literary history that is equally aware of the limits of such attempts towards historiography. The writer describes the intensity of the havoc created by the fire:

“ And at some point seeing becomes impossible because life has elapsed and so they no, anger scare each other and instead they mourn in silence inside the torched hut as their muscles lose mass and begin to flex of their own free will arching joints into pyramids and the dying dance after their death as they are formed and deformed and their tongue-lolling soot-coated smiles only mean that pain is always followed by paralysis”(165).

The novel mimics the official headcount of the dead persons by writing it in a tabloid form, and it breaks free of grammar rules to encapsulate the night of the massacre in a single, breathless sentence. Moving from specific details enabling identification of the burned corpses to non-specificities, the turmoil caused by the massacre comes alive:

41. Burnt, blackened, male torso; 3'6" in height; marital status unknown; skull and skeleton intact, male genitalia partially burnt, remaining body is roasted

42. A charred skull and tiny body; other details not known. (156)

While the writer avoided representation in much of the novel, when she does relent, she creates a lyrical prose that communicates in its wordiness. The second half of the novel moves beyond language to capture the collective trauma of the massacre while the first half foregrounded the impossibility of such an attempt. Through the documentation of the eyewitnesses' accounts, the novel bears testimony to the Kilvenmani violence and allows an engagement between the reader and the kinsmen of the deceased. The reader's encounter with the trauma behind the massacre is as mysterious as the process of its narrativization: the narrative of the eyewitnesses is not coherent and refuses chronology. Also, by the end of the novel, it is suggested that victims become perpetrators of violence. Veena Das's emphasis on the ethical dilemma of chronicling violence while tracing the ethical responsibility of an anthropologist is quoted by Kanak Yadav in his article *Gentlemen Killers: The Politics of Remembering in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess** in the journal *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. He says, "violence becomes so embedded into the fabric of the social that it becomes indistinguishable from the social"(219). As violence pervades all spheres, narrating violence without being politically biased is pertinent for the narrator. In this regard, the writer addresses such limitations through aesthetic responses. The four-page-long poetic-sentence is, therefore, part of the writer's response to the methodological inquiries in creating literary history. Instead of narrating individual struggles through a list linear narrative, the novelist deploys poetic prose to voice the collective trauma of the

agricultural labourers as they suffered, resisted and are finally consumed by the ‘hasty’ fire. By focusing on the collective rather than the individual self, *The Gypsy Goddess* redeems itself from questions of agency, which is otherwise the central point of contention in narratives that claim to establish ‘alternative truths’.

Regarding the issue of agency, it is worthwhile to consider Dipesh Chakrabarty’s inquiries into the subaltern studies project of ‘Minority Histories’ or ‘history from below’. He stressed on the need to incorporate, ‘minority pasts’; Chakrabarty defines minority pasts as ‘those experiences of the past that have to be assigned to an “inferior” or “marginal” position as they are translated into the academic historian’s language’ (2001, pp. 100–101). Just as ‘minority pasts’ resist modes of historiography, the narrative resistance offered in *The Gypsy Goddess* highlights the limits of the project of historiography: in this case the creation of an alternative literary history which is inevitable for resurrecting memories.

Knowing that any attempt to capture the ‘pasts’ of the agricultural labourers—their everyday experiences along with the horrific recollection of the massacre would be met with issues of translation, causing co-option of such ‘subaltern pasts’ and the writer attempts to archive these details by transcribing the words of the witness. The disconnected paragraphs documenting life in Kilvenmani after the massacre reveal how violence has seeped into the activities of everyday:

Arumugam is afraid for his daughter. Asked to identify the dead, he points out Jothi, her classmate. That is when the dread enters him.

He cannot move, but he will not let his little girl out of sight. She is

caught between his fear and her lack of idea of what happened. She shivers when she is alone. She has seizures in her sleep. She needs to be held by someone. She needs the smell of armpits to soothe her, breasts to rest her head on. . . .She keeps asking about the others, her friends. She calls them all, one by one. . . . After she's called their names, after she is sure that all the boys and the girls have come, after she has finished playing, she spins like a top under a frenzied whip, and falls down in a swoon. (201)

To capture the frenzy and psychological void caused by the trauma of the massacre, the writer brings the experiences of different persons who are not developed into individuated characters but mentioned as cases. These first-person accounts of the strangeness of Kilvenmani, blur the distinction between the rational and the irrational and display the continuing trauma of the violence.

Hence, *The Gypsy Goddess* archives the 'alternative truth' of Kilvenmani in a heterogeneous narrative. As it engages in creating a memorial culture that is aware of issues of agency, a disjointed novel survives to create a collective memory. By documenting the lived experiences of Kilvenmani and its people in poetic prose, the novel allows diverse registers of knowledge to coexist. This literary archive, therefore, foregrounds the agency of the people of Kilvenmani even as the writer struggles to document it objectively:

You [the reader] impatiently wait in that house of many, many rooms when word reaches you that Gopalkrishna Naidu has been killed. [...] You hear rumours of beheading. You hear rumours of forty-four

parcels, each wrapped in palm fronds, sent to the people. But you shouldn't believe all that you hear and you shouldn't tell all that you believe. You watch the women sing of the landlord's perverse lust, his blood thirst and this red harvest. You hear the men say, with a sigh, "Mudivukandachu," which can be variously translated as "it has been completed" or "We have seen the end".(273)

The end of the novel reinstates power to the people of Kilvenmani. While the epilogue envisages how the reader would verify the facts by undertaking a journey to the Kilvenmani region, the reader's attempt to judge the narrative truth becomes a fraught exercise: the writer shocks the reader with the knowledge of Gopal Krishna Naidu's premeditated murder and destabilizes any search for objectivity. While the people of Kilvenmani celebrate, the reader gets estranged from the discourse that she was likely to create about Kilvenmani. With its shock value, the Kilvenmani narrative continues to resist narrative control even as the writer writes the last words of the novel. As Satchidanandan says, "the application or implementation of freedom will have to be recognized as an aesthetic value. The intensity of experience, the way the experience is socialized, its power to cross the boundaries of time and space – these are the standards . . . for the evaluation of the Dalit literature" (39).

The role played by *The Gypsy Goddess* in interrogating, resisting and offsetting 'official truths' is not aimed towards solidarity, precisely, because these 'alternative truths' continue to suffer amnesia in public memory. Despite the incongruity of playful tone and sensitive content, the narrative experimentation enables the frenzy of the massacre and its collective trauma to find a language. By maintaining a dual voice in the

narrative, which is playful as well as sensitive, the novelist reveals information as well as conceals it; *The Gypsy Goddess* underlines its own precarious position in bearing witness to violence which has got relegated to the collective unconscious of the public. The novelist, by chronicling violence and by questioning official fact also depicts how life continues after the massacre in a language which pushes its boundaries.

Mukerjee, in the review of the novel says,

this novel is'nt only about the writer's craft and experimentation. It is a searing condemnation of the inequalities of caste and class, and the tragic reflection on how resilient the structures of power are. It is an important novel as it reminds us at the moment when much is being made of corporate power, that caste oppression and violence have not gone away and no matter how many books are written about them or how many inquiry committees look into them, there is still a long road to be travelled.

Elba Mandrelle and Purnima Bhatnagar in their article "Kali: The Epitome Of Women" in Arupa Kalita Patangia's *The Story of Felanee*, in the book *Indian Writing in English* talk about the way gender issues are taken up by women writers: "literature is one of the most expressive forms of art through which woman have articulated the gender specific concerns. . . . Women writers in India gave a new dimension to Indian literature by the portrayal of women sufferings and raised many issues faced by women" (217).

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy, deals with a woman's attempt to realize her freedom and assert her individuality during the course of which she comes into conflict with the family and the patriarchal society. Marriage thus instead of giving

happiness, subjugates and enslaves the woman and leads her to aimless days which are indefinitely repeated. Bimaljit Saini in her article, “The God Of Small Things – A Feminist Analysis” in the book *Feminist English Literature*, quotes what Maitreji Mukhopadhyay says, regarding the condition of woman in Indian society. She says,

It should be emphasized that the poor status of women, their oppression and exploitation, cannot be examined as an isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in the rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exists in Indian, the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure. (96)

Bimaljit Saini also quotes in her “The God of Small Things – A Feminist Analysis”, Collete Dowling’s comment regarding the secondary position of women. She says,

It has to do with dependency: the need to lean on someone. . . . those needs stay with us into adulthood , clamouring for fulfillment right along side our need to be self-sufficient. . . . any woman who looks within knows that she was never trained to feel comfortable with the idea of taking care of herself, standing up for herself, asserting herself. (100)

Nitasha Bajaj in *Gender Clashes in Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman*, in the book, *Indian Writing in English* says, “ gender issues were prevalent not only in the west but orient and universe had suffered from it; it has a hydro-chromatic reaction and static existence; gender politics is governed by traditions and circumstances. Novelists,

whether male or female, have the responsibility of portraying what woman think, feel and experience in the 21st century. . . . Literature is used as a public forum in which gender based discriminations in the society is found” (192).

In *When I Hit You*, the female protagonist after finding her true love thought that she would have a blissful married life. She was shattered when her husband proved himself to be a representative of the patriarchal society. Deepsheekha Kotwal and Priyanka Gandotra, “A Room of One’s Own: A Perspective On Indian English Women’s Writing”, say,

The ambivalence which defines the Indian women today is expressed in texts by women writers who are in the process of writing / righting women. By deconstructing the stereotype of the ideal . . . they are refashioning a new assertive femininity. Contemporary Indian women’s writing can best be defined as “resistance” that eliminates traditional hegemonic biases that obstruct and silence women. (80-81)

In spite of his views on Communism and his education he proved himself to be an ordinary husband contrary to the expectations of his wife. He tried to suppress her in all possible ways; he tortured her during the nights by rape and by calling her names.

What Tejinder Kaur in the article, “Changing Facts of Indian Woman and Women’s Issues In Selected Indian English Fiction: A Study” in the book, *Trends in Indian English Literature*, says regarding the portrayal and the sufferings of a woman in a

patriarchal society is quoted elaborately here for a better understanding of the protagonist's plight:

Indian fiction in English since its reception in the latter half of the nineteenth century till date, along with other issues has also been dealing with the changing place, position, roles and problems of women in various scholarships and areas. Women in Indian society . . . have been oppressed, suppressed, repressed, victimized and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunities for the fulfillments of their lives, despite the fact that they possess equal capacities, skills and intelligence and work wholeheartedly for the development of their family. The values of sacrifice, submissiveness, excessive endurance, series of adjustments and self-replacement have been demanded and desired from them alone as the normal way of life. Destitute of these virtues and rules, a woman is called a shrew, a witch, a monster or in other such derogatory terms. The writers both male and female of almost all the countries and cultures have been grappling with the cultures and context specific problems and issues related to women, the struggles undergone by them to retrieve their subjugated positions, the conflicts and traumas suffered by them in the process and self-assertions made by them to transform their circumstances. These writers have contributed a lot in raising consciousness of the readers about women's victimization in various forms thus making a place for their redressal. (69-70)

She came to a point when she could no longer put up with him. She says, “until then, I stay. I stay because I have no other choice. Until I am within touching distance of a permitted resolution” (209). However, she was determined that she would not allow him to break her any longer. Tejinder Kaur in his article, “ Changing Facets Of Indian Women And Women’s Issues in Selected Indian English Fiction: A Study” in the book *Trends In Indian English Literature* says, “Most of their recent Indian women novelists have shown that in the changing socio-economic scenario, educated Indian women are no longer ready to bear any kind of exploitation. They have become aware of the demands of their self and are committed to struggle for the fulfillment of these demands” (76).

The woman resisted all the violence used by her husband. She says,

I am anti-fragile. I’ve been made not to break. that is one of the reasons why it becomes harder to talk about the violence. Who I am proves to be my own undoing it does not cross their mind that a woman who is being betan is intimidated into feeling, believing, knowing that to ask for help from others will only put her at greater risk: I come to know that even those of them who have mastered the theory have not lived through their experience; they lack the insight that a woman being abused can mostly trust only one person for help. Her self. (220)

Thus, she emerged as an individual.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The Indian women writers in English today present a realistic picture of the modern materialistic man and the pathetic plight of the women and the Dalits suffering endlessly, due to patriarchal domination.

In India, Dalit rural women face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple productive and reproductive roles within their families and communities, due to lack of rural infrastructure and lack of access to essential goods and services. Because of their poverty levels, they are landless and have to depend on the dominant caste in the society. Through the writing of her novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, Meena Kandasamy has given expression to the gruesome event that makes the presence of the novel even more pertinent and important in that it conveys what would otherwise have been buried under the sands of time.

The text becomes a potent tool in the hands of the Meena Kandasamy as it brings out her desire to awaken the sleeping masses. When economics and politics fail to provide the necessary solution for the heinous problems of caste and race, people feel that it could come through art and literature because the pen is mightier than sword. True democracy is yet to be achieved and one may wonder how much more aboriginal blood of the Dalits will flow under the bridge before the dream of Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule will see the light of the day.

When there is marginalization due to gender and caste, the Dalit women's plight is still worse as they undergo the sufferings of double marginalization. In recent years literature related to gender and feminist discourse in India has brought considerable insight into the problems of women in India. Literature, along with several civil society movements, has influenced the government policy for economic and educational empowerment of women and their representation in local governance. More recently, particularly since the early 1990s, we can also clearly hear multiple voices have been heard on issues related to gender and caste. Since then, the Indian feminist discourse has become marked with multiple strands. These multiple voices, are closely linked to the uneven gains of progress recorded by various groups. 'Women' in India is not a homogeneous category; it is marked with differences in health status, educational achievements, economic performance as measured by human development indicators, particularly women belonging to Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes and minorities.

The rate of progress according to human development indicators is significantly lower for Dalit women than it is for women from the upper-castes. This means that the Dalit women have benefited less from development than the rest of the women. Since the improvement in the human development indicators for Dalit women has been slower than for women from the upper-caste group, the disparities between Dalit women and the rest continue to persist. This has induced increased demand for group-specific gender policies.

The feminist discourse focuses on challenges faced by women belonging to the Dalit social group who are the lower castes, particularly untouchables. The caste system

is based on the division of people into social groups (or castes) in which the civil, cultural, and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and then made hereditary; the assignment of rights among castes is unequal and hierarchical, and this system provides a regulatory mechanism to enforce social and economic organization through the instruments of social ostracism (or social and economic penalties). In the traditional scheme of the caste system, the untouchables, who were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, were deprived of all rights, and being located at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, they suffered the most from an antisocial spirit and violence by high-caste Hindus. They were denied many rights – right to property, education, civil and cultural rights, and were restricted to the so-called ‘polluting’ occupations and manual labour. Additionally, the untouchables also suffered because of the notion of untouchability, which is unique to them. Because of this unique stigma of untouchability, the untouchables are considered to be impure and polluting, and they have been suffering from not only physical and social segregation but also isolation. This isolation and segregation lead to suppression of their freedom and restrictions imposed on their physical and social mobility, resulting in the denial of equal access and opportunity in various spheres of society, culture, and economy.

The Indian government has addressed the problem of caste and untouchability through various constitutional safeguards. The Constitution of India has recognized Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as ‘historically deprived’ segments of the society. Because the Indian Constitution has listed 1,108 castes in its first schedule, these deprived castes came to be known as Scheduled Castes. The Indian Constitution also carries certain safeguards in Article 341 for the Scheduled Castes for ensuring their

fundamental rights as 'Dalits'. These are the former 'untouchables' within the traditional framework of Varna system.

Indian citizens and the Directive Principles of State Policy authorize the state to protect this socially marginalized group of the Dalits from any further discrimination in modern Indian society based on their caste identity. Subsequently, laws have been passed with the aim to remove discriminatory practices against the Scheduled Castes and also to ensure their social and economic empowerment. Anti-discriminatory measures for the Dalits include the enactment of the Untouchability Offence Act, 1955 (renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act [PCR] in 1976), and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA), 1989, which aim at preventing crimes and atrocities stemming from discrimination and hatred towards Dalits.

Notwithstanding the principle of equality of all citizens, the government reserves the right to pass legislation designed to give special relief to the 'weaker sections' of the society, which includes the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, women, and children. Permanent national commissions have also been set up to safeguard the rights of the SCs and STs as well as women.

There are also various economic schemes announced from time to time to create employment opportunities or grant welfare payments or other benefits to the 'weaker sections' of the society. In addition to the legal safeguards against discrimination, equal access to and participation in public employment, education, politics, and governance are ensured through reservation of a few seats in government services, public educational institutions, Parliament, and state legislatures for SCs and STs; in the elected bodies of local government, there are reserved seats for women also. Although the practice of

‘untouchability’ has been banned since Independence, many of the associated behaviours, norms, and values still persist.

This means that Dalits still live in separate locations with poorer services, face discrimination when accessing facilities and services, receive lower pay, and face discrimination in the marketplace. However, the problem of Dalit women is distinct and unique in many ways because they suffer from the triple burden of economic deprivation, patriarchal system, and caste- and untouchability-based discrimination—all of which cannot be removed merely by the application or implementation of the above laws. Dalit women are also victims of social and religious practices such as *devadasi/jogini* (temple prostitution) that result in their sexual exploitation in the name of religion. Empirical analyses from official sources will highlight the fact that Dalit women are at the lowest end of a social structure that is characterized by great inequality on the basis of caste and gender. The interface between caste, patriarchy, and gender is a theme that needs a thorough theoretical and empirical study for the purpose of understanding the nature and causes of the caste and gender exploitation of Dalit women.

The plurality of ‘woman’ as a category, and the need to address the diversity within this category, including how different groups of women have different access to citizenship and other rights, different identities, and different problems, is now recognized all over the world as an important issue in feministic discourse. The mainstream feminist discourse in the West came under criticism, particularly from African American and non-Western scholars, for ignoring the racial aspect of the gender issue and also from those who pay attention to the economic and social oppression of women. The writings from black feminists have focused on the distinct problems of

women from discriminated groups, which are similar to those of other women at the same level but are also different in other respects like race, colour, social origin, ethnicity, and nationality. Literature has underlined how the category 'woman' has, in fact, been representative of the dominant groups of women in the same way that the liberal notion of citizenship has been representative of dominant groups of men.

The labour market experiences of Dalit women are different from those of the upper-caste women because of the traditional notion of the caste system of purity and pollution. Dalit women are hardly ever employed as cooks in upper-caste homes. They will only be hired to do the work of cleaning, washing clothes, and sometimes looking after the sick. People of other castes while coming into contact with them avoid them as untouchable, unapproachable, and at times even unseeable people. This notion of untouchability leads to physical isolation and restriction in employment opportunities. Indian feminist discourse has been uncomfortable until quite recently, to acknowledge caste or religious differences among different groups of women.

This is partly because it fractures the kind of political unity that feminists seek to build. The issue of violence against women—rape, murder, and other forms of violence—is taken up with campaigns and movements. The demands of such movements resulted in some changes made in the law regarding 'custodial' rape, dowry related deaths and, most recently, domestic violence.

Special police cells were set up in selected towns to deal with the issue of violence against women. However, most of the cases brought before these cells related to domestic violence, were not the kind of public violence that Dalit women so frequently undergo. When activists of the Indian women's movement have recognized caste

differences, they have recognized caste as an aspect of class, such as, for instance, in their efforts to organize rural women workers, many of whom might be Dalits; or when they take up issues of poverty, where Dalits and lower castes are overrepresented; or when they address issues of violence against women.

Dalit women prominently figure among the victims of sexual violence. However, the focus on labour and on class struggle has precluded an explicit focus on caste as it affects women, and both of the lower and upper castes. That is, upper-caste feminists have often refused to recognize caste as a form of social privilege and capital that enables social mobility and choice. Rather than seeing caste as having its own independent identity, many feminists have seen caste as class-like; that is, as a socioeconomic category instead of an aspect of religious conceptions of self and society that reproduce structural inequality. The proponents of the women's movement in India have generally confined themselves to seeking changes in laws relating to gender relations, marriage, domestic violence, economic empowerment, and sexuality; they have been mostly silent on the public violence and discrimination that Dalit women so frequently endure.

The bodies of Dalit women are subjected to public sexual violence whenever they or the men of their community are seen as transgressing the caste hierarchy and the existing *devadasi* system. In the early 1990s, Dalit women began to question the mainstream women's movement because of its failure to recognize the distinctive character of the problems of Dalit women. Dalit women's discourse recognizes the problem of gender exploitation by their men, and therefore, the Dalit women's movement, like the 'mainstream' women's movement, addresses the issue of patriarchy,

which prevents women from asserting their choices and participating in decision making in both the community and the family. However, writers on the problems of Dalit women have argued that low-caste women, particularly the untouchables, have suffered from not only gender discrimination and economic deprivation, but also discrimination related to prescribed customary provisions in the institution of caste and untouchability. They suffer a triple deprivation owing to gender, poverty, and caste.

Based on the understanding of their own situation and condition, the Dalit women's movement today, is organized around issues of access to livelihood and social needs, patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and impunity for violence against Dalit women and affirmative action policies that claim access to resources such as land, nondiscriminatory employment practices (wages, number of workdays, and equal treatment at the workplace), and access to education as well as the promotion of good working conditions, public health care, and food security.

There is also the designation of prostitution as 'commercial sex work' on par with other exploitative ways in which women have to earn their living. The Dalit women's groups, conversely, are aware of the existence of traditional, religiously sanctioned practices that lead to the sexual exploitation of women of lower castes, and with the growth of modern cities, many of these women end up as prostitutes. Dalit social reformers, from the pre-Ambedkar period right up to Ambedkar himself, have always demanded that Dalit women reject these traditional practices and stay away from prostitution, even at the cost of economic hardship. This dichotomy between the reactions of the two groups of Indian feminists on the one hand and Dalit women's organizations

on the other necessitates greater awareness about the historical discourses that each of them relates to.

Meena Kandasamy's novels, *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You*, focus on issues of feminism, abolition of caste, assertion of self and linguistic identity. It is revealed through her works that her consciousness is firmly tied to the world around her, a world characterized by ecstasy and pain, love and despair.

The Gypsy Goddess deals with the struggle of Dalit agricultural workers in Kilvenmani in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu who are mercilessly killed by the upper caste landlords under the leadership of Gopal Krishna Naidu. The village landlords used the labourers as slaves and made them slog in the paddy fields. A small spark of defiance is ignited in the minds of the labourers which spread from villager to villager. The communities stood against the landlords, in unison; but the landlords were determined to break them; in spite of the difficulties the encounter, the villagers became bold and strong enough to resist the landlords. Moreover the Communists also motivated and encouraged them to fight more fiercely. Unable to put up with the situation any longer the landlords set fire to the village of Kilvenmani.

In *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, Meena Kandasamy writes about domestic violence and abuse within marriage as she herself was a victim of it. The protagonist was a highly educated, clever and articulate young woman who explored the conceived ideas about victims of domestic abuse. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is autobiographical. After a period of courtship, and two weeks of marriage, the husband tried to burn himself with matches until the young wife deactivated her face book account. He also tried to dissuade her from writing

articles about female sexuality in English. He kept deleting every email she received and prevented her from writing poetry about his abuse.

As a representative of male dominated society the husband try to suppress the woman in all aspects when other things failed, he used rape as his weapon. Unable to bear the torture and determined not to break into pieces the woman came away to lead her life on her own.

Meena Kandasamy through the portrayal of the sufferings and resistance of the marginal landless labourers on the one hand and the torture and torments suffered by the marginalized woman (due to patriarchy) at the hands of an abusive husband on the other drives home the message that life is worth living and that it should be lived with dignity in spite of all the odds one faces.

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