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A 'Space' of One's Own: Exploring the Language of Resistance in Select Poems of Meena Kandasamy

Suranjana Bhadra

Assistant Professor of English, MUC Women's College, Burdwan

The author is an Assistant Professor of English in the postgraduate department of English of Maharajadhiraj Uday Chand Women's College, affiliated to the University of Burdwan, for more than ten years. Her area of interest is Feminist Theatre. She has published her research works in national and international journals.

Abstract

Contemporary women poets in India have re-radicalized the commonplace poetical conventions in order to subvert prevalent power structures. The self-representation of the cultural 'other' in poetry dissolves the feeling of being an 'outsider' as they venture to move beyond boundaries, beyond fixities. The process of creating a potent voice translates the 'contact zone' into the production of meaning. The two places, the 'I' and the 'You' get mobilized in the passage through a 'Third Space', a fusion of the horizons through self-representation. This dynamic outcome of the 'war of position' in the fluid, ambiguous and indeterminate spaces makes the structure of meanings polysemic.

With the attempt to create a space of one's own Meena Kandasamy threatens the conspiracy of subjugation and silence by speaking with her body and recreating her own myths. Her works exemplify the resistance to the regimes of the normal that makes them 'queer'. This paper explores the revolutionary language of poetry of the women poets that breaks out of a hetero normative matrix. Kandasamy asserts that "This tongue allows me to resist, rape, to rescue my dreams". Such an assertion from the 'angry young woman' not only suggest the barren, painful lives of women, but also reveal the combined violence of colloquial, slang and mutilated words to shock the readers. The militant language signifies the feminine body, the exuberance and genuine emotions, free from all artificial restraints.

Keywords

space, disruptive, body, language, poetic

At the present time women's poetry in India is transgressive, disruptive, poetic and revolutionary as women are in step with a great movement creating histories themselves. The contemporary women poets have re-radicalized the commonplace poetical conventions in order to subvert prevalent power structures. The connotative language which they employ as a sign-system to criticize the social and political status of women shatters the phallogocentric model. Being the 'other' in the patriarchal space, women poets venture to move beyond boundaries, beyond fixities. The self-representation of the cultural 'other' in poetry dissolves the feeling of being an 'outsider'. They take pride in their otherness. The process of creating a potent voice translates the 'contact zone' into the production of meaning. The two places, the 'I' and the 'You' get mobilized in the passage through a 'third space', a fusion of the horizons through self-representation. This dynamic outcome of the 'war of position' in the fluid, ambiguous and indeterminate spaces makes the structure of meanings polysemic. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* states:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space. (36)

Located in the third space they threaten the conspiracy of subjugation and silence operating in the sociocultural domain of India and at the same time speak with their bodies and retell their own stories. Bruce King asserts: "Writing is a means of creating a place in the world, the use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion" (152). These voices are neither mute nor dominant, they are rather new voices at the fringes of the society where language changes and develops simultaneously.

With the attempt to create a space of one's own, poets like Meena Kandasamy have dared to devise a woman's language through the medium of poetry. Her works exemplify the resistance to the regimes of the normal that makes them 'queer'. The 'angry young woman' boldly asserts in the *Sampsonia Way Magazine* that "my poetry is naked my poetry is in tears my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice" (Sahay). This paper situates Kandasamy's poems in the 'third space', a space that blurs the real and the virtual by creating a domain through distributed presence. This space can be called a 'hybrid' space that empowers docile bodies from the margins to kill and 'seduce shamelessly'. This paper also explores the revolutionary language of poetry of Meena Kandasamy that breaks out of a hetero normative matrix. She subverts the mythical representation of women by shattering the veil of deification and pseudo honour ascribed to

them. She challenges the aura of holiness and chastity associated with Sita or Draupadi. The stories of the epics have become timeless myths. These myths narrate the tales of women subject to exploitation and subjugation through 'pativrata dharma'. Such women have become the cultural icons as they safeguard the patriarchal conventions. Kandasamy situates these deified women in an expanded virtual-real matrix, a third space that often stings the readers. In the poem 'Princess-in-Exile' Meena Kandasamy defines Sita as a person who being scorned by her husband and society chooses the life of a self dependence : Kandasamy says: "Years later, her husband won her back/But by then/She was adept at walkouts,/She had perfected the vanishing act" (Kandasamy 45). Being asked to go through another 'agni pariksha' Sita finds it much better to move out of her 'sex roles' and assert her identity as an individual even though she may be castigated as unchaste. She becomes an adept at walkouts' and prefers to vanish away or move away eternally from these filthy earthly tortures. Kandasamy asserts that men can no longer choose them wives but they are "sure as sluts" who pick up and "Strip random men" (14). The poem ends with a note – "We (women) are not the ones you can sentence for life" (14). In the poems of Kandasamy these mythical women like Sita or Draupadi are no longer the 'gendered subaltern', but are iconoclasts and revolutionaries. Her poems burn with the fire of desiring bodies banished in *Manusmriti* and *Kamasutra*. She declares: "You are all the men for whom I would never moan, never mourn. You are the conscience on this Hindu society" (Kandasamy 8). In the poem "Random Access Man" Sita sends her so called 'dickhead husband' to seek the testicle of the golden deer to activate his manhood. By that time "She picked herself a random man/ for that first night of fervor" (46). This re-created Sita sits on the stranger's lap and learnt all about the consequences of love. The mythical women dare to choose their own roles – witches, nympho, 'sluts', 'gluttons', 'bitches', and shrews. While rewriting the myth of Soorpanakha in the poem "Traitor", Kandasamy says that for the crime of offering her love, Soorpanakha was silenced:

He crafted it with gags, cuffs, chains, knives, harness.
 Flattened, her protrusions torn away: ears, nose, breasts.
 Taken to task, they told the world she was sharp-clawed,
 Long-nosed, big-buddha-eared, pot bellied, cross-eyed,
 with a Potato-peeler voice, and a neck that grew at night.(58)

Therefore, myths put her in this space of militancy. She rejoices and takes 'perverse pleasure' in slaughtering myths that rob women of their right to live, learn and choose. Kandasamy asserts in *Ms Militancy*:

I work to not only get back at you; I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on a stranger's lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me. (Kandasamy 8)

The caustic poems replete with black humour, crude sarcasm not only shock or irritate, but also instigate the readers to think alternatively about the 'time-honoured' myths and traditions that lay the foundation of Indian culture. While de-romanticizing and re-appropriating myths, Kandasamy interrogates the paradigms of cultural ethos.

Following the footsteps of Kamala Das, Meena Kandasamy, the contemporary Dalit poet from Tamil Nadu, believes that the world is not much familiar with real life rebellious women. They are labelled as hysterics as it is unfeminine for a young woman to show her rage. The society asks them to be subdued and they must be tamed. Her poem "Mascara" speaks of the agony of devdasis. The devdasi applies mascara when she dies to make herself beautiful. She asserts: "When she dons the mascara/ the heavens have heard her wishes, Kali you wear this too" (Classic Poetry 50). Such boldness and recreation of myths are marks of their new space. Kandasamy's *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy* can be estimated as a poetic discourse that not only castigates the conventional modes of repression but also resolutely strives towards futures that are yet to exist. The language of her poetry is intentionally dark and dangerous as the poems desperately slaughter patriarchal myths.

The language of the women poets can be related to Julia Kristeva's concepts of the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' as discussed in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Kristeva asserts that a speaking subject is an entity split between the conscious and the unconscious, the cultural and the natural, the mind and the body, thus making language plurisignificant and unfixed. 'Symbolic' is the ordered, coherent mode of signification which represents the masculine. It is the language of power, control, propriety, aligned with patriarchal cultural functions that signal the father's name and his prohibitions. It is the language of authority. The child when initiated into the cultural codes of language comes to subjectivity in relation to the symbolic functions of language. The learning of the symbolic order of language compels an automatic submission to patriarchal codes and rejection of the pre-oedipal space of the mother-child bond. On the contrary, 'semiotic' includes the extra-verbal way of expression that encapsulates the psychosomatic drives and physical energy. The 'semiotic' is associated with the female body—the body of the mother. The free-floating sea of the womb of the mother is the site of the pre-oedipal experiences of the child. This

space of mother-child bonding has been called the 'semiotic chora'⁶. The semiotic originates from the pre-oedipal unconscious field; it is instinctual and incoherent. "The semiotic can thus be understood as pre-thetic, preceding the positing of the subject Though discrete and disposed, the *chora* cannot be unified by a Meaning, which, by contrast, is initiated by a thesis, constituting . . . a break" (Kristeva 36). The discourse which is, disorderly, fluid, expressing the open unrepressed flow of liberating energy constitutes the semiotic. Such a discourse stands outside the convention and threatens the rational order of masculine speech. The semiotic originates in the unconscious as revealed in the incoherent babbles of a baby before getting introduced to the symbolic, linguistic framework.

The semiotic elements which vibrate beneath the phallogocentric discourse comprise an incoherent prelinguistic flux of sounds, rhythms and gestures. In the signifying process, the semiotic is interfused with the symbolic. Kristeva avers:

. . . the two trends just mentioned [semiotic and symbolic] designate *two modalities* of what is, for us, the same signifying process. We shall call the first "the semiotic" and the second "the symbolic." These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called "natural" language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic (*Revolution* 23-24).

The release of the semiotic in the symbolic culminates in 'linguistic play'. Language with semiotic drives is not only fluid and poetic, but also subversive. In contrast to the closed rational symbolic order, the semiotic is open and revolutionary, thereby instigating a radical social change. Therefore, when a woman speaks, she places herself in a new position, the third space. In this 'discourse of dissent' the third space is much removed from the first space, a space governed by conventionalities and symbolic language. It is also beyond the obsolete pre-linguistic 'feminine' phase, the second space, confined only within the 'semiotic chora'.

To express their repressed selves, women have to speak and write in a different language, free from patriarchal constraints. This polysemic and subversive language of women provides new ways of interpretation. This results in 'jouissance', an immense pleasure at their ability to rupture the rational order of speech and give voice to their silence. Leon S. Roudiez quoted Kristeva in the introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "[...] literary practice is seen as an exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language; as an

activity that liberates the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic and social networks; as a dynamism that breaks up the inertia of language habits and grants linguists the unique possibility of studying the *becoming* of the significations of signs” (2-3). The discovery of new possibilities of language subverts conventional practices, thereby questioning dominant ideologies. Helene Cixous, while speaking about women’s writing, asserts that women should destroy and break the norms of masculine writing. Cixous in her essay, “The Laugh of Medusa” (1976), asserts:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not *yourself*. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them (281).

Through the medium of writing women will get back their strength, their desires and pleasures, which have been snatched away from them by the society. A woman should break her silence by bursting out in torrent of words. The predominance of semiotic flux makes the language of poetry fluid, poetic and subversive thereby prefiguring a social change. Such distorted language breaks the conventional mode of language structure employed for the representation of women.

Kandasamy abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, somewhat sterile aestheticism in favour of an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian poets were still governed by 19th century diction, sentiment and romanticized love. Women had to fit in the framework of patriarchal ideologies. They have been repressed, tortured and silenced in the society. In “Introduction” Kamala Das remarks: “I speak three languages, write in/Two, dream in one” (PoemHunter). The language in which one dreams is her own, the woman’s poetic language. The inadequacy of the rational approach has been supplemented by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thoughts. In ‘Backstreet Girls’ she boldly asserts: There will be no blood on our bridal beds/ We are not the ones you will choose for wives/ We are not the ones you can sentence for life” (Kandasamy 14). The uncontrolled torrent of words springs from unlimited resources of repressed internal drives.

Kandasamy’s poetry, with all its performative traits, is too animated and lively to be just called alive, more so because of it being contained in the selfhood that Kandasamy bears as well as projects through her poetry. Gilbert and Gubar talk about the engagement of

women writers “in assaulting and revising, destructing and reconstructing the images of women inherited from male literature- especially the paradigmatic polarities of the angel and the monster” (20-21). Kandasamy’s poetry suggests an endeavour to see through the binaries, while making sure that such schisms are being destabilized by creation of conundrums within. As the poet declares in the Introduction to *Ms. Militancy*- “I strive to be a sphinx: part woman, part lioness, armed with all lethal riddles” (Kandasamy 9). The language of her poetry shows the interplay of the semiotic in the symbolic. Women’s imagination is beautiful, so her desires must overflow through her stormy writings. Through the medium of writing the repressions of women can be perpetuated. Women should write as women because writing is the locus of subversive thoughts, suggesting possibilities of change. Such words disrupt the authenticity of the symbolic order by exposing the unconscious drives and energy through the use of words and horror myths. Kandasamy asserts that “This tongue allows me to resist, rape, to rescue my dreams. It is not man-made...My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths” (Kandasamy 8-9). Harsh, cacophonous and crude expressions like—‘Kali kills’, ‘Draupadi strips’ and so on,— not only suggest the barren, painful lives of women, but also reveal the combined violence of colloquial, slang and mutilated words to shock the readers. This language of poetry shatters all norms of order and coherence, giving vent to hidden desires. The language signifies the feminine body, the exuberance and genuine emotions, free from all artificial restraints. She remains committed to the search for new representational forms, new strategies for encoding the body, new ways to organize the sex/gender relations we live in. Rooting herself firmly, Kandasamy lays bare her challenge: “Come, unriddle me. But be warned: I never falter in a fight. And, far worse, I seduce shamelessly” (9).

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