**On Culture and Commentary:**
The Writings of Meena Kandasamy

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**Abstract**
This article examines the political writing of Meena Kandasamy, online and in print, as it provokes vicious personal attacks which, in themselves, speak to the cultural critique Kandasamy puts forth.

**Keywords**
Culture, radical feminism, political writing, gender, violence, resistance

In New Jersey, a group of Tamil Sri Lankan women gather in support of Tamil women over there. Their daughters will perform, in a show of culture, to raise funds. *We don’t want to do anything...political. Only humanitarian.* In a motion distinct from the all-encompassing ambiguous South Asian head nod, their heads swivel emphatically to reinforce the verdict. No. For Tamil women, to engage in political work is to risk your life or worse, your reputation.

In India, Tamil activist Meena Kandasamy’s thoughtful political writing puts everything, reputation included, on the line. She points through the moments of violence that make us squirm to the violence of structures and states that birthed them. Kandasamy knows, too intimately, the cultural backdrop against which caste, gender and race are positioned in her home, on this land—the culture that runs through a deeply rooted Tamil-ness and stretches, just barely submerged, across the Indian Ocean, to touch the tip of Sri Lanka.

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When an Indian girl is brutally raped, a Dalit student commits suicide, a Sri Lankan Tamil population stands on the edges of genocide the subcontinent’s (mostly male) moral police are the first to erect lines around the crime scene. Inside this box, women’s activism can find a safe(r) space in an unsafe state. It is an activism predicated on a moral outrage against the brutality of violence itself. It is a form of political protest that interrogates culture for its complicity in violence, but stops short of charging it as the perpetrator. In the limited space, women are given to operate, movements must be small and calculated. Their politics are pre-determined to be filled with peace and anti-violence. She is welcome to speak up, in this regard, so long as she does not step out of line.

Movements give rise to moments of extremism, just as moments of extreme violence give rise to movements. Around a body that is battered, bruised and lifeless, there is a movement. A protest, a campaign and a hashtag, all gather to mourn the loss of life and to question the violence that appears to be without sense. Capitalizing on the momentum of urgency, anger demands action. Here too, culture stakes its claim. As the politics of caste are denounced, apathetic police forces are forced to take the stand and women’s rights are draped in the power of pink saris—patriarchy slips quietly past the picket line.

Where others are distracted, Kandasamy is watching closely. She offers a political position that does not simply footnote the role of culture but exposes it as it protects perpetrators of violence, punishes protestors and entrenches political agendas. When the rape and death of Vidya, a young Tamil girl in Sri Lanka, is blamed solely on a disintegrating Tamil cultural fabric, she translates the resulting anger into its purest, most political, essence.

It is impossible for Tamil people to forget the horrors of rape committed by the IPKF, or the Sri Lankan Army on the bodies of Tamil women, including the female fighters of the LTTE. This is the anger of a people who are traumatised by the memory of the rapes and murders of Krishanthi and Koneshwari, of Isai Priya and Logarani. (Kandasamy, 2015)

The reactionary cultural commentary that grows is not beneath her, but a part of her. From her youngest days she is drawn to the promise of liberation movements—The Dalit Panthers, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, The Maoists. She immediately finds the misogyny, masquerading as political ideology, as he reveals himself in their marriage.

He always inhabits the moral high ground, and resorts to extreme generalisations: literary festivals are brothels, women writers are whores, my poetry is pornography. He faults me for being a feminist. I am treated with the hatred that should be reserved for class enemies. (Kandasamy, 2012)

It is here, in the middle of a movement that demands the type of fixed, singular identity that feeds sweeping generalities, that Kandasamy’s writing pushes us towards a resistance within the resistance. She locates the computer cord that she wields as the source of her power and he holds above her his tool to demand submission. She is pulled by the cultural ties that bind her mother to both caste and
the ‘killing fields’ of the Indian Academy, watching ‘with absolute helplessness the woman I love crumble, and disintegrate’. She drafts the ‘Good Indian Girl’s Guide to Online Misogyny’ where she advises young women activists that ‘nowhere else in the universe will you be hailed as a whore, slut, bitch, terrorist, jihadi prostitute’ (Meena Kandasamy, n.d. a) for the simple crime of commenting in 140 characters or less.

Her hair falls, untamed, around a political being, whose politics are rooted in an identity that escapes the trappings of even the loosest of cultural confines for Tamil women’s activism. In their surprise at her words and the incisiveness of her deep cuts at culture, even the progressive voices find their assumptions revealed. The response is visceral and vicious. Her words are amongst the ‘stories that are twisted to character assassinate the victims who resist, raise an alarm, do not allow sex to be extracted under threat, compulsion or coercion’ (Kandasamy, 2016). Unable to contend with a layered analysis, the comment sections fall back on the same stereotypes of sex used to sell the ads that surround them.

Perhaps this reaction is an example of a patriarchy which at its ‘refined best doles out verbal harassment’ (Kandasamy, 2010) or evidence of the persistent, political presence of culture as both driver of moments of violence and strict determinant of modes of resistance. A deeply entrenched patriarchy operates in a cultural process where ‘exploitation and entanglement and estrangement share a common platform that is threatened by the fear of exposure’ (ibid.). And expose it, she does.

Elsewhere, and earlier, in New Jersey, the first Tamil woman to join a major Tamil opposition party was expected to join a conversation on re-structuring political movements in Sri Lanka. At lunch, only the Tamil men were present, some were so secure in their seats they fell asleep in the middle of the conversation. The newly elected female member of parliament (MP) was not present. Finally, one male MP scoffed, ‘We told her not to attend today. Today’s conversation is political. Tomorrow she can come ... when she can discuss humanitarian concerns.’

Even as Tamil women push the boundaries of culture to join the realm of resistance, their roles are continually, culturally, circumscribed. The writings of revolutionary men that underline the ideology of the movement are filled with the violence of a persistent patriarchy (for example, Pablo Neruda’s admission for raping a Tamil woman while stationed as a diplomat in South Asia2).

As the personal bleeds into the political, Kandasamy remembers her time as an ideologue’s wife: ‘For the sake of survival, I surrender my space’ (Kandasamy, 2012). In her writing, she publicly re-claims it, meeting misogyny with militancy, demanding the lines be re-drawn and some erased all together. She stops patriarchy in its tracks with the #MisogynyAlert. Her novels sit close to the heart, even as they overturn the feminist mind (and how it is set). They challenge the Tamil woman to recognize the complicated Gypsy Goddess (Kandasamy, 2014) within and to both feel, and fend off, the blows when the intellectual puts down his book When He Hits You (Kandasamy, n.d. b). The comments have fed her commentary; the culture will continue to fuel her critique.
Notes

1. Meena Kandasamy is a writer, poet, translator, and political activist who holds a PhD in Socio-Linguistics from Anna University in Chennai, India.


References


Author’s Bio-sketch

**Dr Nimmi Gowrinathan** is a Visiting Professor at the Colin Powell School of Civic and Global Leadership and the Founder and Director of the Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative. She is an expert on gender and violence, and the creator of deviarchy.com. She is also the Executive Producer of the Vice News Women in/at War Series. She has recently been the Gender Expert for the United Nations Human Development Report on Afghanistan, and a policy analyst for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the International Crisis Group, researching and analyzing gender inclusion in peace-building and women’s insecurities in conflict zones. She was formerly the Director of South Asia Programs and UN Representative for Operation USA. Dr Gowrinathan received her PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles, which received the Jean and Irving Stone Award for Innovation in Gender Studies. She has published both academic articles and journalistic pieces on humanitarian intervention, militarization, gender and political violence in *Foreign Affairs*, *Guernica Magazine*, *Vice News*, *Huffington Post* and the *World Policy Institute* amongst others.