



## Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*: A Post modern Critique

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### **Abstract:** -

The Debut novel of Meena Kandasamy, *The Gypsy Goddess*, deals with the dreadful conditions of the peasant class workers during the rise of the Green Revolution and the tragic massacre and its aftermath in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu during the 1960's. Theretofore, the critically hailed poet has chosen the genre of novel to describe the tragedy, imbibing the post-modernistic ways of narrative techniques i.e., non-linear plot, using which Kandasamy portrayed the dire straits of the peasant class with conviction. This paper tries to analyze how the post-modernistic narrative technique of the writer successfully leads the reader into the turmoil of emotions- empathy, rage, pity and hatred etc, while reading the novel, and the paper also tries to shed light on oppressions based on caste, gender.

Key Words: - Dalit Literature, Gypsy Goddess, peasant class, Massacre.

In contemporary Indian literature, social problems are the predominating themes for writers, especially Dalit and Adivasi authors, their contribution has brought Dalit Literature into the limelight in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and made it one of the significant genres of Indian Literature. Among the many writers who have been trying to uphold the genre and its purpose of existence, Meena Kandasamy, a Tamil-born writer and activist, adopted their legacy and continued with her works.

Meena Kandasamy is a keen observer of contemporary society and has a hunger to bring revolt against the caste and gender-based discriminations. She speaks loud and clear using her pen, her voice representing the cries of lakhs of people who suffer at the hands of the upper class. Her works reflect the contemporaneous as well as notable tragedies in the history of Dalit communities.

*The Gypsy Goddess*, is the debut novel of Meena Kandasamy, an exploration of the plight of agriculture laborers who work in horrific conditions in the fields incessantly from minimal to no wages while undergoing constant subjugation to the upper caste landlords of Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. This narrative though primarily concerned with the massacre that happened on Christmas day in 1968 in Kilvenmani village, also investigates the ideas concerned with identity, politics, etc., and the narrative evokes sympathy and horror in the reader with its narrative form. This poignant writer narrates the tragedy in her unconventional way as she admits, *'Most people are tired of history and also tired of history repeating itself, so I am constrained to try a new way to chart and plot my way past their boredom.'*(Kandasamy,14). The narrator chose to write a non-linear novel as it could dig up the traumatic story of a Dalit community's fight for livelihood.

The novel begins with a Prologue, which consists of the letter written by Gopala Krishna Naidu, the president of the Paddy Producer's Association, to the chief minister of Madras, to complain about the agricultural laborers who are getting influenced by communism which is spreading like wildfire in their region, he seeks *'immediate redressal of the grievances of paddy cultivators'*(Kandasamy,3), in the letter he explains how the *self-styled communists* are responsible for the disobedience of agriculture laborers. In Part One, titled *"Background"* the writer mostly talks about her anxiety regarding how to tell this story, she is concerned with its rebellious nature as well as with the rebellious power of her hybrid language as she terms it *"Taminglish"* and admits it as *'a crime against the (English) language'* (31), here and there she touches upon legends of that area, reveals bits and pieces of history of Nagapattanam district to which Kilvenmani belongs. The constant flip in the narration, references to people like Ptolemy, and intertextuality, appear to be an attempt to add more layers of meaning to the already complex retelling of an incident. The reader is frequently addressed, warned, and reminded to be aware that they should play an active role and bear with the lack of *'invention, order, system, sequence or result'* (31). After trying several possible beginnings, where she mentions an Old Woman, whose story will be narrated but her identity is not revealed in the entire novel, the narrator admits her art *'prides itself on its ability to disappoint'*(30).

Later the discussion about the title arises, after considering titles like, *"'Long Live Revolution!' Or 'Red Flag' or 'Communism Will Win' 'Tales of Tanjore'"* (40), the narrator *settles on the curiously obscure and mildly enchanting choice gypsy Goddess* (41). Although the narrator gives an abridged version of the legend *Gypsy Goddess*, and some connections between the mythical figure and the character of Maayi, the old woman who tries to take care of her villagers after the massacre, the narrator also admits that it's an *author-arranged marriage-without-divorce* (41). But the reader cannot relate this gypsy goddess, who represents seven gypsy women who were killed along with their children, to any specific character but to all the victims in the novel. Part one stops the reader from arriving at any sort of conclusion regarding the novel and its plot and it ends with the narrator asking the reader *"Now, you can forget all about this and move on to the novel."* (46).

The first chapter of Part Two *'The Cutthroat Comrade'* offers a critical description of Gopala Krishna Naidu's personality and the authoritarian way he conducts the Emergency Executive Committee Meeting of the Paddy Producers Association, the following chapters also deviate from the linear narrative style once in a while, however, they manage to bring the readers straight into the story of a village and its people. Even though the narrative style of all the sections of the novel is experimental, they paradoxically narrate a true story, which is part of the long history of Casteism in India. The remaining chapters of the novel deal with the plight of the peasant class people largely Dalits, who live in inhuman conditions, copping up with relentless oppression and atrocities in the hands of upper-class landlords of Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu. The novel has adopted an incident that happened in the late 1960s by which The Green Revolution was in full swing and the farm yields of paddy fields had risen. The communist party mobilized the agriculture laborers to demand a higher share of yield, when the landlords denied their plea, the laborers decided to go on strike, but most of the landlords broke the strike, in their inhuman ways. One village, Kilvenmani, however, decided to hoist the red flags and continue with the strike which enraged the landlords. On the night of 25<sup>th</sup> December 1968, the landlords sent dozens of rowdies to the village to attack the rebellious laborers. Knowing that they are the target most boastful young men run away from the village desperate to save their lives, the village is left with women, children, and old people. They tried to hide in a hut to save themselves *'there was nowhere safer to go and because they believe in the strength and safety of their numbers and in staying together and so united, they stood as they squeezed themselves inside and locked the door'* (163), but the attackers bolted the hut from outside and set fire to the hut which sheltered 44 people. The fire *"born without eyes, the fire had used its feet to move. Lacking the forgiveness of water, it had burnt them with blindness and bitterness"* (187). Later in the times, the culprits were set free because of the corrupt courts and biased investigations, and all the pieces of evidence of the crime were removed or destroyed. The traumatized victims, meanwhile, were charged with murder and armed rebellion and were taken to jail, the Dalits then stated *'we burned again'* (220). The fact that the culprits were set free and the victims were held captive doesn't settle with them, the villagers were taunted by their tragedy *"They rejoiced in the revenge, but we were held responsible for inviting death"* (221). The massacre was *digested easily* (222) by the upper-caste Hindus. Part four of the novel describes how the peasants were deprived of justice and were deliberately cheated by the people who were supposed to provide the justice, first the police later the Doctors who aped the police, and finally the court. They have suffered at the hands of the police so much as so they felt *"we had not suffered as much even under the white man's police"* (226). The visits of politicians, leaders, and the specially appointed commission are just stunts, they yield no difference in the lives of the peasant class. The legislative system also took part in the conspiracy against the peasants and gave the judgment in favour of the Landlords. Among the villagers, eight were jailed for the death of an agent but the landlords who have the blood of 44 people on their hands had walked the streets with their heads held high.

Nowhere in the novel does the narrator speak for the suffering class, she provides the reader with the incident that took place in “*the land that fed the world but forgot to feed all of her people*” (15), whatsoever, with her post-modernistic narrative techniques, her unembellished diction, her way of presenting the facts with wit and sarcasm, proved the novel as a powerful voice of the proletarian class of people, and questions the ethics and points at the void of morals of the people who preached brotherhood and so to the world outside. Kandasamy successfully draws empathy, outrage, and societal consciousness out of the reader with her assertive novel.

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