

# Uncovering the Causes of Dalit Prejudice in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

M. Keerthana<sup>1</sup>, A. Rahila Banu<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

This study examines the novel "The Gypsy Goddess" by Meena Kandasamy, which highlights the Kilvenmani massacre in India in 1968. It aims to raise awareness about the oppression faced by the Dalit community, particularly Dalit women, due to caste prejudices. The research design involves a qualitative analysis of the novel and the experiences of Dalit women who have faced violence and oppression. The findings emphasize the ongoing discrimination and marginalization faced by Dalits, calling for increased awareness and action to address their plight and challenge caste prejudices.

## Keywords

Dalit, caste prejudices, oppression, violence, marginalization, Kilvenmani massacre

<sup>1</sup> Jamal Mohammed College, Trichy 20.

\*Corresponding author: rahilabanu84@gmail.com

Meena Kandasamy, a young Indian poet, translator, fiction writer, and activist, dedicates her work to addressing various social issues such as caste annihilation, women's rights, domestic violence, marginality, and identity. Through her powerful poems and novels, she vehemently challenges and combats caste prejudices. In 2014, she published her first novel, "The Gypsy Goddess," which was inspired by the influential figure of Kurathi Amman, her ancestral goddess. Within the novel, Kandasamy delves into the tragic Kilvenmani massacre that took place on December 25th, 1968, in the village of Kilvenmani, situated in the Nagapattinam district of Tamilnadu.

A total of 44 individuals fell victim to a brutal act of violence perpetrated by their landlords. These individuals, known as Dalits, are agricultural laborers toiling in the fields owned by individuals of higher caste. Frustrated by the inadequate remuneration they receive for their labor, they have taken a stand and are demanding fair wages in light of the increased agricultural output. The Marxist community has also rallied behind them, offering their support in their quest for higher wages and encouraging them to resist the oppressive landlords. The upper caste families hold dominion over the lands, while the laborers belong to the marginalized caste.

The landlords exploit the laborers by burdening them with arduous tasks but fail to provide fair compensation. These laborers are treated with utter disdain, akin to enslaved animals, solely due to their Dalit identity. Their caste becomes the sole justification for their exclusion and oppression within the social hierarchy. These marginalized individuals reside in modest dwellings situated in the outskirts of the village. Shockingly, the landlords make the cruel decision to set fire to the homes of the Dalits. A group of men converge upon the isolated community, initiating a violent assault against them.

The Dalits are engaged in a relentless struggle against their oppressors. Despite their efforts, throwing stones and even the

involvement of children, their situation remains unchanged. The merciless upper caste individuals have resorted to burning down their huts, resulting in a tragic loss of life. A total of 44 individuals have perished in these fires, including 5 elderly men, 16 women, and 23 children. The upper caste individuals show no mercy, even going so far as to murder innocent children. They are determined to silence and suppress the Dalits, resorting to violence if necessary.

The practice of untouchability still persists, with the upper caste individuals indoctrinating their own children to discriminate against the Dalits. They have seized control of the lands belonging to the oppressed, effectively enslaving them. Exploiting their position, they extract all the benefits from the Dalits while subjecting them to suffering and oppression. They have imposed a ban on selling anything to the Dalits, resulting in the deaths of numerous children and the spread of diseases. The Dalits are denied access to food and medicine, exacerbating their already dire circumstances.

The upper caste people receive preferential treatment from both the police and the media. Although the police arrive at the scene, they refuse to intervene and protect the individuals from the fire. Instead, they make arrangements for the landlords to escape. The incident is portrayed from a skewed perspective, with the victims being portrayed as criminals. The newspaper labels this event as mysterious deaths and shows no interest in reporting or broadcasting it.

Kandasamy effectively portrays the strength and courage of Dalit women through the character of Maayi, an elderly woman who embodies the resilience of women who defy injustice and oppression. Maayi's husband was tragically killed for his protest against caste discrimination, highlighting the perpetual nature of oppression and its increasing cruelty. However, Maayi emerges as a symbol of hope and healing for the village, showcasing her pivotal role as a resilient figure. In

## Uncovering the Causes of Dalit Prejudice in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

Kandasamy's narrative, the women are not passive victims but rather fearless individuals who boldly confront their oppression, whether it be sexual harassment, domestic violence, or any other form of mistreatment. They stand shoulder to shoulder with men in their protests, refusing to be confined to the role of a submissive wife. These women possess both kindness and courage, embodying the multifaceted nature of their characters and acting in accordance with their own needs and desires.

Dalits face numerous challenges in their daily lives, including the lack of adequate shelter, sufficient food, and proper clothing. Moreover, they endure the harsh reality of untouchability, being treated as outcasts in society. Regrettably, Dalits are often marginalized and confined to specific corners of villages or even entire countries. Despite their tireless efforts in serving the upper caste, they are denied their rightful share of resources and opportunities. The upper caste perceives Dalits as mere slaves, solely existing to toil on their lands.

Dalits dutifully undertake all menial tasks within the hierarchical structure, yet they are considered impure and are prohibited from entering the homes of the upper caste or touching their belongings. Furthermore, they are systematically excluded from participating in social functions and are even barred from entering temples. This discriminatory treatment perpetuates the cycle of oppression and denies Dalits the basic human rights they deserve.

Caste serves as a protective shield for the upper caste, concealing their acts of violence and wrongdoing, while simultaneously acting as a weapon wielded against the Dalits. This powerful tool is employed to exert control over both the impoverished and the Dalit community. While it assumes the role of a guardian angel for the upper caste, it transforms into a malevolent force for the Dalits. Countless instances of violence and crimes are perpetrated against the Dalits on a daily basis, yet their plight remains largely unknown and disregarded by society. In stark contrast, even minor incidents affecting the upper caste are magnified and sensationalized by the same society. Regrettably, the significant challenges faced by the Dalits are trivialized and dismissed. The Dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights to express themselves, receive education, secure employment, and more. Their rights are limited solely to serving the interests of the upper caste.

Dalit women are objectified and exploited by their landlords, who use them as tools for their own sexual desires. Despite being considered untouchable in every other aspect of society, they are not exempt from being forced into sexual relationships. In order to avoid severe punishment, these women are coerced into cooperating with their landlords. The consequences for refusing to comply can be brutal, as they often endure domestic violence of the most savage nature. Vividly illustrates the horrific treatment and daily suffering that Dalit women endure at the hands of their landlords.

Tragically, the death of Dalits is a common occurrence in this society. They are mercilessly killed for the most basic of human needs, such as water, food, wages, and education.

These killings are carried out in the most cruel and inhumane ways, including burning alive, physical abuse, starvation, and perpetuating poverty. Shockingly, there is a lack of concern and empathy for these acts of cruelty. No one speaks out against these atrocities, and the voices of the Dalits go unheard. This is the harsh reality that Dalits face on a daily basis - a reality that is often overlooked and disregarded by society. The novel serves as a powerful tool to shed light on the immense hardships faced by Dalits, a marginalized and oppressed community in society. Through its narrative, it exposes the deep-rooted discrimination, prejudice, and social injustices that Dalits have historically endured.

By delving into the lives of Dalit characters and their experiences, the novel challenges the complacency and ignorance of individuals who remain oblivious to the struggles faced by this community. It disrupts the contentment of those who have been shielded from the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, forcing them to confront the uncomfortable truth that exists within their society. The novel's ability to evoke empathy and understanding in its readers is crucial in bringing about a much-needed transformation in society. It compels individuals to recognize the urgent necessity for change and to actively work towards dismantling the oppressive structures that perpetuate the suffering of Dalits.

Through its vivid portrayal of the Dalit experience, the novel aims to dismantle the barriers of ignorance and indifference that have allowed the oppression of this community to persist. It seeks to educate and enlighten individuals about the predicament faced by Dalits, urging them to acknowledge the systemic injustices and to take action in order to bring about a more equitable and just society.

The novel's role as a potent instrument lies in its ability to illuminate the hardships endured by Dalits and to disrupt the contentment of individuals who remain oblivious to their struggles. It is imperative that all individuals are enlightened about the predicament of the Dalits and acknowledge the pressing necessity for transformation. Only through this awareness and collective effort can we hope to create a society that is truly inclusive and just for all.

Meena Kandasamy fearlessly advocates for the rights of Dalits, speaking out against the various forms of oppression and violence they face. Having personally experienced these injustices, she is determined to shed light on the brutal deaths of 44 innocent Dalits, a tragedy that has been largely ignored by society. As the voice of the marginalized, she strives to raise awareness about the atrocities that occur in Kilvenmani. To achieve this, she takes it upon herself to write a novel that not only exposes the incidents but also aims to create a lasting impact and generate empathy for the lives and circumstances of Dalits. Through her work, she effectively conveys the pain, struggle, suffering, oppression, isolation, injustice, harassment, and violence inflicted upon them.

## References

- [1] Atchaya G ,Holocaust of peasantry in Meena kandasamy's the Gypsy Goddess, Shanlax publications, February 2023
- [2] Kandasamy, Meena, Gypsy Goddess, Atlantic Books, 2014.
- [3] Subramanian, Aishwarya. Book Review: Meena Kandasamy's The Gypsy Goddess is Undercut with anger.