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Displacement Ache in the Selected Poems of Meena Kandasamy and rupi kaur

Aditi Sharma (Research Scholar, Deptt. Of English, RIMT University, Mandi Gobindgarh)

Abstract: This paper attempts to study the displacement ache in the selected poems of Meena Kandasamy and rupi kaur, two contemporary Indian English poets. It will highlight the experiences and aches of two different kinds of displacements- physical as well psychological- suffered by both the poets in their personal lives and by the people especially women of their societies and communities, expressed through their poems. Physical displacement refers to the individuals leaving their native lands and getting settled in other countries, and psychological displacement means diversion of mind. These poets belong to different castes and religions. Though their basic issues related to women and a few other sections of society are similar yet they have their individual styles to share their own experiences of struggle, suffering and success. Displacement, alienation, discrimination, oppression of Dalits, survival struggles of the diaspora in the new lands of relocation, nostalgia, language of the new land, migrant women being victims of white superiority, identity crises and many other dilemmas faced by displaced individuals are the major issues discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Displacement, Alienation, Oppression, Marginalization, Ache.

According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 'Ache' is "to suffer a usually dull persistent pain" or "to experience a painful eagerness or yearning." (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ache>) Displacement is defined as the "the act or process of 'displacing': the state of being displaced". (<https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/displace>). It generally occurs in two forms; physical and psychological. Displacement not only denotes the removal or movement of individuals from one place to another, it also suggests uprootedness, where a displaced person is deprived of his/her place taken over by other people or forces. Roberta Cohen and Francis M. Deng define displacement as "a forced removal of people from their homes through armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights and other causes traditionally associated with refugees across international borders". (Masses in Flight,p7) Displacement is, therefore, implicative of a disorientation, a denial of comfort. Displacement may thus be emotional or physical. The definition of 'Displacement' as per Psychology given in Merriam-Webster online dictionary is: "the redirection of an emotion or impulse from its original object (such as an idea or person) to another." (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/displace>). According to Sigmund Freud, "Displacement is the principle means used in the dream-distortion to which the dream-thoughts must submit under the influence of the censorship". (New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, p18).

Psychological ache is a mental suffering that can be caused by traumas, unexpected negative situations, certain losses and unfulfilled basic needs. Displacement is a psychological defence mechanism in which a person redirects a negative emotion from its original source to a less threatening recipient. A classic example of the defence is displaced aggression. If persons are angry but cannot direct their anger towards the source without consequences, they might "take out" their anger on a person or thing that poses less of a risk." (Rajchert J.) The introduction of Psychological Pain Assessment Scale (PPAS) is developed by Shneidman (1999) in which psychological pain is also defined. "Psychache is not the same as somatic or physical pain. It

is how you feel like a human being, how you feel in your mind or in your heart. It is mental suffering and mental torture. It can be felt as shame, guilt, grief, humiliation, despair, loneliness, sadness or sorrow".(pp. 287-294) Most of the times the physical displacement results in psychological displacement or alienation which causes the feeling that displaced individuals are out of the original place and feel the ache of separation from their own identity. However, in diaspora, people get mixed up and feel disconnected which gives them the feel that they are excluded from mainstream society and hence feel alienated. Being diasporic means, people are estranged from acquainted places and community, they live in 'in between-ness'. Alienation is basically living in other's domain, as Julia M Wright explains, alienation refers to living in a system established by somebody else and is being made isolated from the communities, be it the native and the host country (Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation, p57). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin put displacement in this way: "A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by supposedly superior racial or cultural model..."(The Empire Writes Back,22).

Meena Kandasamy is one of the most prominent Indian contemporary writers: a poet, a novelist, a translator, an activist and one of the angry voices of the oppressed. She was born in 1984 in Chennai, India. Most of her works are about feminist issues, linguistic identity, and anti-caste eradication. She published her debut poetry collection *Touch* in August 2006 with a foreword by Kamala Das, one of the renowned Indian-English writers. Kandasamy's second collection of poems *Ms Militancy* was published in December 2010. Her collection of short stories entitled *Black Magic* and her debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* were published in 2014. Her second novel *When I Hit You: The Portrait of the Writer As a Young Wife* was published in 2017. Her third novel was *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). Her other works such as *Mascara* and *My Lover Speaks of Rape* won first prize in All India Poetry Competition. She has co-authored with M. Nisar a book named *Ayyankali: A Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*. Meena Kandasamy edited "The Dalit", a bimonthly English Magazine, which provided her a platform to condemn oppressive hierarchies and to record atrocities. Her poems have been published in many journals including 'Kavya Bharti', 'The Little Magazine', 'Muse India', 'Indian Horizons' and a few more.

Meena Kandasamy is among such voices that have been inspiring the dalit women-who have been displaced and subalternized in the hierarchy of castes given by Manu and leading derogatory lives-and other such women who have been sidetracked by the mainstream societies on various accounts. Manu in *Manusmriti / The Laws of Manu* has divided Hindu society into four castes: Brahmin (knowledge), king Kshatriya (king), Vaishya (traders) and Sudra (service). In chapter one of *Manusmriti/ The Laws of Manu* it is mentioned: "But for the sake of prosperity of the worlds he (Brahma) caused the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya, and the Sudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet." (verse 31). Meena Kandasamy in her preface to *Ms. Militancy* writes: "You are Manu robbing me of my right to live, learn, and choose." (8)

The dalit psyche is different, as a dalit has to face inequality and harassment. Though there comes a point when a frustrated dalit turns out to be a rebel, which is the first step of self defence mechanism. If a dalit has to survive, it can only be through protest and raising voice. A dalit needs the defence mechanism to survive and this is the way for him to exist in the biased society and its system. Thus the defence mechanism becomes the sole weapon and solace for his shattered and wounded self.

Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge and power structures and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's views about the subaltern are quite helpful for highlighting the subalterns' perspectives in the poems of Meena Kandasamy and rupi kaur. In his book *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault challenges the idea of power structure saying, "...power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion..." (web). Each society creates its own truth to discipline people and make them behave in a certain way. The mechanisms of power create the individuals who are designed to dominate. Foucault believes that certain authorities who possess power in society produce knowledge about those who lack power. This kind of system of knowledge is called 'discourse'. Foucault examined the mechanisms of prison surveillance, school discipline, systems for the administration and control of populations, the promotion of norms about bodily conduct, including sex. He studied psychology, medicine and criminology and their roles as bodies of knowledge that define norms of behaviour and deviance. Physical bodies are subjugated and made to behave in certain ways. This social control of the wider population was named by him "bio-power". So, the narratives which support the prevailing power relations for keeping the dominated

structure of the society unaffected, need to be re-read and challenged in order to untangle the traces of voices of the unheard.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985) brings the very notion of ‘body’ of the Third World women, especially those of the underprivileged women closer to the subordination of the subaltern. She adopts the concept of the subaltern from Antonio Gramsci’s views about of the subaltern theory and tries to theorize the condition of the third world women. Spivak comments that the threefold domination faced by these women is because of patriarchy, racism/ caste system and the domination by the ideology of the First World feminists. She convinces them to get over their hesitation and fear to speak for themselves and also states that the subalterns favour to write their own body as they have no other way out to present their stories. The attempts of Meena Kandasamy and rupi kaur to dig out the inscribed voices from history and even from their personal experiences and refresh them is a try to retrieve the diffusive traces of sufferings undergone by the underprivileged which are usually overshadowed.

Meena Kandasamy uses her poems as a tool to voice against the violence meted out by the nationally established system of caste segregation which authorizes the upper caste people to subjugate the lower caste people according to the rigorous rules set by them which inhumanly demand an undignified existence and acceptance of authority from the Dalits. Her poem “Touch” articulates her aching emotions towards the predicament of her community undergoing atrocities hurled by the extremely biased and hypocritical Hindu Brahmanical system:

But, you will never have known
that touch—the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate. (Touch,36.)

The ache of liberating their selves from the clutches of poverty makes them unable to enjoy any social status. They feel that the upper caste people look down upon them as insignificant creatures, even their basic rights are neglected and they become subject to the endless miseries of caste politics in India. The outcome of the caste segregation is that they feel humiliated, as they are marginalised from the mainstream society. So they tend to live a disgraceful life.

In her poem ‘Another Paradise Lost: The Hindu Way’, Kandasamy has presented a story about her conversation with a serpent. The serpent narrates that once it was a monarch on the earth and in the heaven as well. One day it raised questions before gods in heaven related to the reason behind the caste system and the division of work or jobs on the earth. When it advocated the idea of equality and freedom, it was considered a rebel.

For the same act, he was cursed badly and was thrown on earth as a part of his punishment, as gods living in heaven always want division and hierarchy of varnas to be continued on earth. Anyone going against the set system would be punished one way or the other. Then the serpent discloses:

I questioned the Gods, and the learned
sages there. I asked them what would happen if an
high-born did manual work just like the low-born.
I worried about the division of labor, this disparity
in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel
pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. I had a riotous
history of revolution. The Gods plotted against me,
decided that I was trouble. I was cursed to turn into
a vile snake. I was banished from paradise. For sixty
million years, I shall roam the earth, and then I may
return." This was a different case of the paradise lost. (Touch,41)

Her poem “One-Eyed” tells about Dhanam, a little girl who felt very thirsty, touched the pot with her clunky hands and drank a glass of water. The well-educated teacher of the school slapped her on her cheek for breaking the rules.

the pot sees just another noisy child
 the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
 the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst...

The poet concludes the poem in heart rending words :

...dhanam sees a world torn in half.
 her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,
 the price for a taste of that touchable water” (Ms. Militancy,41)

Meena Kandasamy through her poems not only expresses her ache at the discriminatory and derogatory treatment meted out to the members of dalit community, she also vehemently criticizes and condemns the caste system and inhuman treatment which Dalits have been getting since ages. In her poem ‘Mohandas Karamchand’ she has strongly criticized Gandhi for giving the name ‘Harijans’ to low caste people, as he was the follower of brahmanic system. Harijans as per Gandhi are the children of God, but Dalits take it as a derogatory term. As per Dalit intellectuals, Gandhi had attached a stigma to their identity, which would never go.

...Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,
 You dubbed us pariahs—“Harijans”
 goody-goody guys of a bigot god
 Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo...(13-16)
 ...You knew, you bloody well knew,
 Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.
 It haunts us now, the way you do
 with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two... (25-28)

Meena Kandasamy has indeed become the voice of the oppressive dalit class, which was forced to stay quiet.

If we see the legal system in India, many laws have been made to give equal status to Dalits, but practically if it is observed the reality is heart rending. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) at New York University School of Law submitted the information on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to the committee in February 2007 (“Committee” or CERD) for consideration in its review under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The joint-submission is based on the HRW investigations on caste discrimination in India and the findings of Indian government and non-government organizations on caste-based abuses. Human Rights Watch reported that on April 5, 2003, for example, four upper-caste men abducted a fourteen-year-old Dalit girl from her home just outside Jaipur, Rajasthan, and gang-raped her over a period of three days. Upon her return to her village, the upper-caste community of the village threatened to remove her family if they reported the incident. Dalit women are also singled out for other indignities, like being paraded naked, even for petty disputes. These indignities have symbolic significance. For example, Human Rights Watch reported that on November 3, 2003, a Dalit woman in Kishanganj, Bihar was paraded half-naked by a group of people who wanted to teach a lesson to her family for not relinquishing their claim to a piece of land. Vulnerability to sexual violence also results from Dalit women’s lower economic and social status, leading many Dalit women to turn to prostitution for their survival. According to the Special Rapporteur on racism’s 2005 Annual Report: The homes of the Dalits were reported to have been attacked by upper-caste villagers using swords and other weapons. Allegedly, inter alia, they pushed the Dalits to the ground, stamped on them, used degrading caste names to refer to them, sexually assaulted the women and attempted to pull off their saris. Other specific incidents mentioned were that an 8-month-old baby was thrown against a wall, a 75-year-old man was attacked, and a middle-aged woman was hit on the head as she attempted to protect her son. Close to 100 houses were said to have been burnt, money and jewels were stolen, and cattle owned by the dalits were reported to have been killed. In total, 14 Dalits were allegedly admitted to the Coimbatore Medical College Hospital. Many Dalits are said to have tried to escape.

The horrific experiences of cruelty towards the lower class people, their sheer helplessness and inability to save themselves from the extreme violence towards them is portrayed by Kandasamy in her poem ‘Fire’:

...Our huts are burning—
 Regular huts in proper rows.
 Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)

feed the flames as we rush out
 shrieking-crying-moaning
 open mouthed hysterical curses
 and as if in an answer—
 when the blazing work is done
 Fire engines arrive.

Deliberately late... (Touch 7-16)

Besides the description of physical violence inflicted on Dalits in various forms in many poems, there is one more poem titled 'Becoming a Brahmin' by Kandasamy which delineates another form of exploitation that is ideological. This poem shows the steps involved in becoming a Brahmin from a low caste by the constitution of marriage.

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

- Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.
- Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.
- Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.
- Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.
- Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.
- Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End. (Touch,42)

These pictures of atrocities on the lower caste people, their physical, mental and emotional aches and the identity crises they face every now and then raise many questions about the caste system of the nation where the low caste people still feel outcast and alienated.

The poet rupi kaur in her many poems expresses the ache of another kind of displacement which is experienced by the physically displaced persons who migrate to foreign lands for different reasons. This may be termed as 'Diasporic ache.' A simple definition of diaspora means the displacement of an individual or a community from one geographical region to another, and the diasporic literature is the work written by the authors living outside their native land. However, when we read their creations, only then we can feel whether they migrated as per their own wishes, or they were forced to get displaced due to one reason or the other. Such people experience different kinds of ache and anguish. rupi kaur expresses in one of her poems(untitled) in her book the sun and her flowers:

Perhaps we are all immigrants
 trading one home for another
 first we leave the womb for air
 then the suburbs for the filthy city
 in search of a better life
 some of us just happen to leave entire countries(131)

rupi kaur was born in October 1992 in Punjab, India and moved to Canada with her family when she was 4 years old, from a small village in Hoshiarpur to reunite with her father in Montreal, Canada. Her father had migrated to Canada as a refugee just after a month she was born, joining numerous Sikhs who had left their home state fearing persecution after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Being a South Asian coloured woman, rupi kaur has beautifully portrayed the aches of physical and psychological displacement and other difficulties faced by both the first generation and the second generation immigrants. rupi kaur became an international sensation through Instagram with her simple and short poems. She self-published her first book milk and honey on Instagram and became one of the top followed Instagram poets. She is the author of four best-seller collections of poems: milk and honey, the sun and her flowers, home body, and healing through words. rupi kaur in her poems explores many themes such as female sexuality, love, silence, abuse, rape, family connections, personal power and her experiences as a female immigrant.

In her poems she also describes 'the double oppression' she faced for being a woman in a male dominated society and for being a South Asian coloured woman in a space where the white race is still perceived as superior and more desirable. rupi kaur as well as many other South Asian women artists in foreign lands have

been victims of white superiority. They have not been understood properly by the literary establishment, as their works do not particularly entertain white males, who hold powerful positions in the publishing industry. Though through her poems she encourages the displaced migrant women to create their own space in the foreign land. She always wants her poetry to be simple to make it more accessible to everyone, even to the people who speak broken English like her parents

Language of the new land can be considered as a major dilemma for immigrants. In the poem “ Broken English” rupi kaur talks about her parents’ broken English, the dilemma a person from an immigrant family would face in a new land and also how they overcome it by creating an emotional balance.

rupi kaur writes:

i think about the way my father
pulled the family out of poverty
without knowing what a vowel was
and my mother raised four children
without being able to construct
a perfect sentence in English (the sun and her flowers,149)

She has written a poem in her book home body “a lifetime on the road” where she describes her father’s experiences as a truck driver across North America. She explains what it meant to be new immigrants and how they lost and gained along the way.

when you’re an immigrant
you keep your head down and stay working
when you’re a refugee and
you don’t have papers
when they call you illegal
outsider
terrorist
towelhead
you work until your bones become dust
you are the only one you can count on . (94-95)

Before settling in Brampton, her family moved seven times in five years. Then she realised that home was wherever she was, her work started to reflect a deep longing for what she had left behind. In the sun and her flowers, one chapter with title ‘rooting’ focuses on family and migration. In one poem which she shared on social media, she expresses her wish to go back in time to sit and live the moments with the teenage version of her mother in her village, she wants to talk to her about her dreams and to document her in a home movie. It is something she thinks about more often. “The mother I would have known if we had stayed in India would be different than one I know now, who sacrificed so much, living in places where she didn’t have full control of things like language and work. In India she knew her town, her village whereas here, it was completely different. You see a different side to your parents when they return home...”

There is one more meaningful poem “beautiful brown girl”(the sun and her flowers,208) in which she once again criticizes oppressive beauty norms prevalent in Canada which are painful for the survival of the coloured Asian women. She says that these women of coloured bodies are said to be ugly, just for the reason that they are classified as different from white beauty norms because of their “hyperpigmentation”, “unibrow”, “vagina”, and “dark circles”. In this poem, she takes all these things into consideration and redefines these women as beautiful.

By smoothly incorporating her experience as an Indian immigrant woman in her poems about non-specific feminist issues, about love and other topics, her particularities as a woman of colour enter the public domain and her portrayal of the ache of these physically and psychologically displaced women of colour is very touching and penetrating.

As described by the poet herself in a social media post shared by her on Facebook on 14 Jan.2019, that being an immigrant is a funny little thing. She says “ i’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what it means for me. because whether i like it or not- it has impacted a majority of my life. i grew up. like many of the immigrant children. teeter-tottering two very different worlds...” As at home she had to be the obedient little girl who did exactly as she was told- or suffer the consequences. At school she tried so badly to be like every other western kid. But given the strictness she lived with- that wasn’t easy. She further adds “whether at home or

school it felt like i was always losing. it was impossible to fit into either of these places completely. which left me feeling like an outcast in both. when i stepped into my early twenties and finally had some agency i eventually embraced my immigrant history. it's something many of us go through. The phrase which best describes this scenario is ' sailing on two boats', as she feels so brown when in Canada and when she goes back to Punjab, her motherland she feels so damn Canadian. The poet realized that being an immigrant feels like being a bridge between both the countries. As she can't fully step into and just belong to one. She is somewhere in the middle. Being an immigrant is being the bridge between the last generation and the next. And that she feels a beautiful thing. In the poem "immigrant" written and illustrated by her she says:

they have no idea what it's like
to lose home at the risk of
never finding home again
to have your entire life
split between two lands and
become the bridge between two countries.
(the sun and her flowers,119)

This poem is a monologue, having a powerful message to support every immigrant child who tries to fit into western traditions: though her Eastern part remains deep rooted.

Both Meena Kandasamy and rupi kaur have experienced displacement ache in their personal lives, through their experiences. They have become the voice of so many displaced people, who wish to be treated with dignity, equality, respect, love and care. Through their poems they inspire the displaced individuals to create their own space even in the antagonistic social set up and work for challenging the structures of power, always displacing them and overburdening them with the responsibilities, leaving very little space for them to grow and feel 'placed' to establish their identity as an individual.

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