

Cultural Ambivalence And Collective Resistance In Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Citation: Ms.P.Priyadharshini, et.al (2025). Cultural Ambivalence And Collective Resistance In Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 31(2) 260-261

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v31i2.10642

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Meena Kandasamy's debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* powerfully narrates the socio-political horrors endured by the peasant class of Kilvenmani, Tamil Nadu, during the rise of the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Through her unique postmodern narrative techniques—particularly nonlinear storytelling and direct authorial interventions—Kandasamy not only recreates a historical massacre but also engages readers emotionally and ethically. This paper examines the cultural ambivalence embedded in the novel, especially through the lens of caste and gender oppression. It also explores how Kandasamy's writing disrupts traditional literary norms to give voice to the silenced and oppressed Dalit communities.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Cultural Ambivalence, Peasant Class, Kilvenmani Massacre, Postmodern Narrative, Gender, Caste.

Introduction: Dalit Literature

Contemporary Indian literature has increasingly turned its focus toward social realism, especially through the voices of Dalit and Adivasi authors. Dalit literature, in particular, has become a significant genre in Indian writing, marked by its commitment to representing the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities. Sharan Kumar Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, defines Dalit literature as the writing of Dalits with Dalit consciousness—a revolutionary mentality connected with the struggle for dignity and justice.

Amid this literary tradition, Meena Kandasamy emerges as a powerful voice. A Tamil writer, poet, translator, and activist, she uses English as her tool of resistance, channeling the unheard voices of Dalits and women through provocative prose and verse. *The Gypsy Goddess*, her debut novel, is both an artistic and political project that reclaims a neglected chapter of Indian history through a radical retelling.

Cultural Ambivalence: Caste, Class, and Gender Intersections

Cultural ambivalence—the simultaneous existence of conflicting cultural ideologies—is a recurring motif in *The Gypsy Goddess*. The novel operates in the tense space between traditional hierarchy and radical resistance, between silenced history and spoken rage.

Dalit women, in particular, occupy a unique intersection of caste and gender oppression. As Gopal Guru articulates in "Dalit Women Talk Differently," they are subjected to both Brahmanical patriarchy and intra-Dalit marginalization. The novel reflects this dual subjugation—where Dalit women are not only victims of caste violence but are also often excluded from mainstream feminist discourses.

Writers like Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Bama paved the way for Dalit women's autobiographical expression in regional languages. Today, writers like Meena Kandasamy and Sujatha Gidla extend that legacy into the realm of English literature. For marginalized Dalits, mastering English becomes an act of liberation—a means to challenge dominant narratives both locally and globally.

Meena Kandasamy: Identity, Rebellion, and Literary Rage

Kandasamy's writing is deeply personal and unapologetically political. In interviews, she describes herself as "an angry young woman," a label she embraces in opposition to the exoticized and domesticated portrayals often expected from Indian writers. Her refusal to write "sari-and-mango novels" is a rejection of commodified Indian femininity.

Growing up in a conservative Hindu family, Kandasamy was intimately familiar with patriarchal control. Her rebellion against such constraints—refusing to wear a bindi, delaying jeans until 25—mirrors her literary rebellion. Her works are intensely autobiographical in spirit, reflecting her Tamil identity, her caste, and her womanhood, all of which she transforms into political tools.

Kilvenmani Massacre: History, Trauma, and Cultural Betrayal

The novel is rooted in a real historical tragedy—the Kilvenmani massacre of December 25, 1968—when 44 Dalits, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were burnt alive for demanding fair wages. As Kandasamy recounts, this village “that fed the world forgot to feed her own people.” The massacre, and its grotesque aftermath, reflects a betrayal not only by the landlords but also by the judiciary, media, and political apparatus.

Despite overwhelming evidence, the perpetrators were acquitted while the victims were jailed, accused of armed rebellion. The village later echoed in their haunting words: “We burned again.” The denial of justice symbolizes systemic cultural ambivalence—where ideals of democracy, equality, and brotherhood are preached but denied to those at the margins.

Language, Irony, and the Subversion of Power

Kandasamy’s prose style is stripped of romanticism. Her diction is unembellished yet potent, peppered with irony, satire, and wit. She subverts traditional power structures by turning language into a weapon. The fire in the novel is anthropomorphized as blind and bitter: “Born without eyes... burnt them with blindness and bitterness.” Such metaphors give emotional gravity to political commentary.

The court proceedings, police brutality, and tokenistic political visits are all narrated with biting sarcasm, emphasizing the absurdity and cruelty of institutional betrayal. As the villagers say, “We had not suffered as much even under the white man’s police.” Kandasamy thus locates postcolonial betrayal not in the West but in indigenous systems of caste and governance.

Cultural Resistance and the Ethics of Memory

Kandasamy does not romanticize the victimhood of the Dalits; instead, she frames their suffering as a collective resistance. Her narrative urges readers not merely to empathize but to confront their own complicity and cultural biases. The villagers’ unwavering stand, symbolized by their strike and red flags, becomes a metaphor for larger political resistance.

Cultural ambivalence manifests in the simultaneous glorification of agrarian India and the erasure of the laborers who sustain it. *The Gypsy Goddess* restores that erased memory and demands justice—not just legal, but cultural and historical.

Conclusion:

The Gypsy Goddess is a profound act of literary rebellion. Through her experimental form, sharp language, and uncompromising stance, Meena Kandasamy critiques not only caste and gender oppression but also the cultural ambivalence that enables such oppression to persist. Her novel becomes a site of resistance, a call to conscience, and a reminder that literature can unsettle power.

Kandasamy gives voice to the voiceless, not by speaking for them, but by creating space for their stories to unsettle and provoke. In doing so, she redefines what it means to write history, to bear witness, and to fight oppression through the power of narrative.

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