

The Plight of Women in Caste and Patriarchal Society in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

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Abstract

Dalits are the lowest in the hierarchical caste system. They were supposed to do all kinds of low work. The place of women in the Indian caste society is no different than that of the Dalits. In caste society, women had to do the worst kinds of works. This had religious sanction too. As a result of this the status of women in the villages is still lower. Dalit women are considered lower than the other women in their status. Nevertheless, most of the women are completely powerless and do not have much social, economic and political standing. In such a religious social structure, a Dalit woman bears the brunt all her life. Dalit women are victims of economic, social, religious and cultural exploitation, in short, the victims of Indian patriarchal system.

Key Words: *women, victims of patriarchy, dalit women, Kandasamy*

In the Indian patriarchal caste society with an exception of a few beautiful women from the dynasty, all the other women were living the life of Dalit under the norm and male domination. Although the scriptures sang the sweetness of mother power, she had the place of a maid in the house. As stated in *Manusmriti*, a woman should be under the control of her father in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her son in her old age. Manu has written that a woman should never be independent. As the woman does not have freedom, as the duty of a faithful wife she should always worship her husband. Not only this, when we think of women's work, Manu divides women's work as the work of Dalit women different from that of the upper caste women (Moon 09).

According to the religious scriptures the Hindu society is divided into four *varnas*. The scriptures further state that Brahmins are the only worthy and wise, and they should only acquire and give knowledge, Shudra should fight for the protection of the country, Vaishyas should trade in goods and the Atishudra should serve the people of the above three varnas. The Dalits were called the Avarnas as they are not put in any of the four varnas, and they would dispose the dead cattle from the houses of upper castes. Mahatma Phule names them Atishudra. They were bound to every menial work given by the upper caste members of the society, such as cleaning toilets to carrying their excrement on head.

The hidden sorrows, agonies, pains, exploitation, homeless, and hopeless life of Dalit woman is expressed through their silence. Their various unreasonable fears and phobias would spread through the names of Gods and Goddesses. She would never have courage to go against the priest's assaulting behavior, she would tolerate it, as the priest is an agent of God; what the priest does, he does as per the wish and order of God's command, he is demi god, and in fact he is god. It is this anxiety to excuse Priests' sinful activities and she remains silent as if her mouth is tied. Therefore, a

Dalit feminist writer 'Moon' interprets the upper caste supremacy and the craft of higher castes towards the Dalit woman, in her well-known manuscript *Phule Ambedkar Movement*. She says:

A woman is an innocent human being; but the cunning man dominated her emotional and intellectuality without taking any permission of woman he took a decision of each and everything. (Moon 115)

The Indian Dalit woman is emotional and kind hearted female by birth and her sympathy towards other unknown needy person indicate her pure sensitivity and broad mind. She has always compassion for others' struggles. She is open-hearted female and has capacity to bear injustices and exploitations from her own male-dominated society and at workplaces, through higher caste males. However, the men do not understand her emotion and compassion. Meena Kandasamy in her well-known poem, *Aftermath* voices the harassment and ill-treatment given to Dalit women. She states:

down rules: don't shout or scream, but
swallow the shame. next, confess the sin.(Kandasamy 120)

Dalit woman have been the most neglected sections of the Indian patriarchal society. Through generations Dalit woman accepts the male propaganda that she is secondary to a man and without his permission she cannot against his decision, whatever the man does, supposedly the head of the family just by the virtue of being a man, she has to accept that, and that is usually the final decision for all the family members too. Indian patriarchy controls Dalit female vehemently. Parulekar Godavari remarks in her text *Jenvha Manus Jaga Hoto* shows the dilemma of a Dalit woman. She states:

Landlords will not scruple to use their power in fulfillment of other purposes, for instance, the case of their tenants' womenfolk for the gratification of their lust. (Parulekar 45)

Dalit widow woman and a divorced uneducated Dalit woman do not have any recourse, except work in landlord's house as a maidservant. The helpless Dalit woman sometimes becomes a victim of landlord's sexual gratification. The landlord is usually not ready to accept her as his wife however, uses her as his mistress. Kandasamy shows the similar picture of rural lower caste woman in her poem, *Advice to an upwardly mobile man*. She says:

enchanted powers
that a love affair gives me.
Look Back
Reach Out (Kandasamy 74)

Generally, an upper, higher, dominant caste individual has the cover of political and economic power from generations. These things support him to lead society as per his commands. He manipulates Dalits easily to accomplish his political and economic motives. Consequently, a Dalit man does not step into his political ambitions. Thus, higher castes ill-treat Dalits under the pretext of fulfilling the expectations of Dalits. It causes disruptive actions. Therefore, the Dalit writer Shirurkar expresses the same in his writings. He states:

Men earn money and feed their wives and children. There is no reason why a woman should feel enslaved. She is independent. She runs his home for him and he pays for her labor. Often what he pays doesn't match the work she puts in. (Shirurkar 433)

Man is supposedly the head of the family, as a conventional rule of Indian patriarchy; all family decisions are taken by the male. Cooking and cleaning are assignments of a woman which are specified by man to the woman. However, the man never notices her sacrifice for and devotion towards the family. The man only draws her faults and limitations. Then woman is so much dependent on the husband or the head of the family that she literally becomes a slave of the home. Man imposes his ideology in his decisions and interests. Therefore, Kandasamy mentions an enslavement of woman in her outstanding poem, *Maariamamma*. She says:

and their 'good-girl' much-married, father-fucked,
virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses
borne in their golden chariots(Kandasamy 53)

Upper caste daughter gets all kinds of protective covers from her family members and equally from the upper caste society. She gets the skills and capacities to face the socio-economic calamities. Even, she could impress her husband with her parents' political powers, consequently her husband thinks about her "beauty is only to see and not to touch". Her beauty is not only physical beauty but also her raised consciousness is intellectual beauty for him. However, Dalit daughters are far away from such support system due to lack of educational, economic and political background. Hence, Tamil Dalit writer Murugandescribes in his words. He says:

She heard voices near the bush again. 'Our Vellapayyan can finish everything in two minutes. All we need to do is to find her. 'There's a crowd now. If I had found her earlier, I'd thought I would enjoy the fair-skinned girl that has bewitched Nondi. Now it is too late'. 'We can still enjoy her once we've caught her'. (Murugan187)

Due to lack of education for thousands of years and ideological influence of Hinduism, and its imposed slavery has converted Dalit male into a traditionalist manhood who never considers good of his female. He would only draw her mistakes, when she tries to suggest him anything. Even it does not occur to him to enhance her skills. An orthodox narrow-minded patriarchal temperament of Hinduism and its egotistical attitude discriminate between manhood and womanhood. Therefore, Kandasamy articulates about the unfair attitude, in her poem, *Lady Justice*. She utters:

You give the Ten of Swords to the woman
Paraded naked and to the gang-raped girl.
Self-defeating, dangerous if they ever won. (Kandasamy 28)

Teaching of every religion in the world is to love and protect every living thing, it supports non-violence but the images of Gods and Goddess of Hindu religion possesses weapons and tools which kind of give an impression that they subscribe to violence against those whom they do not vouch worth living. The use of such images suggests that among them there is extensive crying,

moaning and lamentation. Such constant subscription of violence makes woman's life ill-fated. Hinduism does not give any right weapon to protect themselves. Consequently, women are vulnerable and can easily fall prey as the male has freedom to use any tool to govern and to torment the women folks. As a result, male by force rapes female thus showing the tools, weapons and the agency he has. Therefore, Dalit writer Shirurkar states in his writing. He says:

Both must believe that they are living on their own, independent labor. Only when our women become conscious of this, will they acquire the strength to think independently.” (Shirurkar 434)

It observes that the patriarchy is a brainchild of the Hindu religious beliefs system, which exploits Dalit women even more. The lower caste Dalit female is turned into a subject of misuses through males. Due to lack of education she has been ignorant about her emancipation. As a result, she does not know her societal privileges. She never tries to place her opinions and notions against the injustices. In this context, Kandasamy remarks with an optimistic side towards the Dalit female in her poem, *The whore's wedding*. She expresses:

We are free of further tension,
They said, as they looked forward
To reformed husbands and
Routine love. (Kandasamy 68)

It observes that every Indian Dalit woman supports her fellow's success. Therefore, behind the success of any Dalit man there is a helping hand of a Dalit woman. This definitely follows a historical lineage as Ramabai Ambedkar had supported her husband Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar during his educational life. Similar is the case with the first teacher of India Savitribai Phule who had been supported her husband Jyotirao Phule, and in turn Savitribai Phule not only supported him in his social work but also continued his legacy after his death. Hence, it can be observed that Dalit women have devoted their entire life for the sake of their man's success and progress of their society.

Dalit woman has all her world in her husband and children, so she immensely loves her husband and children. She hopes only for the love and success of her man. She directly and indirectly becomes the social reformer for her family and society. This sort of positive attitude can be seen in Dalit woman. She knows the pains the caste society inflicts on the men of her society and so she would never see her husband live in trouble. Which is why though prescribed in religious scriptures of Indian caste society she never supports polygamy.

The poet Kandasamy is against polygamy and does not support dowry system, and all her poems are related with the life of Dalit women only. However, Dalit woman is badly affected by the patriarchal system. She has been trapped and mistreated through multiple ways like poverty, patriarchy, caste discrimination and gender discrimination.

Thus, in an Indian patriarchal system Dalit woman is bounded and humiliated just as a black slave for so many years. Moreover, she does not have the freedom to go against the patriarchy yet. She puts her thoughts to appeal for equality, freedom and rights.

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