



**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**

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Abstract

*Politics of a text is couched in the particular language, form and style used in the text. The narrator at the beginning of the novel *The Gypsy Goddess* claims that it is not a postmodernist novel. This paper will attempt to show how this novel fits into the definition of postmodernism. Diverse social issues are also dealt with in the analysis of the novel, where the major issue is the Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968. The heinous caste atrocities in a small village are the microscopic representations of the same at the national level. Besides, the rifts from the canonical Indian literary tradition and the emergence of Dalit Literature have also been focussed in this paper.*

Keywords: *Gypsy Goddess, Postmodernism, Caste, Postmodern Novel, Politics, Kilvenmani Massacre, Meena Kandasamy, Dalit Literature*



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Aim of the Study: This paper intends to study the use of postmodernism, by Meena Kandasamy, as a literary technique to deal with the socio-political issues in the Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968.

Introduction:

Content cannot exist without form. P K Nayar aptly puts it, "Any politics of race, gender, caste or class demands a way of speaking, a method of representation, and a method of narrative organisation to make meaning for the reader" (Nayar 2013). The text with its metaphors, formal properties, voice, setting and characterisation makes it possible for the reader to interpret the meaning of the text. The narrator at the beginning of the novel claims that it is not a postmodernist novel. "Riddled with self-doubt, I stopped trying to make my story fit into this [read Postmodernist] form" (Kandasamy 33). This paper will try to show that postmodernism lies at the heart of this novel. I will try to show how this novel fits into the definition of postmodernism. Like a postmodernist novel, this novel breaks all the conventions of a typical novel. The language is ambiguous and incoherency dominates the narrative. It lacks stability. From a conventional point of view this novel does not start for a

long time as she keeps on reiterating “Once upon a time, in one tiny village, there lived an old woman” (Kandasamy 2014). And as a matter of fact, the old woman, Maayi, appears at the fag of the novel. Thus, Kandasamy is making it appear like a pulp fiction where the reader has to join the various pieces of the text in order to make it whole. Strangely enough, the author also, at somewhere around the middle of the text, starts narrating the text in a flow thus breaking the stability of the instability and bringing the stability. But this should also be seen as a postmodernist technique as the stability makes the ongoing incoherent narrative coherent suddenly (Alvesson 2006). The language is another issue of importance here. The use of ‘F****’ word and its various forms shows the shift from the sanskritised practise followed by the adherents of the Indian literary tradition where the purity of language is given more prominence. Dalit literature is infamously known for its break from this literary practise starting mainly with Dhasal’s poetry and other Dalit writings which emerged in the wake of the Dalit Panthers movement (Limbale 2004). The novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, does not have any main character or a hero or a protagonist in it. A postmodernist novel does not believe in focusing on a single character. (Hicks 2004)

The Gypsy Goddess: An Analysis

The early Dalit writers of the 1970s and 1980s depicted “untouchability as a symptom of structural inequalities based on caste, Kandasamy, (taking it on a different level), depicts untouchability as a form of human rights violation.” (Satyanarayana 2015)“Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* is a novel about the (real) events of the Kilvenmani Massacre of 1968, but it's also a novel about the process of narrating those events.” (Hindustan Times 2014)

K. Satyanarayana, in ‘Caste as the Baggage of the Past’, makes a “distinction between the Dalit literature of the early years- 1970s and 1980s- and the new Dalit literature inaugurated by *Outcaste* after the 1990s...while old Dalit literature narrated the insults and the indignities and the inequalities of the caste system with hysterical rage, Jadhav records similar experiences with more restraint” (291-308). Similarly Kandasamy has pioneered the third phase in the Dalit literature by assimilating the western theory and criticism in the Dalit literature.

Kandasamy deliberately puts her novel in the sphere of western literary tradition. She compares her novel with western literature (Kandasamy 32). Ironically enough, by rejecting her novel as a postmodernist novel she makes it a postmodern novel, as the novel through its narrative technique and style aptly proves it. *The Gypsy Goddess* reminds one of Bakhtin’s idea of a novel, where novel is constantly evolving and can take and assimilate newer

experiments in this genre (Bakhtin 1981). Thus judging this novel according to the parameters of the western literary criticism and theory would not be an unwise act.

Postmodernism says that an individual is a product of his social environment and social context (Hicks 2004). It is collective. Dalit literature never has a subjective tone or individual voice. It is always collective, as Limbale says in his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004). Dalit Literature has many characteristics of postmodern literature. It is, in a way, Postmodern since it challenges canon and defies Indian literary tradition. It believes in deconstructing truth, reason in order to show how the truth and reason have been constructed by the upper caste Hindus in order to dominate over the Dalits and lower castes. Similarly, in the West the truth and the reason were constructed by the white upper class males in order to suit their comfort and to exert and assert their dominance over the racial minorities and female sex and lower class (Hicks 2004).

Alvesson says, "To define postmodernism is hardly possible" (Alvesson 2006). Yet many critics and writers have tried to define it somehow. Featherstone defines postmodernism as "the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface 'depthlessness' of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer and the assumption that art can only be repetitious" (Featherstone, 1988:203). If observed even if not too carefully it can be deduced that the novel in question, *The Gypsy Goddess*, has almost all the characteristics defined above in order to be aptly called as a postmodern novel.

Postmodernism exercises power for the purpose of social change. Hicks thinks that the political horrors are mostly there in the West. But he does not know that the horrors of caste are not just confined to social sphere but are very much part and parcel of the political arena as well in the Indian context. Kandasamy uses the postmodern technique to expose the presence of such political horrors at the grass root level in rural India.

Deconstruction of myths was taken in hand by Mahatma Jyotibharao Phule, who challenged the 'truth', manufactured by the upper caste Hindus (Phule 2008). He pioneered the construction of new epistemology. Mats Alvesson in his book *Postmodernism* says that postmodernism "represents an effort to integrate a number of diverse, in themselves ambiguous, themes" (Alvesson 2006). *The Gypsy Goddess*, being a postmodernist novel, tries to, and very successfully, integrates diverse themes. Therefore, my paper while looking at

this text will not be confined to just one aspect or sphere but will look at varied themes and issues underlying it.

Language is used ironically. Meena Kandasamy uses language ironically. She says she is not writing a postmodernist novel (Kandasamy 33) but she is writing one. She is self-contradictory when she says that. According to postmodernist the use and stress on the use of reason by the western civilization has brought havoc on the world in the form of wars and oppression (Hicks 2004). Thus postmodernists employ the idea of going against reason. They believe in deconstructing truth and not adhering to any particular rules and laws. In the Indian context, Brahminical texts emphasised on following a particular literary tradition. Those who tried to break that literary tradition were forced to sanskritise their works. Dalit literature, in this sense, has broken the rules and laws of the Hindu literary tradition. The rules, like that of western civilization, were used by the caste Hindus in order to keep the Dalits and marginalised away from gaining or producing knowledge. Meena challenges the dominant caste Hindu literary tradition by mixing the western literary technique with the eastern dalit sentiments in order to forge a new kind of work of art in the Dalit literature. Her use of so called vulgar language is a shift away from the sanskritised pure language of the caste Hindus. Thus, it challenges their linguistic purity and the hypocrisy inherent in its use.

Kandasamy also explores the failure of the Nehruvian model. The aura around the major political party leaders has been shattered to the core and their hypocrisy has been exposed. Only a Dalit political leader fights for the cause of the Dalits till the end. This justifies in a way why Dalits need a separate electorate. Had it not been for reservation of the Dalits in the parliament and state assemblies it would have been close to impossible to imagine the presence of any Dalit representative in the political sphere.

The author also exposes the loopholes in Communism. In India, Communism emerged with the goal of working for and helping the working class. But it did not lend its helping hand to the cause of the Dalit masses, in a substantial manner. Even in the novel the failure of the communism in the wake of the Dalit atrocities is exposed. It is not able to provide any concrete solutions to help the Dalits (Kandasamy 2014). On the other hand, ironically enough, the landlords use the enmity with the communists as a tool to save their heads in court by putting false allegations on the members of the communists party.

The question of the use of English language in Kandasamy's novel is another major issue. Chinua Achebe uses English language to write back to empire in order to show the rich culture and tradition of the African people (Achebe 2016). Kandasamy's purpose for using English language seems to be to convey the harsh realities, pertaining to the caste atrocities in

the local villages of South India, to not only to the Indian people but also to reach out to the readers at the global level. She does not seek empathy or sympathy from the readers. But she wants to unsettle them and to compel them to think and become agents of change. Bertolt Brecht invented the concept of 'epic theatre' in order to make the passive audience into active agents of change after watching a play (Brecht 1964). We can see the same method applied by Kandasamy where she uses the act of reading as a catalyst or a stimulus to provoke the readers to think for the solutions to the problem in the caste ridden society of India.

As Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* focuses on the global audience similarly, Kandasamy is also writing in English keeping global readership in mind. A shift is emerging in the sphere of Dalit literature. With Narendra Jadhav, in post-Durban discourse, the appeal has shifted towards an appeal for a cosmopolitan identity. Jadhav "constructs a new hierarchy of identities- the national as 'inhuman' and the cosmopolitan one as 'human'" (Satyanarayana 2015). From his perspective caste somehow just melts away when it is looked at in the context of global citizenship. In the same vein, thus it can be said that Kandasamy, by using the postmodernist style of writing, which has a global appeal, wants to break out of the national barrier and move towards the global arena to proclaim, over and above all, the dignity and identity of Dalits as 'human'. She also wants to prove the proximity between the lives of Dalits and the postmodernism. They are not much different.

According to postmodernists, as stated in the book by Hicks, "objectivity and neutrality of legal reasoning are frauds. All decisions are inherently subjective and driven by preference and politics" (Hicks 2004). Kandasamy exposes this truth in her novel where the legal institutions are politically motivated and are in the controls of the upper caste Hindus.

Since there is a huge nexus between the feudal lords and the state machinery land reforms measures remain on the paper and could not be brought into praxis. Even the judicial authorities and legal institutions are casteist in their approach towards the lower caste and Dalits (Kandasamy 2014). The charred bodies of the dead are counted mercilessly by the policemen. The way these burnt dead bodies of the Dalits are thrown mercilessly reminds one of the gruesome realities of the Nazi regime where the dead bodies, of the Jews, were treated in the similar fashion by the Nazis. The narrator reminds us, the readers, constantly about the two dead bodies which remain uncounted. The dead ones are transformed into mere numbers kept for the official record. Though it is inappropriate to do so but if we compare the number of dead people from either side (Upper castes and Dalits) the ratio is 1:44 (Kandasamy 2014). 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 High court associates the sense of honour with landlords but never see the Dalits through the same lens. 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. This exposes the lack of representation of Dalits in the state machinery, despite the efforts by the forefathers of the Constitution of India.

The language has been distorted by the court to make the case bend in favour of the 'mirasdars'. The peasants show their astonishment on the play with the language. There is no truth. The meanings are deconstructed as has been iterated by Derrida when he talks about the idea of deconstruction. There has been constant play with the words. Sometimes the novel takes a dialogic turn in the sense that the narrator gives an interview to an imaginary person (supposedly representing readers). She tries to answer the questions by raising the questions herself. She tries to understand our psyche by making us confused.

R Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* (1963) makes a grand old woman the narrator of the story. Here, at the end of *The Gypsy Goddess*, the author is trying to make 'Maayi', the grand old woman, the narrator of the story in the similar fashion. Here, the narrative style is a mixture of postmodern narrative style of the twentieth century and the traditional oral narrative style where the old woman of the *sthalam* tells the tale.

Reader reception theory fails in this text. As a director guides the viewer or audience through various scenes and angles in a movie similarly the reader, here it seems, is being constantly guided by the narrator throughout the novel. The response of the reader is evoked and provoked like the epic theatre but is not allowed to come to its fruition in the sense of its active engagement with the text till the end. Despite that the view is not confined to one point of view. Since the author is constantly breaking the conventional understanding of the meaning of novel the sense of the text or the coherence is not achieved till the end. Here the epilogue sounds like a prologue where a new (or old) narrator in the form of Maayi is introduced. The ending is almost similar to some extent to the technique employed by the author of *The Grip of Change* P. Sivakami. Though Sivakami visits the place depicted in the novel herself here Kandasamy sends an imaginary person representing all the readers to the place where the novel is set. Thus bringing alive the fictional characters in this novel. The author employs journalistic technique trying to make it a 'non-fictional fiction'. The report of the deaths is cold and lacks any emotion or sympathy with the victims.

Hicks sees the violation of the body of women from the perspective of gender (2004). In the Indian context, the issue of caste, class and gender are inseparable. Rapes become 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. This point has also been discussed in the introduction to D. R. Nagaraja's book *The Flaming Feet*(1993). 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 (Kandasamy 2014).

Postmodernists' idea of education is that education makes an individual aware about his/her racial, sexual and class identity (Hicks 2004). In the contexts of the Dalits the education was seen almost in the same light. When Ambedkar strongly suggests the people of Dalit community to gain education he wanted them to become aware about their social position and social reality (Ambedkar 2014). Thus the role of education in the context of Dalit community is same to that conceived by the postmodernists.

Hicks argues that "postmodern education should emphasise works that are not in the canon" (2004). So is the case with Dalit literature. It rejects canon. And it focuses on the achievements of the marginalised. It highlights the historical crimes of the caste Hindus. It also shows the other side of the truth, which postmodernist also advocated for when it asks us to explore alternative ways of learning about society.

Dalit literature is very much in postmodernist literary tradition. Dalit literature is always blamed for lacking aesthetic literary sense (Limbale 2004). Kandasamy, through her novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, situates her novel once and for all in the postmodernist literary tradition of the west. It should be seen not only as a challenge to the Hindu literary tradition but should also be seen as a turning point in the history of Dalit literature.

Postmodernists are of the view that our current social context is characterized by oppression (Hicks 2004) that benefits, in the Indian context, upper castes Hindus, at the expense of Dalit community. Depicting truths via the medium of novels (books) has its own limitation. The full truth remains hidden somewhere. Even though that being the case Kandasamy has tried her best to portray this one dark day in as picturesque manner as possible.

In *The Gypsy Goddess* instead of the fall of the Bastille the third estate is burnt to death and mocked at by the representatives of the so called Democratic institutions. The country is enslaved in its own chains of traditions and religions. Here the fight is not only for bread and butter but also for, that every human has a fundamental right to it, human dignity. It seems

that the panacea of this millennia old caste system is a revolution in the lines of French Revolution. The extremist position taken by Kalyan Rao in *Untouchable Spring* seems the only light guiding us out of this dark tunnel.

Conclusion:

The lack of space and attention given to this gruesome event makes the presence of this novel even more pertinent and important to convey what would otherwise have been buried under the sands of time. The text becomes the potent tool in the hands of the writer especially when it has to awaken the sleeping masses. It has been proved time and again, that the pen is mightier than the sword, especially during the French Revolution when Robespierre along with others used the power of the ink to make their voices heard to the otherwise deaf people sitting in the position of authority and privilege. In *The Gypsy Goddess* the voice of the author and the narrator is not meek and subdued but potent and powerful, even condemning in tone. The reader is not spared for being passive. The fourth wall has been broken time and again. Obama is still called a colored President and K.R. Narayan a Dalit President. It seems economics and politics failed to provide the solution for the heinous problems called caste and race. The true democracy has not been achieved till yet. One can only 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.

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