



MAH/MUL/03051/2012  
ISSN-2319 9318



Peer Reviewed International Multilingual Research Journal

# Vidyawarta<sup>TM</sup>

Issue-42, Vol-03, April to June 2022



Editor  
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single and centralized empire emerged during the period. Though India was divided into small kingdoms ruled by both local and foreign dynasties. Indian society was generally divided into four Varnas and each Varna had its own role and duties. As a result of social and economic changes, the conditions and status of lower classes were improved during this period. The foreign people who came India as invaders or immigrants adopted Indian culture and incorporated themselves in the Kshatriya Varna known as Fallen-Kshatriya (Vrata kshatriya). The condition of women seems improving but Smriti literature does not show much favor to them as it depicts the poor image of the women. The social, political and economic changes of this period had great impact on the culture including food, habits, and dresses etc.

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**PLIGHT OF UNTOUCHABLES IN  
MEENA KANDASAMY'S  
"THE GYPSY GODDESS"**

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**Abstract:** Since from her teenage, Kandasamy realized the need to voice the contemporary issues of Indian society through her literature, particularly the social norms and customs that designate peculiar and fixed roles to the masses on the basis of caste and gender. The debut literary venture of Meena Kandasamy is the novel entitled "The Gypsy Goddess" which deals with the miserable condition of peasants from Dalit community, who work and survive in unhealthy environment adjusting with the tortures of oppression and inhumane atrocities imposed upon them by their stone-hearted feudal landlords in Tanjore District in Tamil Nadu. The central theme of the novel moves around the historical tragic massacre occurred in the village of Kilvenmani on the day of Christmas in 1968.

**Keywords:** Meena Kandasamy, Kilvenmani, Dalit, massacre, landlords, atrocities, untouchables.

For Meena Kandasamy, the prime sources of inspiration behind composing the unconventional novel "The Gypsy Goddess" were—the autobiographical element wherein she cherished the experience of her own landless and orphaned father, who shifted to Chennai only to get rid of his poverty, and later on, he completed degree of PhD there and, the second source was, the tragic massacre that was occurred on December 25, 1968 at the village of Kilvenmani, in



Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. In that tragic massacre, many women and children were burnt live and ultimately met their tragic death for participating in a strike to demand for hike in wages and improvement in fundamental human rights.

The opening chapter of Part Two entitled "The Cutthroat Comrades" provides, in quite a truthful approach, a critical analysis of the personality of Gopalakrishna Naidu and his autocratic approach in which he calls an emergent meeting of the "Executive Committee" of the "Paddy Producers Association", subsequently followed by the other chapters which, although diverting away from the fact and a linear narrative technique once again, nevertheless enable the readers to indulge directly into the story of a village and its citizens. The story of the novel is a part of the extensive history of caste discrimination and the conflicts of agricultural workers in India. They deals with the predicament of the group of agricultural workers, mostly Dalits, who work and survive in unhealthy environment, adjusting with the ruthless tortures and harassment imposed upon them by the dominating and heartless landlords from the upper-caste of Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu. The story of the novel is set during the time of the "Green Revolution" in 1968, when the crop production of paddy has immensely increased. Leaders from the "Communist Party" instigated the labourers to make demand for the higher wages, otherwise they called strike. Most of the landlords skillfully managed to make the strike unsuccessful. But, in the village of Kilvenmani, the farmers determined to challenge their landlords, held their red flag high and denied to resume their work. It was the night of December 25, 1968, when the angry landlords forced their goons to attack on these rebellious farm workers. Having realized the fact, some of the potent men-folk ran away from the village and saved their lives, but majority of them including women, children and old-age citizens stayed in

the village. To save their lives, they all took shelter in a hut. But the goons locked them up inside the hut and set the hut on fire. Many weeks later, most of the culprits are acquitted by the court of law in a corrupt way and biased investigation. All the evidences regarding the crime, are suspiciously distorted and destroyed. On the contrary, the sufferers of the tragic massacre were alleged of murder and armed rebellion and sentenced to jail.

Perhaps one of the most influential and moving description in the book is the delineation of the fire-episode in which 44 lives were burnt, which is included in Chapter No.10, entitled "Mischief by Fire". The description is without punctuation whatsoever, and thus the complete chapter becomes one single sentence that eloquently reproduces and split, complicated, and twisted narrative of what could be the intrusive phantasm experienced by a survivor in trauma. To mention just one passage:

"...and in description 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" (164).

The traumatized passage is composed against the cold-blooded official report of the 42 remains (the dead-bodies of two children were actually recorded) as noted down in the inquest forms of Inspector Rajavel, presented two chapters earlier. Sufficient enough to give number one as an example:

"1. Male, age not known, nobody can identify body; height 4'10"; marital statusot



known; protruding tongue, body totally burnt below the hip, hand flexed at the elbow, blackened blood all over the body" (151).

The aseptic nature of this ghastly tabulation also has a powerful emotional effect: human remains are handled in such a way that they were disposable fragments of a lifeless artefact. They were not only shown as the want of their dignity, but also of lacking in their humanity, and, in this way, of their right to love and be the representatives of their own survival.

Even more disturbing is the Chapter No. 7, "A Walking Corpse", in which narrator-writer flirts with the notion that she was commissioned to assist Gopalakrishna Naidu to draft a letter to the Chief Minister, requesting him for immediate intervention and safeguard against the communists who, as per his claim, were excited to kill him. He wishes that this draft should be read like his suicide note, and the narrator-writer makes compliances of his orders without exhibiting the minutest hint of regret:

"This is his working principle, his modus operandi, his craving to cash in on a sympathy wave. I catch the hint and decide to use every tear-jerking, heart-wrenching adjective at my disposal. Following his advice, I also learn to successfully imitate the formula of his previous letters and thus, under his guidance, I perfect my knowledge of officialise, petitionese, and memorandumese" (137).

Dalits from Kilvenmani village are forced to wake up before the sunrise and walk in line every morning. They were compelled to wash their faces in pond-water and have to brush their teeth with the powder of red bricks, the same was the colour of their land in which they were working. They compelled to wear only a lain cloth, nothing more. On the other hand, women-folk from Dalit community had to wake up every morning with the hope to have some tamarind and dried chilli with half onion in their home, with the help of which, she used to prepare burning red hot chutney that can be licked and spread

on the tongue with the help of their fingers to cope up with the tastelessness of the stale and leftover rice. There labourers toiled hard to produce Burma rice, the best quality rice in the world, which grows in Tanjore district. But these untouchables were allowed to eat only second rate food stuff, the cheaper Burmese rice.

These untouchable people were compelled to carry with them, the coconut shell called "serattai" to the tea stall as the tea was supposed to be served to them in a "serattai". The women from Dalit community were not allowed to pull water from wells or lake, instead they had to remain on the mercy of some Hindu-caste woman to pour the water into their vessel. Prior to the advent of petrol or christoil, the buses running on coal powder, never allowed Dalits to sit with Hindus. Dalits have to make their separate seating arrangement in cinema tents, as well. The feudal landlords used to construct a cement shelter for their cattle. But the people from Dalit community have to huddle themselves under a blanket of night sky only because they were treated as "Untouchables". An old jute sack was their only protection from the cold winds.

The feudal landlords used to inflict severe punishment on the women-folk from Dalit community by stripping them almost naked. They used to whip them up by tying them to the tree trunks in front of the whole village. Policemen also used to punish by making them to kneel and walk a few miles on their knees as a result, they used to crawl at last, even though they survived.

A mixture of cow-dung with water, called "Saanippaal" were given to the beaten person as a punishment. Sometimes the poor victims used to die because of this punishment. Later, this drink of cow-dung was replaced by a cocktail of fertilizer. This drink for punishment offered no humiliation but death.

"Saanippaal would be waiting for the beaten woman or man -cow - dung mixed in



water – a concoction that would drain them to death...being forced to drink diluted cow-dung was soon replaced by being forced to drink a cocktail of fertilizer, so disobedience brought no disgrace, but death" (264).

The farm workers revolted and demanded the feudal landlords, the extra half measures of rice but stone-hearted landlords turned deaf-ear to their demands. On the other hand, landlords warned the shopkeepers not to sell anything to these farm-workers. Thus, the younger children of the untouchables were losing their lives because of starvation and the elder ones were falling prey to diseases because of the malnutrition and lack of medication.

#### Conclusion:

Although, India is enjoying the privilege of being the largest democracy in the world, it is a matter of tragedy that a group of people in Indian society is still living a marginalized life full of suppression and sufferings. People from Dalit community are falling prey to the violence of caste discrimination inflicted by the upper-caste people, due to their powerful socio-economic and political status. It is believed that Dalits were the ever-available soft targets for all kinds of violence. The village of Kilvenmani witnessed all sorts of atrocities inflicted upon the people of Dalit community, as one of the earliest and most horrifying crimes occurred in the Post-Independent India. The country is still lagging behind to practice the true democracy. One is eager to know how much aboriginal blood of untouchables will be shed prior to the realization of the dream of Ambedkar and Mahatma.

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