

**A Raging Voice against Marginalization in Meena Kandaswami's Poems  
*Liquid Tragedy and Another Paradise Lost*****Anoop S Varrier**Assistant Professor of English  
Silver Arts & Science College, Perambra  
Kerala, India.**Abstract**

Dalit literature is a recent offshoot, which initiated a new kind of experiences in literature. It elaborate the range of expressions and makes use of dalits who were destined to excluded from the mainstream society and discriminated, exploited, humiliated and marginalized on the basis of caste system which were so uprooted in Indian society. Dalit is the collective term for the “untouchable” castes of India. In Indian background, Dalit or dispersed classes is a term that was first used by the British is now changed as the Scheduled Castes. The term expanded and the references included groups like scheduled tribes, poor people and all those being exploited politically and economically in the name of religions. Ilaveni Meena Kandaswami is one of the most prominent contemporary writer, poet, translator and activist, one of the angry voices of the oppressed. Born in 1984, based on Chennai, Tamilnadu, and most of her works were about feminism, Linguistic identity and the anti-caste eradication. The paper is an attempt to explore the major challenges faced by the dalit literature. There will also be an effort to examine Meena Kandaswami as a champion of dalits. The paper also focuses the atrocities of casteism in Kandhaswami's poems *The Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* and *Another Paradise Lost*. Her one of the most exciting works, *The Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* is a poem that recalls the most tragic event which happened in *Karamchedu*, a village in Andhra Pradesh, on 17th July 1985. Her next one, *Another Paradise Lost*, is about the questions of caste system. The poem is a lively conversational mode between poet herself and a serpent. The serpent, here act as a rebel and protest the God's will on caste systems. Through the pictorial presentation of this conversation Meena Kandaswami, questioning attitudes of upper classes towards dalits.

---

**Keywords:** Dalit Literature, Subaltern, Marginalisation, Casteism, ‘*Purusa-Suktha*’, Exclusion.**Introduction**

Dalit literature is a recent offshoot, which introduced a new kind of experiences in literature. It elaborate the range of expressions and makes use of dalits who were destined to excluded from the mainstream society and discriminated, exploited, humiliated and marginalized on the basis of caste system which were so uprooted in Indian society. Dalit is the collective term for the “untouchable” castes of India. In Indian background, Dalit or dispersed classes is a



term that was first used by the British is now changed as the Scheduled Castes. The term expanded and the references included groups like scheduled tribes, poor people and all those being exploited politically and economically in the name of religions.

Etymologically, the term dalit has originated from *Sanskrit*, means oppressed. It can be traced back to '*Rigveda*', one of the oldest *Veda* of Hindus, four *Varnas* or castes are identified with ancient Hindu Vedas and literatures. In '*Purusa – Suktha*', *Purusa* is described in *Rigveda* as "...the man with thousand heads, eyes, feet... the ruler of immortality". It is explained as all living things are derived or as a part of Him. Human beings are descended from his body. "From his mouth *Brahmins*, from his hands warriors (*Kshatriyas*), from his thighs the business peoples (*Vaisya*) and from his feet servants (*Kshoodras*) are born. In contemporary linguistic jargons, this final division, the lowest of all, the untouchables, the impure and the despicable outsiders are known as the dalits.

The vast problems allied with dalits are brought out in literature, effectively through autobiographical descriptions. Basically dalit literature is writing about Dalit, by a Dalit and with a Dalit consciousness. The direct interventions of dalit individuality or personae are very rare in the mainstream literature. They are the result of continuous analysis and study, but done through with an outer kaleidoscopic view. The issues relates with dalits were always analyses with main social system's point of view. A marginalized essence versus mainstream perceptiveness is one of the main hazards that faced in all dalit literature.

Here, in dalit literature culture became the center subject. In India, with all its diversities, these cultural multiplicities symbolize the hybridization and hybrid identities have given a diverse flavor to the literature as 'Subalterns'. Subaltern is a group that is socially, linguistically, culturally, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power pattern of the contemporary society. It is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Antonio Gramsci.

The marginalized and disposed people like dalits, the discussions and presentations about dalits, their indispensable cultural characteristics etc., normally examined with the writings of upper class authors. That means, dalits were defined and discussed by the judgment of a class that was not from this group but from the outer surface. Dalits and their real issues becomes a topic of debate but margined by the drawings of established upper class system. The vital approaches of these writings are generating a state of pity towards this class. So as a result of all these, the dalit issues are read and understand without a universal perceptiveness of reading. The established canon of literary aestheticism is the main hazard that a dalit literature encountered with its beginning. The arguments of literary standardness and common aesthetic symbols, somehow step aside in dalit literatures.

The exclusions and outcasteness that the dalits had been faced for many years in the society is now turned as a primary motive of dalit literature as the liberation of dalits from these



stature. It is a kind of 'fourth world literature' and it is very realistic representation of the plights that endures by dalits. The existences of these groups' literature and art definitely raise a challenge to upper class society and intellectuals. Sharankumar Limbale pointing that dalit reality is a liminal reality in time and space. The content and form of the literature that is about this liminality has its own particular features. According to him the dalit is:

*"...the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm laborers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included". (Limbale. 11)*

What made dalit literature identification and real-self of a dalit become more important? Their literature, always raise a challenge, a questioning of, a theorizing pattern of mainstream literature. They were an important political and social force. The existences of this group in literature and art generate a challenge to upper class intellectuals or other dominant communities.

The dalits were well conscious of the prevailed caste systems and through literature they were tried to break the state of "Otherness" that they were faced in the caste oriented society. The challenging and rejection of the hegemony of the caste oriented social system, especially in India, is not an easy process. Thus dalit literature raises a profound issue in a broader context of the role of literature in the struggle for human rights, equality and social justice.

Dalit literature is uniquely Indian and of course, it is a byproduct of evil caste system that stays alive for many centuries in our society. The clutches of caste system are very sturdy in the mind of its people. It is like the sufferings of slaves in America and Africa. So thus this way, the dalit literature, pointing the universal nature of oppressed people around the world. The dalit literature is a strong protest movement against this system. Meena Kandaswami's poetry became a clear answer for this marginalization. Her poetries are not only depicts the atrocities faced by the dalits but also stands as a reaction to the prejudistic minds of upper classes in the society.

Dalit literature is an endeavor to overcome the impurity that relate with them as the lowest stature in Hindu dominated hierarchical social order. Meena Kandaswami and her works are the finest examples for this attempt to elevate dalit standardness and break the social order that define dalits as impure.

**Ilaveni Meena Kandaswami** is one of the most prominent contemporary writer, poet, translator and activist, one of the angry voices of the oppressed. Born in 1984, based on Chennai, Tamilnadu, and most of her works were about feminism, Linguistic identity and the anti-caste eradication. In an interview she says that:



"I come from a very mixed background-almost four different backward castes including a Dalit" (Kandaswami, idiva, 2010.)

Meena Kandaswami published her debut poetry collection *The Touch* in August 2006 with a foreword by Kamala Das, one of the renowned Indo-English writers. Her second collection of poetry *Ms Militancy* was published in December 2010. Her collection of short stories entitled as *Black Magic* and her debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* published at 2014 is about Kilvenmani massacre, influenced by the figure of Kurathi Amman, her ancestral goddess. Other works such as *Mascara* and *My Lover Speaks of Rape* won first prize in all India Poetry Competition. She has co-authored (with M Nisar) a book named *Ayyankali: A Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*, a biography of Ayyankali, a dalit leader in Kerala. Meena Edited *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly English Magazine. Now she is working on a book titled *Caste and The City of Nine Gates*, her first non-fiction work.

Besides she wrote many essays on the drudgery of casteism and its consequences. Above all, her poetry honestly speaks in loudest and is filled with fire as it brings out the anger in the hearts of the downtrodden communities.

Meena Kandaswami believed that her writings as a process of coming to terms with her identities. That is basically, related with the womaness, Tamilness and outcasteness. All these were the labels that she brings in her writings with immense pride. Kamala Das, acknowledges as: "once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandaswami's poetry", she further adds to that:

"Revelation come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips" (*The Touch*, 7)

The extreme revolt against the established caste system was noticeable in her poetry. For Meena Kandaswami, the cast system is the cruelest villain behind the pitiable conditions of dalits. Her poetry is thus altered as a real counter attack towards this caste system. The poet unleashes her words to harness the power of language and boils it down to the uncovered facts that tell aloud the tales of various silences. Her portrayal of the oppressed caste is one of the strength of her spirit and rage. Unlike many contemporary writers, Meena uses rage as her language of poetry to depict the feelings of dalits.

Her one of the most electrifying work, *The Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* is a poem that recalls the most tragic incident which happened in Karamchedu, a village in Andhra Pradesh, on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1985. According to *The Times of India*, Daily dated on Dec 20, 2008, stated that after a long 23 years, the Supreme Court has now delivered its final verdict in the sensational Karamchedu massacre case by awarding life sentence to the main accused and three years of imprisonment to thirty others. It was on the morning of July 17, 1985, that six dalits were

killed and twenty others grievously injured in the attack by upper caste people in Karamchedu village, Andhra Pradesh and which created a furor all over the country.

Her poem, *The Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* depicting this tragic incident with powerful words. In two ways, this work is very notable. At first, the most interesting fact about this poem is its shape. The poem prepared in the shape of a vessel. It is a hieroglyphic poem shaped like a vessel. The second one is the powerful language that she used in the poem.

### Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit  
Drinking Water for the Dalits  
The very same Pond.  
Practice for eons.  
A bold Dalit lady  
dares to question injustice.  
Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation  
is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.  
Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly  
consult History—'If there was a way out then,  
there shall be a way out now.' Succor arrives with  
Esteemed Father of our Nation. His *Samaadhi* speaks:  
If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them  
set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example  
is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories  
Dalits exit—weary of the persecution  
And wander all over the nation.  
Again, a Dalit Exodus.  
Total Surrender.

The beginning of the poem clearly pictures the pathetic conditions of dalits. The pond's water in the village is a mixture of all wastes. Yet too, a dalit not allowed using this water.

*Buffalo baths. Urine. Bullshit*

*Drinking water for the Dalits.*

As Kathi Padma Rao, a former leader of Dalit Mahasabha, explains:

*Two Kamma (upper caste) youth, Potina Seenu and Rayineedu Prasad, took their buffaloes to the drinking water tank in Madigapalle. They fed the buffaloes with washings of rice in buckets. While they were washing the dirty buckets in the tank, Katti Chandraiah, a Dalit boy, objected to it. His courage angered Seenu and Prasad. They were about to beat up Chandraiah when Munnangi Suvartha, a Madiga woman, came to the tank to collect water. She tried to protect the boy from the attack of Kamma youths. Seenu and Prasad*



*threw hunters at her. She lifted her vessel and warded off the hunters. Suvaartha's lifting of vessel in self-defence became a pretext for Kammas, who were itching for a fresh quarrel with Madigas after the election clash . . . They raided every Dalit's house, drove Madigas into fields. The blood thirsty Kammas beat Madigas, stabbed them and axed them. They raped Dalit women . . . The murder and mayhem had no parallel in the Indian subcontinent. ( Para 4)*

These Madigas and their crimes and the assaulted people of Karamchedu are the optimum instance for the silenced subalterns of post – independence Indian history and their pains and sufferings incite the thought of Meena and the poem becomes the symbol of those oppressed groups. The women, who dare to protest against this crime with a vessel is the key of this poem. It is highly symbolic in the sense the vessel that used to held the drinking water for the dalits, which the women used to hit, this poem is like the same vessel that sharply smashes the society for its discriminations. Thus this vessel shape of the poem, clearly explaining what the poet basically intends to express.

Her next one, *Another Paradise Lost*, is raging voice against the caste system. This poem composed as a lively conversational mode between the poet herself and with a serpent. The serpent, here act as a rebel and then questions the God's will on caste systems. Through the graphic presentation of this conversation Meena Kandaswami, questioning attitudes of upper classes towards dalits.

In the beginning of the poem, the poet talks about a summer afternoon. It was very hot. Then the poet wants to drink a glass of water and she opens up the refrigerator, there she finds a serpent inside. So, right from the beginning itself, the poet raises the curiosity of the reader. It is somehow, very much comparable to a metaphysical dramatic beginning. As defending from the poisonous serpent she chooses acid as a means for self-protection. She manages to get it and ready to pour over it. Here, this serpent is a personified metaphor of the person who having a diasporic feeling in his own country. It is no one else but the dalits itself. But the serpent talks to her in pure Tamil language to stop. As political refugee, serpent spoke that "I am an exile". This sentence was spoken by Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The term 'exile' denoting the banished, marginalized outcaste group of the dalits.

*Refugees. It wriggled out and I saw that  
It was balding, almost Rushdie like, perhaps  
With a death sentence too...*

Here poet pointing that the serpent is looks like Salman Rushdie, a writer, who is not allowed to enter into his country only because of his writings. The similarity with Rushdie is exceedingly symbolic that he is the man who suffered and faced '*fatwa*' from his own country and thus out casted from his "Homeland". The serpent compares with a preacher and talks about the perfection of life – about rebirth and reincarnation. Both these terms are



noteworthy in the sense that with these old phrases, this caste based society entrapped the marginalized dalits for centuries.

The poet uses the pun as she says, “being a writer I really wanted to take notes”. When this out casted serpent speaking, the poet wanted to take notes and this signifies that the controversies are the vital resources that flames the writers creativity and it is the core of their writings. She declares that “I began arguing” means, the differences between surrendering and protesting. But the serpent stops her and further talks about ‘Karma’ as ‘bunkum’ means meaningless or a foolish thing. Poets feared serpent’s red tongue. The poet is well sentient of the error committed by *Eva* and the dangerous power of words. *Paradise lost in Hinduism* is a very difficult one to comprehend; only the snake and failed writers can recognize.

Now the serpent spoke about his life in Heaven. He was a protester at heaven. He is a great monarch on earth at once– his name is *Nahusha*, the great. He ruled approximately twelve thousand years happily in earth but after that had suffered a lot in Heaven because of the rules and regulations that followed there. Then the serpent began to ask questions about *Karma* and God’s Will.

The questions were entirely related with the burning issues of life and Indian society. The serpent was a rebel pleading for liberty, equality and fertility in Heaven. The crime that committed by the serpent is that he questioned the supreme authority of God in Heaven, just like the Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven, Book 1, and Line 263). So the serpent branded as a rebel and ‘rightly’ punished. The Gods living in heavenly abode do want hierarchy of *Varnas* to continue on earth. Any advocacy to take apart this system is also intolerable and punishable. Thus the serpent discloses as:

*I wanted to know why  
caste was there, why people suffered because of  
their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned  
sages there. I asked them what would happen if an  
high-born did manual work just like the low-born.*

Then the God plotted against the serpent and decided to throw him outside of the Paradise. So it finally resulted with the banishment of serpent from the Heaven. The poet simply stated at the end that, in this story of ‘Paradise Lost’ there were no the forbidden fruit and fickle – minded woman.

*In this tale, there was no forbidden fruit, no second  
Fickle minded woman.*



To recapitulate, discrimination and exclusion are an omnipresent social evil which is very much common in the society even in these contemporary ages. Meena Kandaswami exposes the cause of these in her poetic discourses through powerful symbols and languages and expressing her anxiety about it. In her writings, she attempts to champion the real reasons behind the plights of the dalits.

### **Conclusion**

As a writer Meena Kandaswami hailed as the foremost Indian women poet writing dalit poetry in English. Her poetries are the hallmarks on the drudgery of casteism and its consequences and they were speaks the loudest and is filled with the inferno as it bring out the anger in the hearts of the downtrodden communities.

In short, Meena Kandaswami depicts the bare truth of our contemporary society where people living in the margins are still faces and victimized the brutality of upper castes. As Meena Kandaswami explains: "... the criminals have/ already mainstreamed-/ their caste is a classic shield" (58). Her poetry is also stand as a voice of those who were destined to silence. She poignantly records the miseries, humiliations and brutality experienced by the oppressed. Her poetry is an assault on the social systems such as caste, untouchability, oppressions and cultural hegemony.

Her poetry is her weapon on the casteism and her works especially, *The Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985* and *Another Paradise Lost: The Hindu Way* brings out clearly that Meena Kandaswami is a poet, who has a way with word that pounce on the reader and influence them with raw emotions. Her poetry is powerful, her techniques enhance the beauty and her images are vibrant and clear. Both these poems are sharp and clear replica of the society and thus she becomes the raging voice against the marginalization and oppressions faced by the dalits.

### **References:**

1. Anand, Mulk Raj and Eleanor Zelliot. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992. Print.
2. Ilaiah, Kancha. *Caste or Class or Caste-Class : A Study of Dalit Bahujan Consciousness and Struggles In Andhra Pradesh in 1980*. New Delhi: Sage Publication India Pvt Ltd. 2004. Print.
3. Jeyan, Subhash. *Articulations of Anger*. *The Hindu*, 6<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2008. Literary Review: 1.
4. Kandaswami, Meena. *The Touch*. Mumbai: Peacock Books, 2006. Print.
5. Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. Orient Black Swan, Kolkata: 2010. Print.



6. Mukharjee, Alok.trans & ed, *Sharankumar Limbale, Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: Histories, Controversies and Considerations*. Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2014. Print.
7. *The Rigveda: An Anthology*. Trans. & ann. Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty. New Delhi, Penguin: 2000.
8. [www.languageindia.com](http://www.languageindia.com)
9. <http://ultraviolet.in/2008/04/14/dangerous-dalit-women-and-witch-hunters/>
10. <<http://www.hindu.com>>
11. <<http://www.himalmag.com>>
12. idiva interview by Lakshmi Krupa. *Times of India*. 10<sup>th</sup> Sep 2010. Web 27 Oct 2010. <<http://meenu.wordpress.com/2010/09/10/>>