

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*: A Pedagogy of Teaching Dalit Resistance in English Classrooms

Dr. Hanumant Ajinath Lokhande

Associate Professor, Dept. of English,
Nowrosjee Wadia College, Pune 411001.

Email: halokhande@nowrosjeewadacollege.edu.in

ABSTRACT

The research paper focuses on Meena Kandasamy's novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), the first English-language novel by a Dalit writer. It explores how the novel addresses Dalit persecution, utilizing Dalit pain, anger, and revolt to restore Dalit dignity, subjectivity, and resistance, thereby providing a unique critique of the Indian English novel. The paper discusses how the novel fulfilling the basic requirements of fiction designed to raise Dalit consciousness is pedagogical. The unity and collectivism of the downtrodden community, the prominent role of the women in inciting and supporting the strike and struggle, and the final scene of Dalit public anger would all mark this novel as a traditional example of the literature of pain and protest. The paper examines how the novel, meeting the fundamental requisites of fiction aimed at heightening Dalit consciousness, holds pedagogical value. The unity and collectivism within the marginalized community, the significant role played by women in instigating and sustaining the strike and struggle, and the concluding scene depicting Dalit public outrage collectively characterize this novel as a paradigmatic example of literature depicting pain and protest.

KEYWORDS

The Gypsy Goddess; Dalit; Pain; Anger; Resistance; Pedagogical.

Meena Kandasamy (1984-) a poet, novelist, translator and activist, is born to a Tamil Dalit-educated parents, both university professors. She has completed her PhD in Socio-linguistics from Anna University, Chennai. She developed her interest in poetry and began to write poems at the age of seventeen. She published two collections of poems in English: *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010); and three novels in English viz. *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). She has translated Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Tamil writings into English and some

Tamil Dalit poems. Her first novel, *The Goddess Gypsy*, was chosen as one of *Independent* newspaper's debuts of the year in 2014 and was short-listed/long-listed for several awards including the DSC Prize for the South Asian Literature Live First Book Award. The novel has been translated into Dutch, German and French languages. It is the first novel originally written in English by a Dalit writer.

Exploitation based on caste is deeply rooted in the Indian caste system. Dalits in India experience exploitation as a daily reflex. They live under constant threats of exploitation, humiliation and violence from upper castes. There are

many cases in which they are beaten, chased, humiliated and murdered. In such a direction, Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* draws on Dalit pain and persecution. The novel deals with the pitiable plight of Dalit landless agricultural labourers mainly from the untouchable Pallar and Paraiyar castes in the village of Kilvenmani, in the east Tanjore district- "the area known as the granary of South India." (*The Gypsy Goddess*, 88) The novel, set against the backdrop of the Green Revolution, draws on the historical massacre that took place at Kilvenmani on 25th December 1968 in which around forty-four striking Dalit village labourers were chased and murdered by the armed upper caste people, led by the ruthless landlords. The gruesome incident occurred after the poor labourers from different villages under the influence of red flags of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) organized a one-day district-level agricultural strike demanding a rise in their daily wages.

The plot of the novel revolves around the tripartite structure basing conflicts among the arrogant upper caste landlords- the Naidus, the Communist Party leaders and the untouchable landless labourers. The labourers are mobilised by the Communists to demand a higher share of the yield in the east Tanjore belt. The labourers demand an increase in their wages, daily wages instead of weekly wages and women's right to take breaks to attend to their infants during work. The labourers participated in a one-day district-level agricultural strike organised on 15th November 1968 in which the landlords killed the local Communist leader Sikkal Pakkirisamy in vengeance. The workers attend Pakkirisamy's funeral procession and as a result, remain absent for two days on their work. The landlords term it as "arrogance and insolent and impudence and a Communist nuisance" (105) and demand that the labourers should pay a fine for abstaining from work.

In return, the Communists announced that "they would not pay any fines and that they would go on an indefinite strike until they were allowed to work." (106) But most rowdy *mirasdars* (landlords) managed to break the strike successfully as the destitute workers from the nearby villages compromise and pay the fine:

dreading death by hunger, came to a compromise by discarding their party connections. Some others, petrified of the many horrors that would visit their village if they enraged the *mirasdars* any further, went to work. (106).

However, there is one village, i.e. Kilvenmani which decides to confront the landlords, keeps the red flags hoisted and refuses to go back to work despite a lot of pressure from the landlords. The labourers from Kilvenmani do not yield to the landlords' tactics of threatening, beating up, forcing them to leave the Communist Party to join the landlord's Paddy Producers Association or blackmailing with a huge amount of fine, and so forth. They stand collectively together which irks their landlords and leads to further tensions. When the landlords finally realise that the village is not going to stoop by any means, the landlords send in rowdies to attack the armless and helpless labourers on the night of 25th December 1968. Knowing that they are their target, most able male villagers desperately run away to save their lives, but most women, children, and old people remain in the village. They all try to hide in a hut, but their attackers lock them up, bolt the door from the outside, and set fire to the hut, burning alive 44 Dalits locked inside. Weeks later, many landlord perpetrators are acquitted in biased police investigations and the courts, and all evidence of the crime is cynically removed or quickly destroyed. The traumatised victims of the massacre, meanwhile, are charged with murder and armed rebellion and are taken to jail. They are blamed for their own miserable plight

by the upper castes. Justice is denied to them everywhere and rather they continue to be humiliated and oppressed by all means. In such situations, the Dalit victims act on their own selves at the end and kill their oppressor Gopalakrishna Naidu in anger after twelve years to avenge the deaths of their loved ones and thus “rejoice in the revenge” (273). They thus metaphorically propitiate their local Gypsy Goddess also. Naidu has been killed, his body parts, cut into forty-four pieces, wrapped in palm fronds, and parcelled to the people as a souvenir of revenge.

The novel while narrativizing stories of Dalit pain, anger and protest fuses Dalit realism with Tamil mysticism. It narrates the real stories of the village Kilvenmani, Maayi- the old woman, Muniyan- the village headman, Gopalakrishna Naidu- the landlord from the nearby village Irinjiyur, the Communist leaders Sikkal Pakkirisamy and Muthusamy and the historical massacre by drawing inspiration from:

Tamil mystics – shrinking to a microscopic speck, burgeoning into a ten-headed demon, assuming weightlessness, turning leaden, taking flights of fancy, transmigrating into other bodies, assuming authority and charming everybody. (29)

In this direction, the narrative mediates several possible titles for the novel like *Long Live Revolution*, *The Red Flag*, *Communism Will Win*, *Tales from Tanjore*, *Butcher Boys*, *Kilvenmani*, and *Christmas Day*, but finally settles on “the curiously obscure and mildly enchanting choice, *The Gypsy Goddess*”. (41) According to the legend, the cult goddess Kurathi Amman, the Gypsy Goddess, is the elevated embodiment of seven or seventeen gypsy women who “were murdered along with their babies” (44) and the village should propitiate her – “unless these dead women are worshipped, the village shall suffer

ceaselessly.” (44) The goddess’ mysterious powers make:

[m]isers come to ruin, thieves are struck blind, wife-beaters sprout horns, rapists are mysteriously castrated, and murderers are found dead the following morning, their bodies mutilated beyond recognition. (44-45)

The goddess is associated with violence, death and injustice and she stands for and comes in association with all the victims in the novel. The narrative revolves around the thread of the belief that unless the village repents over and avenges the unjust deaths, it will continue to suffer incessantly. The eponymous goddess, metaphorically, created out of the 1968 massacre of several women and their children, needs to be propitiated.

While writing about this gruesome massacre, Kandasamy, in her interview with Kidd J in *Independent* cites the surviving Kilvenmani villagers, some of whom she met while writing *The Gypsy Goddess*.

It is a very shocking story. It’s about a huge massacre; it’s about a complete lack of justice; it’s about how the system works against people. In some ways the system legitimizes the need for a guerrilla or underground struggle. The coolies of Kilvenmani were really militant, holding out against the threat of violence and police action.

In this interview, she says further:

It’s about me getting inspired by their militancy, by understanding that they have been standing up to the system without any of the safety nets we take for granted. I look at them and ask, What am I doing? Why am I not fighting? They are giving me courage.

The complex, digressional, fragmented, nonlinear, nonconventional, self-reflexive, poly-historical, polyphonic, heteroglossic narrative of *The Goddess Gypsy* surfaces

atrocities inflicted upon the helpless Dalits by their ruthless upper-caste landlords. It presents the picture of how Dalits live and work in inhuman conditions, coping with unrelenting exploitation and oppression dealing with themes like caste atrocities, class struggle, broken justice system and apathy of the State Machinery including the police and the judiciary system. The novels like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1994) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) also present a critique of civil society and the inefficacy of the State Machinery to intervene in the cases of caste atrocities. They reveal how the upper castes control the State Power and the State Machinery to manipulate Dalits. Anand's *Untouchable* represents the pitiable plight of the Dalit protagonist Bakha, an eighteen-year-old boy belonging to the Bhangi (Scavenger) caste, whose life is tied to deep-rooted caste practices. The novel portrays the miseries, humiliations and oppression during an eventful day in the life of Bakha who lives in a colony of the outcastes of Bulashah. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* has as its key characters Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash who belong to the Chamaar (Cobbler) caste, and are victims of caste discrimination. The novel focuses on the sufferings and exploitation of the Dalits who live in villages. Roy's *The God of Small Things* revolves around the tragic love story of the Paravan Velutha and upper caste Ammu. The novel depicts the tragedy of an inter-caste love relationship, and at the same time exposes the hypocrisy of the upper caste people.

In *The Goddess Gypsy*, the narrative constructs, like its classic predecessors, the notion of pain as oppressive and unjust in association with the lack of opportunities for material and social resources to Dalits. The narrative of *The Goddess Gypsy* toes a similar line, but deviates in one important way: novels like *Untouchable*, *A Fine Balance* and *The God of Small Things* describe Dalit lives with an upper caste

gaze; but the narrative of *The Goddess Gypsy* carves the narrative of Dalit lives differently. The novel serves as a classic example of Dalit *sahitya* (literature) with tenets like *vedna* (pain) *krodh* (anger) and *vidroh* (protest). Let me present one contrastive example to demonstrate how the narratives of *The God of Small Things* and *The Goddess Gypsy* construct the idea of Dalit pain and resistance differently.

The narrative of *The Goddess Gypsy* highlights the pains of helpless Dalits through different points of view, through different narrative voices: "I was the first to come and tell everybody" (157); "it was a suffering that *we* had never undergone so far" (109); "now that *you* have swallowed the pulp, *you* can leave the peel intact" (107); "Sundaram ... complained of how *she* had to go and plead to Ramanuja Naidu" (116); "And then *they* shared more stories" (117; emphasis added). Such alternation of voices draws our attention to the polyphonic nature of the narration that points to a need for a multiplicity of voices. It is indicative that the voice of Dalits has been silenced for many ages and one narration is not enough to listen to their pains. Perhaps one of the most powerful and moving passages in the novel is the two-page-long narrative of the massacre in Chapter 10, titled "Mischiefs by Fire." Here the experience of pain is manifested through one of the victim's narrations to the author about the description of the fire that burnt Dalits alive. There is no punctuation mark, and the entire chapter becomes one single, long sentence. To quote just two excerpts:

... and in desperation a mother throws her one-year-old son out of the burning hut but the boy is caught by the leering mobsters and chopped into pieces and thrown back in and in that precise yet fleeting moment of loss and rage everyone realizes that they would die if their death meant saving a loved one and

that they would die if their death meant staying together and that they would die anyway because it would not be as disastrous as living long enough to share this sight and so alone and together they prepare to resign themselves to the fact that they have mounted their collective funeral pyre ... 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 their greatest trauma and long-ago tattoos 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)

Such an intensifying description of Dalit pain is suggestive of Dalit anguish and anger. The angry and disturbed narrator breathlessly narrates the incidence of violence which points out the urgency to end the caste violence on Dalits. On the other hand, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* appears calm and picturesquely presents the incidence of violence on Velutha in police custody without much disturbance. In Roy's narrative, Estha sees Velutha's condition:

The lockup was pitch-dark. Estha could see nothing, but he could hear the sound of rasping, labored breathing. The smell of shit made him retch. Someone switched on the light. Bright. Blinding. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone.

Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head look liked a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile. (*The God of Small Things*, 319-20)

But the twins Estha and Rahel soothe themselves by believing that it is not Velutha, but his brother:

Eshta whispered something into Rahel's ear.

'You were right. It wasn't him. It was Urumban.'

'Thanks god,' Rahel whispered back.

'Where d'you think he is?'

'Escaped to Africa.'

They were handed over to their mother fast asleep, floating on this fiction. (*The God of Small Things*, 320)

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Dalit pain and anger work as a collective force to fight against caste-based exploitation. Chapter 13, for example, titled "A Survival Guide", is a collection of different survivors' pains. Here, the personal individual pain forms oneness as it becomes the collective pain of the community. Arumugam's daughter, who has committed suicide swooning over the death of her fellow classmates, can be seen as a case. When Arumugam is summoned to identify his daughter's dead body:

He cannot move, but he will not let his little girl out of sight. She is caught between his fear and her lack of any idea of what happened. The terror talks to her body in strange ways. She shivers when she is alone. She has seizures in her sleep. She needs to be held by someone. ... She keeps asking about the others, her friends. She calls them all, one by one. They are

dead, but to her, it doesn't matter. Perhaps they come and stand in a line. Or perhaps they hold each other's hands and form a neat circle. Perhaps they clap their hands for her. Perhaps they dance too, one leg in the air, half-bent, and then the other. Perhaps they can only stay still. She doesn't tell the elders about her friends. 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 conclude, Kandasamy uses a narrative point of view to tell stories and rewrite history: history from the below, from the subjugated Dalit point of view. A reader learns about the unity of the downtrodden, the prominent role of the woman in inciting and supporting the strike and the

struggle, and the final scene of killing Naidu that all would mark this novel as a classic example of the literature of protest. In this way, the novel fulfils the basic requirements of fiction like its regional counterparts intended to teach the nature of Dalit consciousness based on Dalit pain, anger and protest in English classrooms. Therefore, the novel serves as a classic example of making aware of the nature of Dalit pain and revolt to students of English literature. In this sense the novel is pedagogical. In essence, Kandasamy's novel not only stands as a literary testament to the resilience and resistance of the Dalit community but also serves as a poignant pedagogical tool, urging students of English literature to delve into the intricate layers of Dalit consciousness, fostering a deeper understanding of the profound impact of pain, anger, and protest within the broader tapestry of human experience.

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Dr. Hanumant Ajinath Lokhande is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Nowrosjee Wadia College (Autonomous) Pune – 411001. He has qualified SET and has done his Masters in English and PhD from the Department of English, Savitribai Phule Pune University. He has completed his Post Graduate Course in the Teaching of English (PGCTE) from The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) Hyderabad. His areas of research and academic interests include Dalit Literature, Indian English Literature, Marathi Literature and Postcolonial Studies.