

# Between Ekstasis, Ekphrasis and Kinesis: Theatricality and Performativities in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy

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**Abstract:** In this article, I seek to argue that Meena Kandasamy's (1984 -) poetic endeavours call for an alternative academic framework beyond mere symbolism, textualism and identitarian determinism. I suggest that although much has been inscribed on her positionality as a Dalit feminist, not enough critical evaluation has focused on how performativity and theatricality permeate her body of work as a whole. Her expressions can be studied as a clarion call to transcend norms, forms, and practices through an embodied experientiality of self and an invitation to consciously ruminate on the art of poetry itself, that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia, but as reverberations for the entire world. This article will perform a close reading of select poems from the two poetry collections by Meena Kandasamy - *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) to substantiate the arguments and bring about her contribution to form, content, and new directions in Indian Writing in English.

*Keywords:* Aesthetics, Dalit, Ekstasis, Ekphrasis, Kinesis, Kandasamy, Theatricality, Performativity.

## Locating the Oeuvre of Meena Kandasamy's Poetry: An Introduction

With the first poetry collection, *Touch* published at the age of 22, in a short span of 36 years, Meena Kandasamy has already been a trailblazer, as a conscientious public intellectual. She has been a poet, an editor, a novelist, and a translator of more than a dozen books that run into over 1,500 pages.<sup>1</sup>No doubt, the abject gendered relationality that demarcates the geopolitical location of Kandasamy as evident in her prose writings does animate her poetic expressions too. Similarly, the poetry reverberates with a deep historical rumination and influences her so-called 'prosaic' writings. Her conscious effort as a creative writer leads her to challenge any kind of norms, which is evident in her treatment of literary genres. In this article, I seek to argue that Meena Kandasamy's poetic endeavours call for an alternative academic framework beyond mere symbolism, textualism and identitarian determinism. I suggest that although much has been inscribed on her positionality as a Dalit feminist, not enough critical evaluation has focused on how performativity and theatricality permeate her body of work as a whole. Her expressions can be seen as a clarion call to transcend norms, forms and practices through an embodied experientiality of self and an invitation to ruminate on the art of poetry itself consciously, that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia, but for the entire world. To substantiate the arguments and bring about Meena Kandasamy's contribution to form and content in Indian Writing in English, we will do a close reading of some poems from the two poetry collections - *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010).

### Viscerality and Embodied Presence

Touch is an expression that serves as a title for Kandasamy's first poetry collection (2006). Touch as haptics has been a way to define our experientiality in contemporary times, with the digital ushering of our everyday lives. In our daily interaction with the digital, we all the more intermingle and internalise the notion of touch as an unmediated custom. Axiomatically, this interaction with the digital as is your interaction with this article itself, while accessing it on a website or in print, is perhaps made only possible by an engagement with the haptic as a precondition, which facilitates other modes of perception, i.e., sight, and sound. Parallely, haptic or touch is the fundamental marker of what defines casteism or caste-based practices in this part of the world. Aniket Jaaware, in a meticulously argued proposition, *Practicing Caste: on Touching and Not Touching* (2018), has already drawn our attention to how touch fundamentally defines our relationship with others, regulates our behaviour and evolution as a social animal.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these times of global crisis like a pandemic - Covid-19, led us to engage with social distancing as a concept. Still, perhaps if we look through it from the perspective of the performative dynamics of caste in India, we will be able to comprehend that 'social distancing' is not a new concept, which has been practised since ages in India, in the form of the caste system. Through the ages, social distancing and sustained cultural amnesia have led the Dalits and marginalized entities to strive for an autonomous space of cultural and political articulations. Therefore, the act of touch is perhaps our way to understand the larger concept of society and sociability. Kandasamy concludes the eponymous poem with the following lines,

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)

It is an invocation of touch to help us think through the possibilities associated with touching and not touching any- "thing," which transcends the "thing" itself and goes on to be related to a person's being, especially associated with caste or specific religious identity. Kandasamy perhaps wants us to touch our sensibilities, or initiate us to engage in a haptic imagination, enabling us to experience those existences as if they touch us in a bid to move us, unsettle us. 'Touch' then becomes a generative expression in her poetry that brings in visceral experiences, which otherwise cannot be spoken. She carefully chooses her words, replete with verbs like "come", "invade", "capture", "lead", "teach", "make", "talk", "press" and many more. All these words lead us to actively stage the actions depicted in her poetry and dynamically become participants. This embodiment on the part of the readers as active co-creators of the activities in her poems leads us to think of the apparent theatricality that engenders her poetry. The concept of theatricality here, as the inherent theatre of everyday life and drama as to how Kandasamy acts as a stage director, developing scenes and narration in her poems. Erika Fischer Lichte defines theatricality as,

a particular mode of using signs or as a particular kind of semiotic process in which particular signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs - by their producers, or their recipients. Thus a shift of the dominance within the semiotic functions determines when theatricality appears. When the semiotic function of using signs as signs of signs in a behavioural, situational or communication process is

perceived and received as dominant, the behavioural, situational or communication process may be regarded as theatrical. (88-89)

Drawing on Fischer Lichte's recapitulation, one can see the actions embodied in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy within this paradigm of theatricality, where a sign is employed as a sign of signs. For instance, in the poem, "Lines addressed to a Warrior" (Touch13), she deploys expressions like, "come colonise me.", "invade this inner-space.", and "capture every territory.", which can well be associated with the larger historical meaning linked with spoils of colonialism; however, in her usage, she personalizes the broader cultural sign into an individual one. In return, the individual then stands for the society. These metonymic individuated microcosmic experiences guide the readers and the audience into exploring the macrocosm. The poems in both the poetry collection, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) by Kandasamy, are replete with such imagery. Mundane everyday activities felt on a visceral level, stands in for enormous discriminative ideas that plague society. The title of the collection *Ms. Militancy* reminds one of Langston Hughes' poems, entitled "Militant" (*Panther*39), where the mundane daily inequalities lead the poet to articulate a resistant voice. Analogously, for Kandasamy, her context's specificities do herald a caste consciousness and discourse of the 'other'. However, she makes a dialogue possible between two disparate, seemingly antagonistic entities. For example, she writes,

Your affinity to catch colds; my rising fevers on seeing you  
 Your headaches, your backaches; my avowed helplessness  
 Your falling asleep while waiting for my reply  
 Your asking me to remain with you for all of time. . .  
 All your delicious lies. . . (*Touch* 30)

This description of the daily ailments that plague our perishable bodies provides a voice to the symbolic and emergent imperishable alienation that beset us universally. These situations that engender communication, or the lack thereof, are symptomatic of Kandasamy's poetry in general, where there is a foregrounding of a scene's enactment. As readers, we are privy too, facilitating a shared co-creation of meaning, where we do understand the context that emanates such iterations. Still, we also embody these characters and re-enact the situation on our terms. A performative use of language brings about this conscious, deliberate enactment of theatricality as prevalent in her poetry. Performative language reflects on matters regarding the connotation and denotations of language, identity, and the subject's nature. Performative utterances do not explicate but perform the action they iterate. Philosophers have extensively asserted that we must concentrate on what literary language does while focusing on what it says. The theory of the performative offers a linguistic and philosophical rationalisation for this idea. The performative brings into limelight an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language and helps us conceive literature as an act or event. Austin (1975) and Derrida (1988) develop the theory of performativity, and Butler (1988) further applies it to gender.<sup>3</sup> In Kandasamy's poetry, we see this constant self-reflexive awareness of language, the emergent literature as an act or event which unfolds, provoking possibilities. In the poem, "Facing the music," she writes

Your lover was lynched  
 For one of those readily available reasons.  
 Too weak for suicide, too meek for murder

You live. Post-traumatically, poetically,  
 You live as if he has never died. (*Ms. Militancy* 21)

In the lines mentioned above, Kandasamy perhaps states the obvious, depicting how lynching happens in India and around the world, owing to a certain hierarchical, patriarchal belief system. However, in the following line, she also announces the turmoil that writhes within, as if poetry is the only solution to deal with post-traumatic feelings. This conscious critique is not necessarily about the impossibility of expression or worthlessness that might engender the creative art of poetry, but on the contrary, it is a provocation for what poetry should be able to do and not in the obliteration of the so-called amnesia “as if he has never died”. She does not stop there but further depicts how this incident transformed the experiencer’s being, and history was born with a specific realization of how one needs to act and bring about a change. This performative usage of language and dealing with the performative reiterations of life activities ranging from theatrical performances to rituals, ceremonies to public events, populate the imaginaries that Kandasamy provides us in her poetry. In a similar vein, she invokes firewalking traditions as a purification ritual, (*Ms. Militancy* 22), again offering us a possibility of transformation. Thus, Kandasamy’s poetry is a vehicle not just to challenge the dominant ideological structures which facilitates the perpetuation of discriminatory practices, but it is a self-conscious attempt to address structural inadequacies of discursive practices and poetry being one of such a practice. There is a recurrent critical engagement with the form and content of Epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, along with various Brahmanical scriptures, only develop a familiar ground on which the foundation of recent assertions of equity can be founded. For example, the poem “Ekalaiavan,” contemporizes the character from the epic *Mahabharata* and places him in the present context,

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things  
 With your left hand.  
 Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant Left-handed treatment.  
 Also,  
 You don’t need your right thumb, To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb. (*Kandasamy Touch* 44)

In the episode of Ekalaiavan losing his right thumb as *Gurudakshina* (donation to the teacher) to his teacher, Dronacharya becomes the catalyst to ruminate on possibilities of resistance in contemporary times. It enacts two conjoined functions; one, the hierarchical pedagogic conditions of the epic are seen through the prism of historical thinking, as a comparison of fascism appears in the poetry. On the other hand, the epic character of Dronacharya, a teacher, stands as a function for many symbolic Dronacharyas of our times, which underscores the hierarchical tradition of discriminatory Guru-Shishya Parampara. Further, a poem like “Advaita: the ultimate question” (*Kandasamy Touch* 37) and “Moksha” (*Kandasamy Ms. Militancy* 32) are specimens of formalistic rumination and critical commentary on the discourses embedded in the scriptures. Yet again, the poems, “Becoming a Brahmin” (*Kandasamy Touch* 42), and “Things to remember while looting the burial ground” (*Kandasamy Ms. Militancy* 57), are presented to us as an instruction manual or recipe book. At this juncture, when we are ruminating on kinds and forms of poetry itself, surrounded by visceral and bodily co-presence in works of Kandasamy, one is reminded of this evocative enunciation by Derrida, standing on the *Margins of Philosophy*, “The poet...is the man of metaphor: while the philosopher is

interested only in the truth of meaning, beyond even signs and names, and the sophist manipulates empty signs...the poet plays on the multiplicity of signifieds." (248) Thus, to interpret the poetry of the Meena Kandasamy in context, we perhaps need to look into the playing of "the multiplicity of signifieds" – by not just looking for meaning within the text, but all around it. In other words, poetry can only make sense in not just looking for literal meaning but also reading between the lines, the form used and subsequent contextualization.

Kandasamy asserts in an interview with *Sampsonia Way*, "Poetry, it is raw. It is real. It is full of jagged edges. 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. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people." (Duarte) We see a conscious attempt to justify poetry as the means for the desired end, a dialogue. A dialoguethat emerges from a theatrical context must be understood as a mode of communication and conversation. Poetry is perhaps the way for Meena Kandasamy to get across her thoughts, which subscribe to the inherent lyricality that animate all indigenous community through the notion of orature, from birth to death; every event is conceptualized and conceived through evident musicality. Through her poetic critique of dominant literary discourses, Kandasamy opens to us a whole world of discursive practices and also the modes of possible resistance.

Kandasamy's exploration in textuality through her poems, attempt to reveal the impact of dominant literary discourses on alternative practices of creativity, which helps us unravel dominant and violent power/knowledge relations within a given society. Several of her performative poems show how dominant power/knowledge systems tend to appropriate marginal voices through the visceral act of violence on either individual or society at large. W.B. Worthen, underlining the productive relation between authoritarian canonical works and possibilities of performative texts, writes, "It's not surprising that Barthes's opposition between the work (authoritarian, closed, fixed, single, consumed) and the text (liberating, open, variable, traced by intertexts, performed) proves so useful to contemporary discourse about performance." (12) This argument provides multifarious possibilities for reading and understanding a text, encompassing all its manifested signifieds. Worthen rightly argues that this performative reading of Text as one possibility should then include both the probabilities as mentioned earlier. He further asserts:

Stage vs. page, literature vs. theatre, text vs. performance: these simple oppositions have less to do with the relationship between writing and enactment than with power, with the ways that we authorize performance, ground its significance. Not surprisingly, both strategies of authorization - literary and performative - share similar assumptions, what we might call a rhetoric of origin/essence. This rhetoric appears to ground the relationship between text and performance, a relationship that is always conceived, as John Rouse suggests, as "a question both of the possible and the allowable" (1992: 146). From the "literary" perspective, the meaning, and so the authority, of performance is a function of how fully it expresses the meanings, gestures, themes located inefably in the structures of the work, which is taken both as the ground and the origin of performance and as the embodiment of authorial intention, the work. Though performance may discover meanings or nuances not immediately available through "reading" or "criticism," these meanings are nonetheless seen as latent potentialities located in the words on the page, the traces of the authorial work. (12)

Worthen points at the rhetoric of origin/essence but also specifies the exploration as "a question both of the possible and the allowable", which gives rise to the notion of how

certain narrative/performative (in various modes) ends up underlining conventions and also potentialities, subject to specific conditionings and conceptualizations of any individual in a given society. Consequently, keeping this in mind, a textual analysis, in the lines of a genealogical enquiry of the work (genre/form) through scholarly pursuits, would be essential to construe various methodological impetuses foregrounded in the works of Meena Kandasamy.

Now we understand Kandasamy's poetry has a strong undercurrent of theatricality and discursive performativity. This view is further attested by herself when she mentions, "Poetry is not caught up within larger structures that pressure you to adopt a certain set of practices while you present your ideas in the way that academic language is. Despite being an academic myself, I dread academia's ultra-intellectualizing." (Duarte) This assertion by Kandasamy can itself be read as a provocation to the existing discursive practices to strive to attain a poetic language that can "speak of the oppressed." Her poetry then achieves a generative function, a manifestation of Bakhtin's dialogism.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin mentions, "When someone else's ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 345). In dialogism, the provocation is to performatively co-create a language in which any victim would speak and be meaningfully understood. The same spirit of personalization and dialogism can be seen in Kandasamy's characterizations of selves, with the recurrent usage of personal pronouns in the poems. She uses a variety of pronouns, but 'You' requires a special mention as it at once can be singular or plural, and also it addresses the one reading a poem directly, establishing a dialogic connection, wherein a person participates with the entirety of his/her being, with eyes, lips, hands, soul, with the whole body as Bakhtin would put it. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 293) This apparent dialogicity can be better understood if we infer two conditions or processes, namely, Ekstasis and Ekphrasis, which facilitate such a performative usage of poetry, especially and language in general. For example, even when she writes a "Monologue" (Kandasamy *Touch* 29), it is an interrogation of unidirectional communication and an intense urge towards initiating a dialogue.

### Poetry as Ekstasis

Ekstasis is a Greek term, popularly used in Greek drama and theatre, where worshipping Dionysus would involve achieving ecstasy (in Greek, ekstasis or "standing out"), and for some, the aesthetic experience of attending the theatre. In Greek theatre, the performer-audience relationship was also about "becoming involved in the sufferings of another" and "was in some sense an ekstasis." (Storey 30) Existential philosophy perhaps rearticulated concepts of ekstasis to bring about a discrete kind of being, which was commonly used in Greek theatre, the context of mystical practices and rituals across the world from an anthropological and phenomenological perspective in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, ekstasis of the being is defined as "casting itself out of its own given place and time, without dissipating," writes Alphonso Lingis, "because at each moment it projects itself — or, more exactly, a variant of itself — into another place and time." (6) Here, Lingis asserts that the manifestation of the being is defined by its reconstitute-ability anywhere and at any moment. The being is a result of this constant dialogue with the other. Lingis, further states, "*Ex-istence*, understood etymologically, is not so much a state or a stance as a movement, which is by conceiving a divergence from itself or a potentiality of itself and casting itself into that divergence with all that it is."

(6)Kandasamy's poetry accentuates this understanding of 'being' in relation to others. However, Kandasamy perhaps does not draw her reading on ekstasis from the European thinkers. She harks back to alternative proclamations and voices of dissent in the mystical practices of ancient and medieval India. The figures of Mira, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Karaikkal Ammaiyar features prominently in her poetry. In one sense, this invocation of the mystic, ecstatic figures from ancient and medieval India can be seen as a direct reference to the importance of the state of ecstasy, to leave behind oneself and to be one with the one depicted as an essential precondition to have a dialogue. In another sense, it is also a performative act to invite the readers to feel at one with the characters, as if on a journey to embody the characters and selves portrayed in the poems. It is an expression of ekstasis, when Kandasamy writes, "my Mahabharata moves to Las Vegas; my Ramayana is retold in three different ways. I am unconventional, but when I choose to, I can carry tradition." (*Ms. Militancy* 8) It is also a sign of ekstasis when the 'you' in the poetry merges with the 'you' of the audience and readers. Kandasamy further reifies this conscious choice of the ekstasis as an essential idea in her poetry, when she writes, "Like each of these women,[mentioned above] I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to stay alive." (*Ms. Militancy* 8). For example, in the poem, "You don't know if you are yielding or resisting" (Kandasamy *Touch* 18), encapsulates the trials and tribulation that a poet has to go through to express herself. This might be the reason why Kandasamy's poetry can simultaneously express love and anger in the same breath. The expression of being getting enmeshed into beings, bringing about the possibility of dialogues and transformation, and resultant transversality echoes through the poems like "Touch", "Last Love letter", and many more from the collection *Touch* (2006). The conscious attempt to foreground the art of poetry in poetry itself leads us to explore another associated concept of Ekphrasis.

### Poetry as Ekphrasis

Literary studies typically define Ekphrastic poetry as an expression (in words) which "provides a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art." (*Ekphrasis*) In commonplace usages, the poet may augment and expand its meaning through the creative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture. Of course, this does help us understand the poems by Meena Kandasamy, which are sated with visual, sensual imagery. However, in the context of our discussion, rather than limiting ourselves to the literal meaning of this genre of poetry based on established practices of literary analysis, perchance, it will be more productive to concentrate on the definition of the concept 'ekphrasis' as a coupling between word and image (Squire). More suitable to our discussion would be the Oxford English Dictionary's breaking down of the phrase ekphrasis' etymology where "Ek" means "out" and "Phrazein" means "to tell." (Lexico. Ekphrasis). In the expression, 'Out - to tell' or to speak out,' the word finds an expression that depicts a singularity - a conscious and deliberate attempt to state the palpable without thinking about the repercussion shows its original meaning from ancient Greece. James A. W. Hefferman, while reflecting upon ekphrasis and representation, cite Shadi Bartsch on the origin of the word and possible context of its usage,

In what is probably the earliest definition of the term, which was used by Greek rhetoricians of the first five centuries A.D., it is called simply "a descriptive account bringing what is illustrated vividly before one's sight." (Shadi Bartsch, *Decoding the Ancient Novel: The Reader and the Role of Description and Achilles Tatius* [Princeton, 1989] p. 9.) [sic.] In the Greek

rhetorical handbook and paintings were treated *among* [sic.] the objects suitable for ekphrastic description, but only after the fifth century did *ekphrasis* [sic.] come to denote the description of visual art exclusively. (312)

This enunciation of ekphrasis as “a descriptive account bringing what is illustrated vividly before one’s sight”, might help us contextualize the poems mentioned not only earlier in this paper but also perhaps the entire creative oeuvre of Meena Kandasamy. The novels, non-fictions, translations embody the spirit of ekphrasis to varying degrees. It would also be productive to even think about this paper itself as an expression of ekphrasis. The part word ‘Ek,’ i.e., ‘out’ in Greek, does have a multiplicative function in our discussion, which leads us to contextualize even the Dalit identity in the context of being in exile, the living embodiment of ekstasis, which is in itself so evident in all the creative expressions we have inundated ourselves with so far in this article. The dialectic of word and image is quite central to the study of Kandasamy’s poetry. This coupling of word and image in Ekphrasis, which defines our perception, is why the term has become crucial to contemporary media theory as the intersection of verbal and visual.

Furthermore, the poem, “Why she writes of her love” (Kandasamy *Ms. Militancy* 60), not only depicts the emergent condition of her poetic expressions but also presents how the emergent media as “hyperlinks”, “tv”, “twitter” and “news” broadcast continuously shape and reshape our everyday reality. Therefore, it is also significant in the immediate context of our immersion in the poetry by Meena Kandasamy, while making sense of her identity assertion and a will towards claiming an equitable social space, underscores this very expression of ekphrasis. It is also important to note that it in this countenance of ekphrasis lies the genesis of the inter-medial expression of ‘and others’, which is a fundamental governing principle of not just Kandasamy’s creative expressions but also the quest for identity, as ekphrasis is invariably an invocation and allusion to a dissimilar mode of expression, which is her own distinct identity, but it also makes itself apparent in the form of an ekphrastic work of art be it poetry, or as we seek to argue, the practice of any kind of creative expressions. Perhaps, this is what Rancière intended to mean by the expression “being together apart”, when in *The Emancipated Spectator* (56), he defined the contemporary aesthetic regime as the one which should facilitate the interaction with the other, where each one maintains their distinct identity, but still being in a position to develop a somewhat camaraderie through the meaning-making process in the artwork. In the poetry by Meena Kandasamy, similarly, we have seen modes of performances as instances of creative expression, which might lead one to think about a very personal narrative, which may not directly stand for or represent a direct political action. However, these do emerge out of a deep political understanding of notions of identity, which in turn manifests itself in the realm of the sacred or recreational or literary mode as aesthetic pursuits, but invariably do usher in the possibility to “open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation.” (Rancière 82) Therefore, the Dalit woman’s identity through the ekphrastic and inter-medial co-presence in the form of the simultaneous performativity of being a Dalit, Mira, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and many more bring about the Rancièrian imaginary, i.e. a new form of “political subjectivation.” The poetic self finds its identity only through an apparent negation of its identity. In other words, Kandasamy finds her existence only in these explorations of identities as many and not one. i.e., in other words, an expression of ekstasis. We are aware that Ekstasis is a precondition to ekphrasis. No expressions better encapsulate this dialogic spirit than ‘exile’, which seems to perpetually animate the Dalit identity in a continuous claim, movement and journey toward an autonomous space of articulation.



### Poetry as Kinesis

With ample examples of performative iterations in Kandasamy's poetry, it will be significant at this juncture to look at the emerging debates within performance studies and see how that can help us construe the meaning in the poetic oeuvre of Kandasamy and poetry in general. 'Performance', according to Conquergood, can be seen in three modes: mimesis, poiesis and kinesis. Performance as mimesis is inspired by Erving Goffman's works that "gave currency to the notions of role-playing and impression management." (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84). He notes that "the ultimate effect of (the) dramaturgical theory was to reproduce the Platonic binary opposition between reality and appearance, and thus sustain an anti-performance prejudice." (84) Performance as poiesis inspired by the perception that performance is "making not faking." In other words, the performance and performative interactions bring about the possibility of the new. Conquergood recognises the role of Victor Turner in evolving this view. Conquergood further explicates that Turner "subversively redened the fundamental terms of discussion in ethnography by denying humankind as *homo performans*, humanity as performer, as a culture-inventing, social performing, self-making and self-transforming creature." (*Communication Monographs* 187) This nuanced understanding of the performative might help us understand the conscious stance taken by Kandasamy in her conception about poetry and the art of writing in general. Conquergood repeatedly underscores Turner's emphasis on performance events and processes being central to any culture, a notion that, according to him, set the stage for a more politically urgent view of performance—that which regards performance as kinesis, or as "breaking and remaking."

Consequently, Conquergood mentions Homi K. Bhabha's usage of the term "performative" and "performativity" to denote "discursive acts that insinuate, interrupt, interrogate and antagonize powerful master-discourses that he dubs 'pedagogical'". (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84) This allusion to performative being discursive and pedagogical can very well be true of what transpires in Kandasamy's poetry. In her visceral portrayal of rape, murder or public lynching, there are no doubt elements of mimesis and poiesis; however, more manifest is the transformative possibility of kinesis. For example, in the poem "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985" (Kandasamy *Touch* 52), the massacre that occurred in Karamchedu, Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, on 17 July 1985 is portrayed, where cruelty by Kamma landlords against Dalits due to dispute over drinking water, caused the killing of six Dalits and inflicted grievous injuries to many others. Three Dalit women were raped, and the houses of Dalits were burnt and looted. This further led to the displacement of hundreds of Dalits from the village as an aftermath of the massacre. (Berg 103-26) This can very well be read as an act of mimesis or poiesis, as mentioned above. However, when we look at the pitcher shaped print of the poem, the event of the massacre is unfolded in front of our eyes and our mind; we visualize the dispute over water and embodied caste hatred. The evocation attains a new meaning as kinesis by describing the event as snapshots of sensitive information, where we encounter the visual juxtaposition of the shape of the poem and the recollection of events as its contents. Poetry in such iterations transcends the realm of representations. What it does is perhaps a re-presentation, a re-enactment of the event for us as readers, as if we are a witness and perhaps complacent in such incidents? Kinesis- as a movement, an interruption, an interrogation, a response to stimuli, where we as readers are no longer mute, passive spectators, but active agents who have been provoked and sensitized. We do see both ekstasis and ekphrasis at work here contributing to the elements of kinesis rendered visible in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy.

## Conclusion

Kandasamy might be placed within the long tradition of confessional lyric poets like Sylvia Plath (Beach 155), who appears as an inspiration in one of her poems, "Mohandas Karamchand" (*Touch* 54), which she acknowledges having "written after reading Sylvia Plath's Daddy." As in the case of Sylvia Plath, Kandasamy too expresses the social through the personal. The imagery of the Daddy, a personal rumination about one's father, transcends into the figure of the 'Father of the Nation', and self, 'I' transcends and becomes the collective 'we'. Like Sylvia Plath's contribution to mainstream American Poetry, Kandasamy, too through her lyric poetry dealing with relationships, sex, and domestic life, portrays the society at large, is conceivably extending on the works of Kamala Das, who parenthetically wrote the "Foreword" to Kandasamy's 2006 poetry collection *Touch*. To stress upon the lyricality of Kandasamy's poetry and her poetic vision, Das writes, "Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive... Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips." (*Touch* 7) Das's proclamation about the "revelation" and "prophecies" in the poetry of Kandasamy reminds us once again of the ekstasis and ekphrasis as conjoined processes, wherein the personal was a way to reach out to the impersonal. The aspiration to transcend one's own identity and generating a dialogic mode of communication is what Kandasamy herself mentions in a recent interview with *The Mint* (2019), "Even if you [women] write a very political work, and then a man writes a very political work at the same time, his narrative will be the grand narrative, it will be the narrative of the commentary on a country, or a culture, and it would speak to contemporary issues, whereas your narrative will be one woman's experience." (Goyal) This once again reifies Kandasamy's conscious attempt as a poet to think through not just her own experiences and identity as a Dalit Woman but also poetry as a vehicle for performative iterations and exploration into ideastoto usher in transformations. Noted scholar and political thinker Gopal Guru while ruminating on discriminative pedagogic structures in "For Dalit History Is Not Past But Present" writes, "What irritates upper-caste academics is the discursive transgression made by a Dalit who has now moved from the empirical to the theoretical and from identity to ideas." (Guru 11). In the same volume, Kandasamy's essay "He Has Left Us Only His Words" underlines this journey from "the empirical to the theoretical" and also "identity to ideas.", alluding precisely to Rohith Vemula's suicide. The exploration of ideas through new kind of poetry can be seen in Kandasamy's own creative endeavours. In this regard, we do see a continuous conscious foregrounding of the art of poetry in poems like "You don't know if you are yielding or resisting" (*Touch* 18), "He replaces poetry" (*Touch* 27), and "Mulligatawny Dreams" (*Touch* 21), where Kandasamy not only ideates about just poetry but also about her interventions and aspirations about an English Language of the future, that will be able to accommodate differences. In the recent interview with *The Mint*, she reiterates her constant awareness of English as her second language, facilitating her self-reflexive choice of expressions. (Goyal) She further maintains that her poetry has been a constant influence on her prose and non-fictional writings. She is a poet who believes in transcending norms, forms and practices through an embodied experientiality of self, and an invitation to ruminate on the art of poetry itself consciously that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia. Recent online publication and dissemination of her poem "Rape Nation" (29 Sept 2020),<sup>5</sup> written as a response to

Hathras Rape, is yet another manifestation of ekstasis, ekphrasis and kinesis, which once again asserts her ardent attempt to provoke and engage her audience into transformative thinking across diverse mediums of reception and perception. The final line of the poem “Rape Nation” is not a pessimistic statement about the inevitability of violence, but on the contrary, a prophetic invocation and reminder, “[t]his has happened before, this will happen again”, until and unless we do something about it. This line, which acts as a refrain throughout the poem, can be reread as a performative enactment that cuts across multiple temporalities, identities and their engagement to the actions and events depicted. Thus, it can also be read as an instance of kinesis, which beckons our conscience so that the inevitable may not happen again. In conclusion, Meena Kandasamy’s performative poetry invites us to “come unriddle” her and embark on voyages of experiences through intimate reflections on the body in kinesis and the myriad ekstatic and ekphrastic influences— aesthetic, cultural, libidinal, mythological, physical, social, which shape and animate not just the poetry, but also us as readers, co-travellers. We and herpoetic vision, both traverse through the world, among people and places both foreign and domestic, familiar and unknown, to redefine poetry itself and our perception of it, in a quest towards personal and social transformation that yields justice and equanimity.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Significant among her translations are the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003) and *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers* (2004), Samya, Kolkata), and the poetry and fables of Tamil Eelam poet Kasi Anandan.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jaaware, Aniket and Anupama Rao. *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Cutting across the historical, sociological, political, and moral categories, Jaaware defines caste studies from the perspective of touch, which also underlines a possibility of new socialites in the articulation of destitute literature, which in return brings about a destitute thinking.
- <sup>3</sup> See J.L. Austin’s usage of the various speech acts as locutionary and illocutionary acts. Derrida further intervenes into the idea of performative in language and proposes that specific usage might foreground possibilities of transformation in language itself.
- <sup>4</sup> Bakhtin proposes communication, language and meaning making processes are inherently dialogic. Every concrete act of understanding, mentions Bakhtin, is active; it is “indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement . . . Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (DI, 282). This “internal dialogism” of the word brings about an encounter not with “an alien word within the object itself “but rather with “the subjective belief system of the listener” (DI, 282). See. Bakhtin, M. M. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson, Trans., M. Holquist, Ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 1981.
- <sup>5</sup> Originally shared on multiple online platform like WhatsApp, Facebook on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2020. Later published on The Wire, on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 as “Rape Nation: Meena Kandasamy Poem on the Hathras Case”.

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