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**TO LOVE OR NOT TO LOVE: REPRESENTATION OF LOVE IN SELECTED POEMS  
OF MEENA KANDASAMY**

Anjan Das

Independent Researcher

WB SET, NET, GATE, M.A in English

Biswa Bangla Biswabidyalay

Parsundi, District- Birbhum West Bengal, India

[alexanjan943@gmail.com](mailto:alexanjan943@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to show the representation of romantic and erotic love in Meena Kandasamy's poetry, specifically focusing on her anthology Touchand Ms Militancy, within the context of Dalit feminism by analogously relating to the theory of womanism as explored by Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde. The study acknowledges the severe inequalities faced by doubly marginalized Dalit women but seeks to explore the potential for love in their lives, even amidst adversity. By examining Kandasamy's poems, the paper aims to analyse how the representation of love adds plurality and a different dimension to the monolithic assumption that Dalit women's narrative solely consists of only subjective forced disability and violence. Instead, it delves into the politics of emotional positioning and identity construction for Dalit women, considering the role of love in their lives. In particular, the paper investigates how the portrayal of romantic/erotic love disrupts heteronormative frameworks and empowers Dalit women by repositioning them in the matrix of love, leading to a re-evaluation of the man's position within patriarchy. By shifting the focus from whether the Dalit woman can speak to understanding the significance of love in the lives of marginalized Dalit women, this study highlights the potential for love to facilitate their pursuit of a peaceful existence.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Feminism, Love, Meena Kandasamy, Ms Militancy, Patriarchy, Touch

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## **Introduction**

“Come, consume me,  
Devastate me, love, if you ever will,  
But with a force that I will forever remember.” (Kandasamy, lines 19-21)

Dalit feminism captures the severe inequalities of the doubly marginalized Dalit woman and the question of the representation of their love, if any, stands beyond the prospect of inquiry with the monolithic assumption that they are only subject to force and violence. This is not to deny the reality of their plight but to focus on the possibility of love in the Dalit woman’s life even amidst all odds and to venture into the politics of such emotional stationing in recreation and construction of identity for the Dalit woman. In Meena Kandasamy’s poems in general and the anthology of her poems *Touch* in particular, we see how representation of romantic/erotic love squares the uneven heteronorm and places Dalit woman in a position to be loved by the man whom, through her love, the lady has been able to ‘bring him up to worship’ her. In this attempt of discovering the position of the partners in the heteronormative love matrix, we see explorations of the actual positionality of man within patriarchy — as mainly the oppressed and not the oppressor. Kandasamy’s Dalit feminism thus takes a different turn no more asking ‘Can the Dalit woman speak?’ but inquiring what love means to the Dalit marginalized woman and how it can help her regain a peaceful existence.

In the poem entitled “Random Access Man” Kandasamy reiterates the tale of Sita’s hijacking by Ravana. The striking point then is that she represents Ram as an impotent husband who is unfit to fulfil the carnal solicitations of Sita. “Denial aroused desire and/ lust rolled on her breasts,/ lust rode her hips”( Kandasamy, lines 7- 9). So, to get relief from him she sends him to cost the testicles of a golden deer to arouse his masculinity and meanwhile picks a “random-man”( Ravana) with numerous heads and hands. According to tradition, Ravana took Sita to his area i.e. Srilanka but no way touched her. Then, Kandasamy reverses the tale and says that Sita

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herself chose Ravana, a man full of mannish vigour. Then, Sita has been portrayed as a woman who's apprehensive of her fleshly solicitations and yearns for its fulfilment. Sita is represented as an epitome of all those women who are bound in a soulless connubial relationship and so in order to find her true tone she needs to break the impediment of marriage. Here Kandasamy gives importance to the erotic love of women. The idea of love becomes having a happy sexual relationship, from "Matasita" she becomes "Mamacita". "By the time she left/this stranger's lap/she had learnt/all about love/ First to last" (Kandasamy, lines 28-32) -- Kandasamy redefines love as more than just emotional attachment but also as a means of personal liberation and empowerment, especially for women who are constrained by traditional roles and expectations, by highlighting Sita's agency in seeking erotic love and breaking free from a soulless marital relationship.

Menna Kandasamy describes her poetry as a means of her oral resistance against estate and gender-based oppression. She establishes the confluence of the social and the sexual circles of the desire to be touched by the Dalit women. In using a language which is purposely and designedly fleshly, she attempts to capsize the Dalit-womanish body's veritable line of "utility" in society. Her picking of her first florilegium as "Touch" therefore, can also be read through this veritably perspective where the sense/hedonism of the body, as can only be felt through the whole of her body through her skin and hence through touch is also accurately where the veritable polemics of order and sexism are inseminated. Kandasamy takes the most natural and potent form of expedient to rebel against it- The body and its fluid fornication which in desire and rage catches fire. Kandasamy in the poem "Nailed" says, "Men are afraid of women who make poetry and dangerous portents" ( Kandasamy, lines 1-2). Kandasamy's language is a tool which she uses to defend as well as attack, and her runes appear to be an encyclopedia of painful narratives. In the lyric entitled "Once My Silence Held You Magical ( on reading bell hooks)"

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she claims: “You wouldn’t club me because my suffering was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough. Enough. Now I’m theoretical enough. I’m theatrical enough”( Kandasamy,lines 12- 14).

Kandasamy’s Draupadi as a ‘stripper’ queen, a cynosure of the public aspect offers a poke to virility, problematizing the novelties of ‘honour’ of the fellows circle/neighbourhood consorted with the core of women and the novelties of ‘modesty’ credited to her clothes. Her independent act of slipping clothes becomes synonymous with the rejection of these phallogocentric denotations. Her inclined violation from the non-public to the open theatre undermines the testament of ‘separate spheres,’ whereby the private sphere is incidental to ‘respectable’ and the public attendant to ‘non-respectable’. Kandasamy says that Dalit men and women are also exploited by patriarchy but also says that they can love, they can get married even they can also make a truthful relationship.

### **Discussion**

This article seeks to examine the role of love as both an ethic and a discourse in the formation of emancipatory spaces for Dalit women. The first section of *Touch*, “Bring him up to worship you” defines the very space of love where the woman teaches man to care and respect his partner in practical and not idealistic terms. Men are not seen as superiors or superhumans but as beings sharing all weaknesses that nature has left vulnerable in humans. In the poem “Excerpts from a Study Guide”, Kandasamy studies the formula to teach men to look into the alternative and the other not as an option to choose between but as a spontaneous act leading towards unadulterated love in a world otherwise adulterated: “Teach him not to seek/ Where he has been taught to find” (Kandasamy,lines 1-2). Thus, the poem begins by advocating the practice of teaching men not to seek in places where they have been conditioned to find, suggesting a call to challenge traditional gender roles and encourage men to expand their perspectives beyond societal norms. Emphasises the importance of guiding men towards understanding the complexities of women’s experiences and the need to question ingrained biases. The poem urges

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men to enter the land of silence, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for marginalized voices and experiences. By encouraging men to listen and learn from these silenced narratives, the poem promotes inclusivity and empathy. It urges men to ignore words of praise “where all the perfidy hides” (Kandasamy, line5) and which often conceal the injustices prevalent in society. Furthermore, the poem suggests the importance of men appreciating the diverse beauty of women. It encourages men to observe and study the nuances of appearance, highlighting the contrast between the gilt of gold and the wan brown of skin. However, it emphasizes that the choice should ultimately lie with women themselves, promoting agency and autonomy in defining their own beauty. The poem also touches upon personal histories and vulnerabilities. It discusses the marks left by diseases like smallpox and chickenpox, symbolizing the scars and traumas that shape individual experiences. By sharing these stories, the poem invites men to understand and empathize with the realities of women’s lives, which often include both moments of beauty and moments of pain. In the final lines, the poem encourages men to embrace a deeper connection and understanding by pressing their ears against women’s skin. This intimate act suggests a desire for men to listen not only to women’s words but also to the hidden stories and emotions that reside within their bodies. By recognizing that the dance is in the bones and blood, the poem highlights the inherent interconnectedness of human experiences, inviting men to participate in and support the feminist movement.

The enjambment or the running lines of the poem signify a fluid intermingling of the positions and roles of man and woman in the love diary enabling free communication otherwise thwarted for women in general and the Dalit women in particular. Men now become human and thereby empathetic and women gain autonomy and agency. However, a peaceful coexistence is imagined and resistance is not meted out in terms of “aggression as the best kind of troubleshooting” (Kandasamy, line 12). Instead, an attempt is made for equality between men and women. In the repetitional manner of “lead him” and “tell him”, an urgency is expressed to

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equalize the pedestals of man and woman based on mutual understanding and an attempt is made to make possible, what Bell's book in *All About Love: New Visions* (2001) would have called the construction of a loving environment:

We have all heard the maxim "If you do not love yourself, you will be unable to love anyone else." It sounds good. Yet more often than not we feel some degree of confusion when we hear this statement. The confusion arises because most people who think they are not lovable have this perception because, at some point in their lives, they were socialized to see themselves as unlovable by forces outside their control. We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else. However, we are born able to respond to care. As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection, and joy. Whether we learn to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of a loving environment. (Hooks 53)

In Kandasamy's poems, we see the construction of this "loving environment" to finally equalize the hierarchy between man and woman, or between Dalit man and woman. In the poem "If Everything Comes Crashing Down" the poet writes,

    "And both of us become strangers onto each other  
    Do not worry about me.  
    We will look beyond eyes and run into each other  
    As usual, for the rest of life" (Kandasamy, lines 1-4).

Despite the acknowledgement of potential separation or distance, there is a deep-seated reassurance of continued connection and encounter.

In "Frenzied Light" an initial hesitation of love is overcome by overpowering eroticism when the "loving environment" of care and respect is finally established, and the identity of the woman as an active respondent and not a passive receiver in the love matrix is confirmed. Love

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was first seen as a lie in the cruel world, “Love, I can’t be a candle/ For I know it is an ancient lie” (Kandasamy, lines 5-6), promised an alternative and then its possibility is confessed when away from all prime hands, love like a camphor would burn and consume all itself up. The idea of consumption as sexual interaction can be remembered from the metaphysical tradition of English Poetry. However, what seems ingrained in this borrowed meaning is also the idea of a metaphysical possibility of love reaching the platonic paradigm or a paradigm of mutual inclusiveness even when it begins from physicality. Thus, as the poem expresses, when it will burn (in passion) it will burn completely creating a shared world of compassion, love and understanding:

“And dearest, when I burn for you, that single time Nothing shall  
remain of me, or of you, except that flash of  
Memory. Our blending shall be so sublime, so intense, so total.  
Come, consume me,  
Devastate me love, if you ever will,  
But with a force that I will forever remember.” ( Kandasamy, lines 16-21)

This idea of erotic empowerment, destabilising the role of man-woman as sexual predator-prey respectively and initiating a passionate love of physicality only in mutual inclusivity and “inter-assuredness”, (Donne 19) with both partners in lead can be understood when pitted against Audre Lorde’s idea in *Sister Outsider* (1984):

The erotic is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced it, we know of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. . . . Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of

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satisfaction and completion we can then observe which of our various Life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness. . . . Within the celebration of the erotic in all of our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for the bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. (Lorde 54–55)

It is seen that the empowerment discourse emphasizes the significance of the erotic as a measure of self-awareness and intense emotions and as an internal source of satisfaction and fulfilment. It suggests that once individuals have experienced the power of the erotic, they can strive for that sense of completion and seek endeavours that bring them closest to that fullness. The celebration of the erotic becomes a conscious decision, empowering the individual. In the poem “Frenzied Light”, the speaker addresses their lover, expressing their willingness to light up the lover’s life but also presenting certain conditions. The speaker rejects the notion of being a mere candle, which represents a solemn and settled tenderness, a slow and passive role. Instead, the speaker offers a substitute, comparing themselves to a piece of holy camphor, a substance associated with purity and preservation. The speaker promises that in their passionate union, there will be a complete merging, leaving nothing but a vivid memory. The poem resonates with the empowerment discourse on eroticism by challenging traditional notions of love and relationships. The speaker rejects the passive role of a candle and seeks a more intense and transformative experience. By embracing the forceful and consuming nature of love, the speaker aims to create a profound and lasting impact. The poem aligns with the idea that the erotic can be a source of empowerment, as it defies societal expectations and embraces a more powerful and memorable connection. Furthermore, the poem employs vivid sensory imagery to evoke a sense of intensity and passion. The mention of burning, light, and flash of memory appeals to the reader’s senses and intensifies the emotional impact of the speaker’s words. Through these



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linguistic cues, the poem captures the speaker's yearning for a love that transcends traditional boundaries and societal expectations.

Another of Kandasamy's poems "Love and War" explores the eternal idea of love by going back to a time when the word for love was universal, some two millennia ago. The poem examines how love is a universal emotion shared by both sexes, as demonstrated by the songs that highlight the intimacy of love. The poem presents love as a power that has no bounds or limits; it is boundless, a feast for the imagination, and free of any negative associations like illness or evil.

“no names were named.

you did not know

who he was

or who she was

or when it was

or where it was

only

love was” (Kandasamy, lines 22-29).

Love is described in the poem as being greater than the sky, deeper than the ocean, and larger than the earth, emphasising its vastness and depth. Love is an enduring power that unites hearts of all ages. It is nameless and ageless, existing beyond of identities, time, or place. Kandasamy asserts, - “and because it has an end/ war was a history./ love never has an end./ love was. and will be” (Kandasamy, lines 56-59). In most of her love poems Kandasamy talks about a love that is ‘Reserved for needy Nights’, that is ‘tireless’ and a ‘fantasy feast’ and teaches the reader the equality of love focusing on women's experience and the ‘lack’ women in general feel in their love life as Hooks says “Men theorize about love, but women are more often love's practitioners. Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what it feels like to be loved; women

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often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it” (Hooks XX). While acknowledging the beauty and depth of romantic love, Kandasamy also offers a critique of romanticism that overlooks inequalities and glosses over systemic issues. According to K. Satchidanandan,

“Meena Kandasamy’s full-blooded and highly experimental poems challenge the dominant mode in contemporary Indian poetry in English: status-quoist, depoliticized, neatly sterilized. These caustic poems with their black humor, sharp sarcasm, tart repartees, semantic puns and semiotic plays irritate, shock and sting the readers until they are provoked into rethinking the “time honoured’ traditions and entrenched hierarchies at work in contemporary society.... She de-romanticizes the world and demystifies religious and literary traditions by re-appropriating the hegemonic language in a heretical gesture of Promethean love for the dispossessed. The poet interrogates the tenets of a solipsistic modernism to create a counter- poetic community speech brimming with emancipatory energy” (“Poetry Books (2002-2010)”).

### **Conclusion**

Kandasamy’s poetics aims to elucidate how a love ethic can contribute to the development of body-based politics for Dalit women, enabling them to reclaim their Dalit feminist past, assert their liberatory present, and envision an emancipated future. To conclude, it can be said that Kandasamy’s poems are replete with innuendos, slang, catchphrases, irony and aphorisms that startle the reader to take notice of the sub-text infused with political messages. Eschewing euphemism and with the use of expletives, ribaldry and words considered sacrilegious to the ‘literariness’ of (elite) standard English writings, her poetry challenges set mores and conventions, bringing a whole new lexicon to it. A curious blend of pain and protest

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permeates Kandasamy's poetry. Fusing activism and literature, she brings a fresh perspective to Indian poetry in English in terms of theme, form and content.

Meena Kandasamy is one among those many Indian muses who have managed to convert their deepest anguish into brilliant poetry. The minstrel herself has an ambitious soul. She takes up fables and symbols from Tamil ideas and derives them by furnishing them with an identicalness entirely dissimilar from their premier bone. As a woman, she has compelled her trace to the front line to characterize her neighbourhood through her important language and rebellious jotting. Her say is like the vote of her African-American counterparts. Her soul is endlessly searching for an oasis. Most of her themes and Her choices of diction are taboos in the artistic environment of India. In her poems, Meena Kandasamy also represents the description of Love.

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