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Emotional Regimes and Silent Resistance in Selected Indian Caste Novels by Meena Kandasamy

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ABSTRACT

Reading Meena Kandasamy for the first time feels less like encountering literature and more like being caught doing something you weren't supposed to. There is an accusatory quality to her prose not directed at the reader exactly, but at the comfortable assumptions readers carry into books about suffering that isn't theirs. This study takes seriously the claim that Kandasamy's fiction is doing theoretical work, not just emotional work, and tries not always tidily to trace how that theory unfolds across *When I Hit You* (2017) and *The Prey* (2014). The central argument leans on William Reddy's concept of emotional regimes and James C. Scott's notion of the hidden transcript, with some necessary detours through Dalit feminist scholarship. Silence, this study insists, is the wrong word for what Kandasamy's protagonists practice. It is closer to strategy a disciplined withholding of the self from a world that would consume it without ever quite understanding it. The proposed used in aims to examine emotional regimes and modes of silent resistance in select works of Meena Kandasamy . The study focuses on Kandasamy's representation of explicit emotional articulation as a feminist. Employing a qualitative textual analysis supported by theories of emotional regimes and resistance, the research attempts to identify convergences and

divergences in the narrative strategies. The study intends to contribute to Indian English literary studies by offering an emotion - centered framework for understanding resistance in contemporary regional and diasporic writings.

Introduction

Motions are not merely personal experiences but are shaped by socio-political structures. Reddy conceptualizes "emotional regimes" as systems that regulate normative feeling within specific power structures (Reddy 129). In the Indian caste system, emotional expectations humility, shame, obedience are imposed upon marginalized communities. This study reads caste as an affective governance system.

Kandasamy's works challenge these regimes by foregrounding anger, irony, and silence as disruptive forces. Her novels demonstrate that emotional expression becomes a form of political defiance.

Kandasamy is not and it is worth being clear about this early primarily a writer of protest literature in the conventional sense. Her work is too formally restless, too intellectually impatient, too uncomfortable with the posture of victimhood for that category to hold her. What she is writing is harder to name: fiction that insists on the political significance of Dalit feeling while refusing to make that feeling palatable to an audience whose sympathy it doesn't especially need.

The question this study pursues is straight forward enough in its formulation, even if the answer is not. If caste society imposes a regime governing whose feelings matter and whose do not, what do the people on the wrong side of that regime do with their inner lives? Where does the feeling go?

Kandasamy's answer, across her fiction, is that it goes inward. Not destroyed driven underground, where it becomes something different. More guarded. More knowing. Quieter in a way that is not the same as quieted.

Emotional Regimes

A Framework Worth Taking Seriously

Reddy's argument in *The Navigation of Feeling* (2001) is, at its core, about the coercive dimension of emotional norms. Emotional regimes the sets of prescriptions governing appropriate feeling within a given social order are not simply cultural conventions people can take or leave. They carry penalties for non-compliance. They are enforced and their enforcement consistently serves those who designed them,

which means the question of who benefits from a given emotional regime is always political, even when it presents itself as merely cultural.

The application of this framework to caste society is almost uncomfortably direct. The Brahminical emotional regime assigns emotional depth and moral significance to upper-caste subjects while systematically denying that same significance to Dalits and, with particular thoroughness, to Dalit women. This is structural to caste, not incidental. Grief is only publicly mournable when the dominant order considered the person who died fully human.

Sara Ahmed's work on affective economies is worth invoking briefly here. Ahmed's insight that emotions circulate socially sticking to certain bodies and not to others, in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies maps onto the caste emotional regime with a kind of precision that is uncomfortable to sit with. The Dalit woman's anger cannot circulate freely it is intercepted, reinterpreted, neutralized. What Kandasamy's fiction does is create, within the space of the text, an alternative economy one in which that feeling is finally allowed to move on its own terms.

Though it should be said and perhaps this is where the neatness of theory begins to show its limits that Kandasamy herself doesn't seem terribly interested in being a case study for anyone's framework. She writes as though the dominant culture's categories for her experience are mildly beside the point.

When I Hit You: Living Inside Someone Else's Emotional Logic

It is difficult to know where to begin with this novel without sliding into either overstatement or understatement.

The marriage at its center is violent. Kandasamy is unsparing about that but what the novel tracks, beneath the physical violence, is something more like a sustained and systematic assault on the protagonist's capacity to trust her own emotional experience as real. The husband is the novel's most precise and most troubling creation. He is not a monster in the way that would make him easy to dismiss. He is a man with a coherent worldview Communist, disciplined, theoretically fluent and that worldview functions as the mechanism of the protagonist's subjugation with a thoroughness that crude brutality alone could never manage.

Her desire to write is not simply forbidden, it is philosophically dismantled, reframed as the petty individualism of someone who hasn't yet understood her own false consciousness. Her loneliness is reinterpreted as political weakness. Her grief is not denied exactly it is worked over and rearranged until

it becomes unrecognizable to her. This is the novel's real horror. Not that her feelings are suppressed, but that she is made to doubt whether her feelings were ever legitimate to begin with.

The second-person narration is formally extraordinary and genuinely difficult to remain inside. The "you" is not an invitation to comfortable identification. It is closer to an ambush a grammatical choice that refuses the reader the distance that third-person would allow, that places you, syntactically speaking, inside an experience of someone who has been so thoroughly managed by another person's emotional regime that she is no longer entirely sure of herself outside it.

The form is the argument. Kandasamy is not describing dissociation, she is inducing something like it.

And then there is the writing the protagonist writing covertly, compulsively, in whatever space the regime cannot reach. It would be easy to sentimentalize this. Kandasamy is too alert for that. The writing in the novel is not triumphant. It is desperate and private and often frightened of being found. But it is there and that presence, unglamorous and precarious as it is, constitutes the form resistance takes when every more visible form has been closed off.

***The Prey*: When a Community's Grief Has No Audience**

Grief needs somewhere to go. This is not sentiment it is closer to a sociological fact, and it is what *The Prey* circles around with a patience that sometimes feels like the formal enactment of the endurance it is describing.

The community in this novel carries a grief that has no legitimate public outlet, not because the grief is inexpressible, but because the dominant social order has built no structure capable of receiving it. And this is, plainly, a different kind of silence from the protagonist's silence in *When I Hit You.* Here it is collective, historical, accumulated across generations of non-recognition.

Dalit communities in Kandasamy's fiction do not grieve in the way that tragedy in the upper-caste literary tradition, and in the public discourse shaped by that tradition is supposed to look. There is no catharsis available to them through the established channels, because those channels were built by and for the people who caused the losses in the first place. To perform Dalit grief in the idiom of the dominant culture is to accept the terms of a contract written entirely without you.

So the community's silence becomes a form of refusal. Scott's concept of the hidden transcript, the off-stage discourse of subordinate groups, what is said in kitchens and in the dark, what never makes it into

the dominant cultur's official version of events illuminates this. The full emotional reality of the community circulates privately, in spaces the dominant gaze cannot find.

It is not absent. It is simply not available to those who have not earned access to it.

There is something worth sitting with here that theory doesn't quite reach. The grief in *The Prey* is not only a political condition though it is that it is also just grief. The loss of specific people. Specific relationships. Specific futures that will not happen. Kandasamy doesn't allow the political significance of the community's suffering to become an excuse to abstract the suffering itself, and that discipline is one of the things her fiction does that academic writing, by the nature of its form, mostly fails to.

Caste, Gender, and the Accumulation of Constraint

Dalit feminist scholars V. Geetha, Shailaja Paik, Sharmila Rege have spent considerable effort establishing what ought to be self-evident but apparently keeps requiring demonstration, that caste and gender are not two separate problems affecting Dalit women simultaneously. They are one problem with two organizing logics, and at their intersection, the constraints don't add up they compound.

For the Dalit woman in Kandasamy's fiction, this means navigating a world in which she is disqualified from full emotional subjecthood on multiple grounds at once. As a Dalit, as a woman, as a Dalit woman whose particular situation neither the anti-caste movement nor mainstream feminism has historically been designed to center.

The protagonist of *When I Hit You* is managed on several frequencies simultaneously by her husband's gender expectations, by his political framework, by the broader caste society she moves through outside the marriage. And these do not arrive as separate pressures that a sufficiently organized person could address one at a time. They arrive together. They are experienced together. They create a density of constraint in which the small survivals the secret writing, the interior life stubbornly kept alive feel genuinely significant rather than merely symbolic.

The act of writing as transgression

Kandasamy's metafictional tendencies the foregrounding of the writing process, the refusal to maintain a clean separation between author and protagonist are easy to misread as postmodern self-indulgence if you come to them without context. In their actual context, they are something else entirely.

Knowledge production in the Brahminical social order has historically functioned as a mechanism of exclusion. The texts that organized and justified caste hierarchy were simultaneously texts that prohibited Dalit access to literacy and the production of authoritative knowledge. The Dalit woman who writes and publishes and theorizes her own experience is, in this context, doing something that carries a specific charge not because she intends it as symbolic but because the system she is working within was designed to make her presence in the literary space anomalous.

When Kandasamy's protagonist writes in secret, that secrecy connects to something older and wider than the immediate danger of the marriage. The act of writing becomes and this sounds more deliberate than it perhaps is a continuation of the long tradition of Dalit knowledge circulating in spaces that the dominant culture couldn't easily survey or suppress.

The hidden transcript, again. The interior resistance, unglamorous as ever.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative textual analysis and affect theory:

Primary texts: Kandasamy's novels (e.g., When I Hit You, The Gypsy Goddess, Ms. Militancy)

Theoretical framework: Berlant's and Ahmed's models of emotional regimes; Scott's theory of hidden resistance.

Approach: Close reading of emotional expressions, narrative strategies, symbolic silence, and subversive language within caste contexts.

Conclusion

This study has been making, throughout and in several registers, a single argument. Silence in Kandasamy's fiction is not the silence of someone with nothing to say. It is the silence of someone who has learned through experience, or through inherited knowledge, or both that saying everything in public is not always compatible with survival, and who has decided, accordingly, to preserve the self in whatever space remains available to it.

That decision costs something. The hidden transcript is not a clean solution or a source of consolation. The protagonist of *When I Hit You* does not emerge from her marriage intact. The community in *The Prey* carries its grief without resolution, without the satisfaction of being understood by the world responsible for its suffering. There is an enormous amount of loss in these novels the public losses that

caste inflicts, and the subtler, more private loss of a person who has had to become expert at concealment simply in order to keep going.

But something survives. And Kandasamy's fiction is, at its deepest level, a document of that survival not as triumph, not as resilience in the tidy sense that the dominant culture finds reassuring, but as the blunt, unglamorous fact of a selfhood that refused in the end, to be entirely taken.

The emotional regime of caste attempted total governance of the interior life of the Dalit subject. Kandasamy's fiction is evidence that it failed. Not completely but enough.

And that matters.

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