

Challenging Brahminical Patriarchy: The Poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella

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Abstract: This paper examines the critique of Brahminical patriarchy in the radical poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella. While both poets, one Dalit and the other Brahmin, represent polar nodes of the caste spectrum, their poems delve into the intersections of women's lives and examine the layers of oppression that women negotiate. In addressing gender-caste violence and the othering as a result of privilege, Kandasamy's and Akella's poetry offers us opportunities for a deeper critique and dialogue.

Keywords: Dalit, Brahmin, Patriarchy, Poetry, Feminism

As much as Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella are from different caste demarcations, Brahmin and Dalit, one privileged, the other oppressed by upper castes, particularly Brahmins, what draws them together is their honest gaze at and articulation of caste dominance and the oppression of women. However, the comparison is complicated. In her poetry, Kandasamy addresses the caste oppression suffered by Dalits. Many of her poems are indictments against Gandhi, Brahmin supremacy, Hindu practices, as well as the celebration of leaders such as Dr. Ambedkar. Akella's poetry is critical of her caste privilege that she as a woman is oppressed by. In her feminist poems, she lays out the crude details of the expectations of and assumptions about women that circumscribe her both as woman and as seeker. At the outset I would like to state that I am cognizant of the difference between gender violence of non-Dalit women and the gender-caste violence of Dalit women. In this essay, I want to show how Kandasamy portrays gender-caste violence and how Akella portrays gender violence within caste privilege. How do both poets address the othering of the self? In Akella's poems, we are conscious of patriarchy's modus operandi in the othering of the self. In describing the layers of patriarchal and caste oppression, Kandasamy "underscores the inseparability of caste and gender identities" (Rege 134). Both poets don't see "struggles categorized as singular issues," but as "complexities of compoundedness;" their poems show the problems of "reinforce[ing] the status quo" (Crenshaw 148).

Kandasamy ridicules Brahmin caste habits and describes the fatal results of caste supremacy and beliefs that keep the caste system in place. Consider Kandasamy's clever mirroring of the form to capture the irony of Advaita (Non-Dualism) philosophy, in "Advaita: The Ultimate Question":

"Non Dualism
Atman Self
Brahman God
Are Equal
And Same.
So I
Untouchable Outcast

Am God.
 Will You
 Ever Agree?
 ...
 Can My
 Untouchable Atman
 And Your
 Brahmin Atman
 Ever Be
 One

?" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 1-10; 18-24).

This poem begins with the line "Nondualism" and enacts the opposite: the poem splits in two, with two words per line. Kandasamy presents the cruel and violent actions of Hindus as diametrically opposite to the philosophical idea of Advaita. The average Hindu self, here the Brahmin self, is split from the Atman; thus they are split from Brahman (Highest being). If, according to Advaita philosophy, the Dalit is also "god," since the speaker is part of the universal Atman, ironically, the Hindu is further split from Advaita and from the highest selfhood by not recognizing the Dalit as a sacred part of Atman. The poem reaches its final argumentative crescendo by asking the provocative question, if it is even imaginable that the Dalit soul and the Brahmin soul can be one. It is a rhetorical question that contains its own answer, No, with a resounding finality, which the question mark that occupies its own line seems to affirm. Similar to other Dalit writers, Kandasamy exposes the irony of caste that is a cancer in religion. In "Prayers," which describes the beating of a Dalit man in a temple by an upper caste man, she calls out the hypocrisy of devotees: "Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 22-23). In the final line of the poem, she relegates the gods to hell, for where else can they reside if an innocent man is murdered and his soul sent to hell?

Akella's critique of Brahminism is highlighted in "From a Brahmin Niyogi Woman to a White Woman," in which she lists all the things a "good woman" does to meet the expectations set by patriarchy. But the breaking point is clear: "I didn't fully come apart / somehow there is enough glue / And yet I rue, I rue." The voice of a woman trapped within caste dictates haunts us. That she stays "within glass walls / where duty and goodness call / tipsy on dharma resisting booze / watching / watching as they crack and break" lists the process of the shattering and the layers of delusion (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 24-26; 79-83). In "Requide," Akella talks more about the process of the Brahmin woman breaking with caste and patriarchy: "I danced through my lineage, the coils of DNA / and their heavy bearing, I danced beyond being Indian, / Brahmin, immigrant or outsider, / the raiments of identity, color of skin or lens" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 92-95). These poems show the double-edged sword of caste patriarchy; it oppresses those within and without hegemonic structures.

What in Kandasamy is a painful splitting of self and other, in Akella becomes the desire to connect outside of herself and be at home everywhere; hence, her travel to many parts of the world and be with many people of different faiths. Of course, she has the socio-economic privilege to travel, but the poems affirm the oneness of humanity, as she pays attention to the immanent presence of the other wherever she travels. This presence of the fragmented other is also the goddess, "pointing *mehendi* stained palms inward" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*, "Dakshineswar IV" 15)—as we see in the "Dakshineswar"

series, Kali poems, and Guadalupe. The Word is embodied in the cries of “Maajaago’ pounding the air, / As if the earth is a drum beating to your awakening” (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 9-10).

In the Dalit tradition of dissent, Kandasamy debunks Hinduism. She critiques the mythological stories which are replete with oppression of the Shudra, the lowest caste. For example, in her poem “Ekalaivan” she hurls a missile at “fascist” Dronacharya unable to bear the “crime” of a young boy aspiring to be a better archer than the teacher’s brilliant student, Arjuna. The poet writes to Ekalaivan a consolatory note: “You don’t need your right thumb, / To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb” (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 7-8). In this example of the poet offering agency, she asserts that there is plenty in her arsenal to push back against the terrorizing upper castes. Reading this poem, readers become aware of mythological stories of divine characters (supremely good) terrorizing Dalit characters (demons). These stories have been part of the cultural fabric and it takes the oppressed to bring to light this terrible divinely-sanctioned injustice, and for society to use its critical lens to awaken to a shared cultural knowledge of injustice. Kandasamy is allowing us to bear witness to the age-old narratives and ask questions about Hindu philosophy: Brahmin belief in “purity,” vegetarianism, man-made taboos against menstruation, and religious restrictions. Does contemporary Indian society venture to see the counter cultural movements within Hinduism, its lesser-known branches, both in religious practice and philosophies? This question is answered in Akella’s poetry, which can be placed in the tradition of anti-caste spiritual traditions, such as Bhakti movement, tantric practices, and Buddhism.

Akella is shaped by Hindu philosophy, religion, culture and customs. But she is also shaped by her feminism, and her discovery of her voice once she immigrates to the United States. “No longer was her identity tied to caste, religion, in-laws, or ‘Indian wife’. Usha became a poet. Her poems celebrate this new-found freedom to speak—and to see the world anew” (Starling). In the process of her growth as a poet, she writes about other women, other cultures, and examines her oppression and finds amity with counter cultural spiritual practices on the margins of Hinduism. Her training under a Sufi master results in her oeuvre of Sufi poems. When we go deeper into her work, especially in *A Face that does not see the footprints of the World*, we see her connect with a vital nerve of the mystical path which bypasses the dogma and division within Hindu history and practice.

Autobiography and poetry have the kind of analysis that is the baseline for poetic articulation. As Rege asserts, “Dalit women’s testimonies offered counter narratives that challenged the selective memory and univocal history both of the Dalit and the women’s movements (134). Kandasamy writes autobiographical poems about the fate of other Dalit women. She uses the autobiographical “I” to write in the voices of Dalit women, thus giving them agency. “First person narratives [here, poems] clearly play a role in expanding the canvas of feminist thought—particularly demonstrating how the challenges posed by caste identity reveal the absence of homogeneity among women—that women are different (Mahadevan 227). When Kandasamy offers us in “Apologies for Living On” a portrait of the humiliations suffered by herself and other women—“i was a helpless girl / against the brutal world of / bottom-patting-and-breast-pinching” (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 7-9)—she is showing the possibility of female experience that “has meaning for both non-Dalits and Dalits, as well in the search for transformatory practices leading to an egalitarian social world (Mahadevan 227). The title speaks to women’s agency in the face of brutal obstacles.

Some of Akella's poems are autobiographical, where she reveals the self that shares with other voices of women. Deeply aware of the patriarchal order, where the purity of caste is maintained by controlling the Brahmin woman's reproduction through endogamy, Akella writes, "Sir, no Sir, I will not give you sons, / I will abort every male fetus I bear (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, "I Will Not Bear You Sons," lines 12-13). In these lines, we hear the militant tone of Kandasamy's poems. When Akella uses the "I," she invites other women to see themselves in the characters who are given voice. We hear the voices of millions of women who are burdened with the pressure to bear sons. Such is the misogyny that Akella's poem exposes. In battling evils in the structures of sexism and casteism, Kandasamy and Akella allow their audience to see themselves in the poem's mirror.

Both poets write without apology or censorship about the brutality of the walls that keep them out or which confine them. Rebellion is a running theme. What is the nature of their rebellion? In Kandasamy, we see it in her strident tone, in the strategies she employs in her poetry that mirror the arguments and counter-arguments happening in real time, as she personally experiences them and bears witness to the narratives of her community. In "How to Make the Bitch Give up Beef," we hear and see the on-the-ground violence of upper castes towards Dalits and non-Dalits who are beef-eaters. As the epigraph indicates, the poem is based on the real life "strategies employed against the poet after her defence of the organizers of the 2012 Hyderabad Beef Festival and her condemnation of the subsequent violence" (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke You*). While the poem is sarcastic and witty, we hear the fanaticism of terrorist politicians and social media tweets when it comes to vegetarianism, as portrayed in the strategies that are used, from threatening social messaging to planned attacks. Kandasamy uses these same strategies in her poetic form, whereby the poem is divided into sections of action plans; this fiery mix brings us face to face with the harassment faced by dissenting women, particularly Dalit women and Dalit activists and writers in India. The poem ends with the cold threat of a gang rape tweeted to her; the irony cannot be missed: "explore the possibilities of an Islamic-style Hindu fatwa to finish the bitch once and for all" (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke You*, "How To Make the Bitch give up Beef," lines 53-55).

Contrary to the false assumptions of Dalits as lacking a spiritual tradition, as propagated by Hindu nationalists, Dalit-authored critical works show that "Dalit spirituality is the origin of non-violence" (Raj). It is ironic that the upper castes who revere vegetarianism are violent toward Dalits! Just as Dalit women leaders have been spearheading justice movements—as we see in some Christian Dalits who call for "courageous compassion" and harmony (Bernard 49-50)—Kandasamy uses poetry as social activism to awaken non-Dalits from complacency to witness truths that have lain veiled.

Like Kandasamy, Akella prods the national consciousness to look deeper at our failed humanity. Some of Akella's poems are about specific oppressions women face currently. In "Naming," Akella writes about the national protest following Jyoti Singh's rape in 2012. The victim was called Nirbhaya, since her name was not released. The poem begins with an epigraph, a statement by Jyoti's father who says her name should be on everyone's lips, so other women do not experience the same violence that his daughter experienced. Akella's fine lines connect images of the mother's pain that fuel activism, thus drawing us into the center of the protest:

Her mother's eyes were dark charcoal, unspilled lakes,
She died but we die every day... Kudratbhi ne hamaresaathmahindiya¹

When the dots finally connected they were black,
 black gags, gnashes across their mouths, black dressed,
 the women gathered in India Gate, Raisina Hill,
 the drum beat of marching footsteps in cities spelt *Justice*...

women as petroleum, she the wick
 keeping the flame burning. (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 11-18)

The refrain of “black,” the visual image of the sorrow in the mother’s eyes, and the metaphor of women as the fuel to keep the memory of the victim alive make us aware that we too are bearing witness to a crime against women. Akella feels the responsibility as a poet to write about violence done to women, a violence that is out of control as class, caste and gender inequalities widen, making the lives of many ever more precarious. Violence of men against women is a dominant subject in Akella’s poems. But she goes a step further in “I will not Bear you sons” to point out the hypocrisy of women who have internalized patriarchy:

“For all those half-souled women turning on each other,
 rich with epithets for men behind their backs,
 who point to their head and say, ‘I hate him,’
 and points to their hearts and say, ‘I love him,’
 and walk around dismembered holding their
 head in one hand and heart in another” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 140-45).

This split in women shows a deep internal colonization of the self—masking truths as a result of fear of expulsion from family and society.

Rather than remain in fear or subjugation, the poet aggressively asserts at the end of the poem,

“I will have girl children,
 I will write my poems wet with vein-blood,
 they will come to me,
 daughters dead by female infanticide,
 daughters dead by dowry deaths,
 daughters mutilated by female genital mutilation,
 daughters slicing their wrists,
 daughters anemic, anorexic, stunted into size 0s,
 they will come to this womb, this glorious womb,
 these are the ones that I will bear” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 168-77).

Fully armed with her female Shakti power, she looks closely at the lives of women and finds that power in the most traumatized. As she writes in a short prose poem, “Witness,” “Every room a record— who we are, who we were what we did, what we tried to be . . . What we became is the wall’s silent secret (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 1-3).

Kandasamy shocks us as she captures in vivid detail the double oppression of caste and gender that Dalit women endure. She talks openly about sexual expression and about sexual oppression. Her poems show that she has clearly stormed the gates that were locked to Dalits and women and poured out her rage in radical verses. Her women in *Ms. Militancy* “do not confine themselves within the iron bars of culture and tradition” (Priya 2). Their role models are Kannagi of the *Cilapathikaram* whose rage burns down the city and Sita who become expert in her walkouts from the strictures of the King/husband. Sexual language permeates her depictions of religious icons as well as the celebration of “the fires of a woman hungry for sex” (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke You*, lines 22-

23) and “prides [herself] in [her]perverse mindset” (31), a fury that makes her declare, “This poem is pornographic” (86) and she will not apologize for it. Kandasamy’s depiction of male violence against women is brilliant in its detail in her novel, *When I Hit You*. My contention is that we cannot separate intimate partner violence from the violence that emerges from stratified social structure of caste, which underlines Kandasamy’s poetry. Therefore, reading Kandasamy’s work gives us a deeper insight into domestic violence. Both upper castes and men within relationships are wanting to see the woman without an identity, as an absence. The wife in her novel says, “I should be a blank. With anything that reflects my personality cleared out. . . . This is plainness that makes him pleased. . . . this plainness that will prevent arguments” (Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*).

While Akella addresses the heart of the violence that undoes us as humans, she also looks for the conditions that restore our humanity. “The Face that does not bear the footprints of the World” is about the speaker’s knowledge of the nearness of the beloved. “Do not think that I do not see how you look at me” (Akella, *A Face that does Not Bear the Footprints of the World* 15); after images of the face are touched by the seeker’s love, it loosens in the end. The Sufi poems are the seeker’s journey until the beloved’s recognition of the seeker, which is the climax of mystical poetry. Akella’s spiritual introspection leads her to ask existential questions, such as the refrain “Why to live” in the eponymous poem, punctuating a variety of experiences: “[When] the mind like a womb ruptured / with too much onslaught of Samsara / and the heart has trembled on so many nameless / portals of terror. . . .” (Akella, *A Face that Does not Bear the Footprints of the World* 51). Akella’s exploration of her mystical path leads us to the nerve center of spiritual oneness and connection with the other, a supernatural energy, a human being, or nature. She steps across faiths in her spiritual journey, across ethnic, racial and caste lines, for these make no sense to her mystic quest.

While she witnesses the stratified spaces we live in, and her poetry is powered with fury which makes her declaim in “Moon-Gazing Bird,” “Rage has no caste” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, line 1), her quest leads her beyond divisions, beyond the experiences of rage, fear, loneliness, violence, and hurt, where love exists, the love that is possible for us to experience with each other. The inner journey is reflected in the outer, in the desire to show the oppression and feel with the other, however different or violent the other’s experience. From the ferocity that informs Kandasamy’s work, we can guess that she will disagree with Akella that “rage has no caste,” because her rage stems from the wounds of caste oppression, and the balm has to come from a total wiping out of the caste system, which entails upper castes letting go of much of their caste-imprinted scriptures, belief system, customs, and practices.

In her critique of a popular Netflix show, “Indian Matchmaking,” Thenmozhi Soundararajan says that women hold up the oppressive caste system. Brahmin patriarchy controls women’s sexuality by controlling upper caste women’s birth canal which keeps the upper caste patriarchal lineage intact (Soundararajan “Caste and Colorism”). Dalit and non-Dalit feminist activists begin their analysis of social issues with the Ambedkarite premise that endogamy was the key to the continuity of the caste system.

“Just like it does not take a man to practice misogyny, it is not necessarily Brahmins who practice brahminism” (Arya 8). Brahmin patriarchy is practiced across castes and faiths. Kandasamy is attacking it at its root. In “Becoming a Brahmin,” Kandasamy lampoons the impossibility of Gandhi’s suggestion of the “algorithm” to end casteism. The poem enacts the algorithm, with the lines written in computer code. The idea that a Shudra woman can become a Brahmin by marrying a Brahmin and producing Brahmin

children thereby populating the country with Brahmins has the coldness of Mendelian eugenics which was practiced by the Nazis to produce a purely Aryan population. We hear the steely ring of ethnocide, further augmented by the dark humor of the final lines apologizing for the inconvenience of the wait, written in the tone of an infomercial or automatic phone message heard when there is a telephone connection glitch (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*). Disgusted by the cancer of caste, Dr. Ambedkar renounces Hinduism. In his riposte to Gandhi's emphasis on the "toleration and catholicity" of Hinduism, Dr. Ambedkar calls such "virtues" "indifference or flaccid latitudinarianism" (Ambedkar 345). He points out Gandhi's wishy-washy stance on caste. As many Dalits assert, Gandhi merely changed the name of the "untouchable" caste to "harijan" but did not denounce caste as detrimental to Hinduism and to the nation: "You dubbed us pariahs—'Harijans'/ goody-goody guys of a bigot god / Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 10-12), Kandasamy skewers Gandhi in "Mohandas Karamchand". Keeping the caste system alive defeats the fight against British oppression. She questions concepts like Dharma and Karma which are cultural currency: She attacks, in "Justice Is," the messenger, Dharma, as "a bastard,/an illegitimate son./ Justice is Dharma./ Dharma is a bastard"(Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 30-33). By her logic, if justice itself is illegitimate, what hope do Dalits have?

Does Kandasamy elide over the possibilities for healing when she denounces what many non-Dalits revere: Gandhi, dharma, karma, the stories in mythology? Besides the denunciation of Brahminical patriarchy and its terrible harm to Dalits, is Kandasamy able to offer a redeeming space in the relationship between people of different castes? Is Akella able to offer a ray of hope in her challenge to Brahminical patriarchy? What possibilities for amity does Akella offer?

Both poets veer toward the goddesses as they turn the tattered pages of the history of religion in India. Dravidian goddesses were transformed after the Aryan invasion. The goddesses were married to the Aryan gods, but some of the goddesses who escaped marriage continued to be worshipped as single goddesses in the many towns of the South. In "Mariamma," the speaker is worried that her goddess Mari is joining the Brahmin gang and leaving the Dalits. Kandasamy asks if the goddesses believe "our poverty would soil their hearts and our labor corrupt their souls" and therefore cannot bear to be touched by Dalits (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, "Maamma," lines 8-9). The speaker voices the spirituality of Dalits who believe that only Mariamma is touched by their troubles. Because of the behaviors of the priests of the temple, Dalits can't take shelter in the knowledge that goddesses are above the patriarchal fray; they enact Brahminical patriarchy, by not leading the Goddess procession to the streets where Dalits live owing to their concern about being polluted. The enraged speaker attacks the shortsightedness of the priests who have made goddesses to mirror good-girl-vegetarian Brahmin women. She deliberately lists the offering that Dalits make to Mari—roosters and goats—to make sure her Mari does not go off to join the enemy. Ironically, upper castes pray to Mariamma when they have a health crisis. A greater irony is that they don't turn to her to heal their disease of casteism!

Since we see the marginalized goddesses inhabit both Kandasamy and Akella's poems, perhaps their effort to bring them into the center of socio-cultural practices, the fine arts, and writing can bring about the dissolution of Brahminical patriarchy. Mainstream Hinduism is male-centered and relegates goddess-centered practices as esoteric, while these esoteric practices are deeply feminine and see men, women and nature as interbeing. Akella's poems explore the two sides of women's stories, the marginalization as well as

the inner power that fights to survive. In this her book *Rosary of Latitudes* explores various cultures replete with feminist spirituality. One example is the Nahuatl Guadalupe. In "The Basilica of Guadalupe," she weaves together the praise of the Virgin from the indigenous languages, which lend a unique melody to the lines, as in "The coyoli jingle" and "fill the cape of your heart with Cozcamiauh" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 13). Even if she does not write about Dalit struggle per se, Akella's poetry reflects her awareness of human sensitivity to pain and our potential to cause pain. She writes in "Poems I Can't Write," "We hurt and are hurt, each step leaves a claw mark / on the sand, because no pain is fully human, guttural, it belongs to the / subterranean... ask Mary when she lost her son" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 26-28). How do we show up in the world? How do we embody anti caste? Usha answers these questions in her poems.

That women who have experienced oppression and witness it around them have a responsibility to speak about it is evident in both poets. In Kandasamy's poems, the subaltern speaks and the reader has no choice but to engage. Similarly, in Akella's feminist poetry, she looks unrelentingly at herself—the self, shaped by caste privilege that undermines the feminist female. Writing about the other women and girls, such as in "Song for Gulsoma," she bears witness to violence against children. The haunting repetitions in this poem awaken our conscience to a little girl's plight in the face of cruelty. "What is the color of paradise in your dreams?" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 11) asks the poet. Unable to simply describe the harm done to a little girl, the speaker finds connection with the survivor: "Little girl, little girl, your beautiful smile keeps me warm, / your spirit a mystery. You lived on when they wanted you dead" (11).

Even in an ekphrastic poem, Akella brings reality to light, as in "Woman on the Sand," a sculpture exhibit by Arturo Martini. Ambiguity is the hallmark of this poem: does the woman shield her eyes from the sun or from the suspicion that grows in her as she watches her lover talk to another woman on the beach? Akella ends with the ambiguous note: "or then this may be about a light too hard to bear" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 15-16). In "Recollecting Matisse's Jeanette," Akella reflects on Matisse's sculpture of the female form, and wonders if his "progressive distortion of the female face [is] / misogyny or self-reflection? / erasure or intuition" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 13-15)? The poem's harsh evaluation of patriarchal power fragmenting women, ends with the poet's personal answer about a different kind of annihilation, a spiritual one, where the individual falls into light, as depicted in *sahasrara*—the visualization of one's Shakti or power. This poem unfolds for us Akella's vision of the numinous that offers a direction away from the suffering of being broken or actively breaking the other.

In goddess practices, there is no separation between woman and goddess, since the goddess is immanent, not transcendent. "Homage to a Kolkota Mother," may be about a human mother or Kali—they are one and the same. Akella experiences her as "light as air in a room, / and as air, let things be" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 7-8). This feeling about Kali / woman as delicate allows the reader to imagine the spirit as a delicate thing; we sense this intangibility, like gossamer, wrapping her poems.

Our ontological and epistemological understanding of gender / caste / class violence are strengthened in the poets' deft use of language and form to create a whole array of emotions embodied in their visual and aural experiences. While in Kandasamy's work we are led into uncertainty and insecurity of knowing the difficulty of finding anything redeeming in the experiences she describes, in Akella, we are offered the sliver of possibility to restore our belief in humanity, and perhaps this, too, is a privilege, born of security that her caste offers. While it is important to recount the harm done to the Dalit

body, some might expect more nuance than simply militancy and biting cynicism. Akella's poems accomplish the task of being provocative in order to challenge people to react, witness beauty in her imagination, as seen in Akella celebrating Kandasamy's poetry in "Moon-Gazing Bird:" "on new moon nights Meena / the moon's gaze is in your poems" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 7-8). While some of Kandasamy's early poems are imitative of American poets, such as Sylvia Plath (as in "Mohandas Karamchand" imitative of Plath's "Daddy"), we are left after reading her poems, with an emptiness, a blank, as if we are not supposed to expect anything more. And perhaps this is Kandasamy's intent to place the ball in the court of the hegemony to figure out how they want to continue the narrative of violence, what strategies they want to use to stop it. As readers of these two poets, we see the difficult dialogues we need to continue to have to mitigate the violence of patriarchy and caste oppression that reaches into every stratified category of the lives of oppressors, survivors and victims.

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Notes

¹ Even God was not on our side.

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