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Article

Decolonising the Canon and the Author: Critiquing Meena Kandasamy's *The Orders were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle*

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Abstract: Literature, at the intersection of Liberal Humanities and Social Sciences, plays a unique role in intervention within a discipline; it not only explores the narratives and aesthetics of representing the subaltern, but it must also ask questions about the politics and ethics of such representation. The literary writer, hence, is neither 'third person', nor 'objective', nor are they politically neutral. The ideological position of the literary writer informs the aesthetics and ethics of what they represent. Thus, literary authorship operates within a field of ideological construction, which in turn shapes the reader's outlook on a social issue. This paper looks into Meena Kandasamy's *The Orders Were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle* (2020) to explore how literary authorship engages with the portrayal of gender-based violence and identity-construction of survivors/victims. Employing her position as a literary author and as a public intellectual, Kandasamy has explored various aspects of how the subaltern is represented. My approach in this paper is thus dual: to examine the idea of literary authorship within the canon and then to converge it with the portrayal of the public intellectual, marking a new tradition of writing.

Keywords: subalternity; literary authorship; canon; ideology; representation

Introduction

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Both the personal and the political constitute and construct the category of literary authorship. In the history of Western literary culture and production, the word 'author' is associated with a domain of authority or power, referring to someone who has control over their output. This distinguishes the person and the concept of 'author' from that of a 'writer', which does not imply ownership or possession. The Middle English word auctoritē (Middle English Compendium, 2024) refers to someone who cannot be questioned and holds authority over interpretations or claims to originality. Within a theocentric society, the author was someone who had control over the meaning and message of the content, analogous to a god-figure, ' omniscient', 'omnipotent'. In this sense, the figure of the 'author' was also a male-constituted figure, embedded within specific power structures, with the agency to wield authority over texts and meanings. The tradition of authorship and the theories associated with it thus explore the nature of an author's identity, role, and relationship to their texts. Within this tradition, the author has evolved from being an individual creator to becoming a public entity embedded in political, cultural, and historical structures.

Method

From being the Aristotelian moral guide to being a post-colonial voice of resistance, the figure of the author as a public intellectual has evolved. The literary author thus connotes not only autonomy, creativity, and inventiveness but also ideology, positionality, and perspective. The aesthetics and ethics of the literary text are informed by this subjective agency, shaping and often controlling a reader's response to it. This paper examines the evolution of the literary author within the Western canon tradition and the positions they assume in literary representations. I have selected Meena Kandasamy, whose body of work has been the direct outcome of her activism and ideologies. Kandasamy has written, spoken, and acted on causes surrounding land rights, women's empowerment, and subaltern struggles. Her lifelong striving to speak 'history from below' has decentred traditional representations of literature, providing new narrative formats for the issues she addresses. I will be discussing Kandasamy's *The Orders were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle* as a text that captures the ideological standpoint of the author and the narrative experiments she devises, thereof. Employing her position as literary author and public intellectual, Kandasamy has explored various aspects of gender-based subalternity- systemic oppression, institutional complicity, selfhood of the victims, their trauma, their silences, and their speeches. My approach in this paper is thus dual: to explore the idea of the Western canon and literary authorship, and then to converge it with the critique of a public intellectual and the scripting of a decolonised text.

Survey

Authorship has a problematic genealogy. In the Western classical tradition, the author meant "predecessor," referring to an adherence to a cultural precedent—a notion that the past holds authority. An author represented a position, an idea, rather than individuality. The classical author was the medium of transmission for cultural or mythological narratives, often referred to as 'divine truths'. Plato's *Republic* has an ambivalent attitude towards the literary author. On the one hand, Plato views the

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author as a figure of divine inspiration, but on the other hand, he is someone who can blur the Distinction Between Reality and Illusion. For Plato, therefore, the author must be kept out of the ideal republic, for he is too dangerous for the running of the republic. In the medieval era, the author was part of the religio-political order that controlled meaning on behalf of the readers. The Bible and biblical exegesis relied on moral allegories intended to convey a didactic message. The author's role was clear-cut- they functioned as a bridge between philosophy and public life. Aristotle's works were highly influential in shaping the medieval author's concept of the public-private duality. Although Poetics deals with literary criticism, it still explores the role of the literary author in engaging with logic, ethics, politics, philosophy, and every aspect of society. The author's idea as a moral guide evolved into that of a social critic during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (Burke, 1995). The 15th and 16th centuries introduced a new socio-cultural system, within which the author began to be viewed as a cultural artefact, a commodity to be put in circulation. Expanding economies, free markets, and maritime geopolitics took the author to different parts of the world, transforming his ability to record his experiences. A new socioeconomic order was now replacing the earlier superstructure of religion and morality. Francis Bacon, Thomas Paine, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau — literary writers of their time — are now also active agents of social criticism and transformation. A competitive free market and capitalism started fuelling Europe's imperial ambitions abroad. European banks began sponsoring the civilizational mission of the 'White Man's Burden', as the race for resources in the colonies gained pace. Within national boundaries, discontent arose over growing inequalities. There were riots over grain as villages continued to feed cities. The coming of consumerism paralleled the rise of mass politics and socialism. Economic and political forces thus catalysed nationalism and identity politics. Race, language, ethnicity, territoriality, and other categories of identity have shaped questions of citizenship (Hobsbawm, 1995). Between the 18th and 19th centuries, many Romantic writers advocated for individual freedom, political revolutions, nationalist movements, and at times even anarchic actions. The author was the interpreter of literary imagination as well as of cultural nationalism, from Shelley to Pushkin, the literary author was now connecting creative expression to political advocacy. Increasingly, the author's position as a public intellectual, influencing public thought and opinion, comes to the forefront. In a post-Industrial Revolution society, the author is a commodity whose work can be circulated, bought, sold, and diagnosed. This gives rise to a nationalist ideology, capable of binding people together and conferring a civilizational identity. The author became part of a process of canon formation, where qualities of 'literary merit' and 'timelessness' also bound them to power. The literary author was in several ways a suitable candidate for this ideological enterprise. As part of a liberal, 'humanising' pursuit, the author could provide 'universal human values', 'eternal truths' and 'beauties' (Eagleton, 2000). The Victorian literary author was an imperialist, a nationalist, and a liberal humanist. He worked on behalf of the empire to promote literature that glorified it. It would give the reading public pride in their national language and identity. The writings of Arnold and Kipling bear testimony to this. Thus, to be a literary author was to be a part of the elite establishment.

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The two world wars, fascism, and anti-colonial movements forced a re-examination of the role of the literary author. Theodore Adorno subverted the liberal humanist role of the literary author and their complicity in the processes of power. Opposition to the established literary canon became a leading concern among critics from diverse viewpoints, including deconstructive, feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial schools. These views laid down the theoretical premise of re-looking at the figure of the literary author. Barthes' *"Death of the Author" (1967) proposes a new definition of literary reading, liberated from the psychological, social,* and biographical references of an author. He argues that since literature is part of a discursive game, the actual author of this game is always in question. The author is nothing but the effect of the action of reading, wherein the reader becomes the author-scriptor. This decentring of the author and privileging of the reader's role as meaning producer revolutionised the way we look at the literary author. Foucault's *What is an Author* (1969) proposed the concept of 'author-function', whereby the author is not an individual but a social function assigned to texts. The personal identity of the author is not essential, but the legitimacy of a work is. Foucault suggests that the author is not only a subject within a network, but also a subjective function—he is both the producer of and a participant in the discourse. Therefore, the literary author cannot be 'dead'. In the post-colonial era, we are increasingly shifting towards a non-Eurocentric idea of the author, who is no longer connected to established institutions but is engaged in challenging power structures. Gayatri Spivak's essay *"Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) can serve as a good entry point to understanding* the post-colonial thinker's position as a literary author. In her essay, Spivak argues about the possibility of subalterns speaking in a way that is truly autonomous and unmediated by the privileged writer. She critiques the positions of intellectuals who assume that they can represent the subaltern as subject. This intellectual creates a political and cultural gap in the portrayal of the subaltern, who are trapped within alien knowledge frameworks. Thus, indigenous episteme is often silenced, as the subaltern is spoken for, rather than having the agency to speak. Spivak therefore calls for ethical representation, especially in literary authorship, which must be self-critical and self-aware of their privilege. In the use of language, voice, narrative style, emplotment, and characterisation, literary authors must explore the nuances of power and control in their role (Nayar, 2023).

Context And Purpose

This overview aims to highlight the evolving role of the literary author across ages: a writer, an inventor, a philosopher, a guide, a critic, a collaborator with the reader, an activist, and a public intellectual. Within a post-colonial context, when the question of authorship has been repeatedly connected to power and ideology, the intersectional nature of a literary work has come into focus. Issues of race, gender, and ethnicity are essential lenses through which the location of an author and indeed the text can be understood. Writers like Meena Kandasamy have shaped public discourse, provoked political change, addressed existential issues, and fostered a legacy of ethical integrity. Their work has sparked complex conversations around equity and moral responsibility.

Meena Kandasamy's association with writing has been shaped by her involvement in ideological struggles and activism. Gender and caste have been the two primary areas of focus in her work. From a young age, Kandasamy's involvement in the anti-caste movement sensitised her to listening to voices from the margin. As she began translating Tamil Dalit poetry, she became aware of how the intersections of gender, caste, class, and cultural location shaped literary production and circulation in India. In one of her interviews, she argues against:

> *"…. gatekeeping of voices, not only internationally, but even within the Indian context. This gatekeeping is along the lines of inequalities, including caste, class, gender, and race. So, the Anglophone Indians would read/ discuss/debate issues that were being written about in the English media..."*(Kandasamy 2019 as cited in Danek 2019)

She has held an editorial role at *The Dalit,* an alternative magazine that documents caste-divided brutalities and anti-caste resistance in India. Her first novel, The Gypsy Goddess (2014), exposes the capitalist mold of the Green Revolution and the cost of resistance paid by Dalit laborers. Kandasamy's critique of the Brahminical state has been integrated into her larger ideology of questioning the canon and canonical institutions. Therefore, all her works have focused on the dynamics of power and the processes of victimisation of marginalised entities. This intersectional position also makes her a post-colonial feminist in the ways she examines dimensions of subaltern oppression. As a survivor of intimate partner violence, Kandasamy speaks of the disguised and concealed manner in which erasure of women's voices takes place. Her novel *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife* (2017) is one of the rare works of confession by an Indian woman author, telling a story of an abusive marriage, trauma, self-preservation, and survival. Taboo topics of marital rape, domestic exploitation and repetitive cycles of manipulation are exposed through an experimental narrative of part-memoir and part-fiction. She argues that while being a woman writer often invites pigeonholing into a specific position, separating the personal from the political is a dangerously dualistic approach. Moreover, therefore, to write is also to opine, to work towards consciousness-raising (Mazzau, 2024).

Discussion & Analysis

Kandasamy's book *The Orders were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle* is her journal on growing up as a Tamil Eelam sympathiser. In the course of the journal, she interviews women who were part of the Eelam struggle and who witnessed the genocidal war waged by the Lankan state in 2009. These women, whom Kandasamy calls tigresses, acted as warriors, spies, and logisticians in a Civil War that lasted decades—the oral accounts and poems narrated by the women, now refugees, establish the gendered nature of the violence they encountered. Growing up as an Eelam sympathiser in India often meant one was a traitor, and she witnessed her parents being incarcerated for the same. She did not give up. From the era of newspapers to shooting videos on a Sony camera to social media, Kandasamy talks about the journey of her primary material undergoing several stages of transformation. From the decades of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination to the McDonaldization of the Jaffna peninsula, she poignantly recalls the changing nature of the Eelam War. What emerges is a 100-page

book –part poetry, part journal, part memoir – and a lot of blood and tears on what it takes to become a writer. The book can be broadly approached at three levels: LTTE women fighters and the gendered nature of their participation in the Civil War; the aesthetic construction of the narrative in discussing this history; and Kandasamy's position as a public intellectual in handling her primary material.

Various aspects of the Eelam struggle were driven and facilitated by women combatants, fighting, shooting, suicide bombing, spying, and other logistical arrangements. Traditionally assigned gender roles, such as leadership, risk-taking, and combat, were now being taken up by Eelam girls. However, scholars have also argued that women's participation in a militant nationalist struggle cannot be interpreted as a form of gender liberation or equality (Satkunanathan, 2021). That is why sexual violence against women fighters after the war was over reinforced the vulnerability of 'tigresses'. In 'welfare villages' and in refugee camps, sexual violence was perpetrated not only as an act of punishment but as a lesson to prevent future acts of rebellion. Sexual violence was also a political tool to bring about demographic and ethnic alteration in the map of the nation. In the testimonies of the two women interviewed by Kandasamy, horrific details of rape and violence emerge-the accounts repeatedly underlining gendered nature of this genocidal war. In mainstream Sinhala accounts, monikers like "war hero", "humanitarian work", and "rehabilitation" have systematically erased the true nature of war crimes committed. Kandasamy's book is multi-voiced and multi-representational (Saji, 2022). The two women she interviews are from different locations of the Eelam struggle-one a Tamil Tiger and the other, the wife of a Tamil Tiger. Both, however, are in diaspora and have survived the war as witnesses and as memorialists. The second half of the book contains translations of resistance poetry by Eelam female fighters, including Captain Vaanathi, Captain Kasturi, and Aatilatchumi. This bricolage, comprising transcripts, journal entries, testimonies, video footage, and a manifesto, contributes to the book's aesthetics. Each part has been threaded together, in keeping with Kandasamy's prologue, where she sets down in detail her genealogy as a writer and ideologue of resistance. She calls herself 'The Traitor Who is the Writer' and in this sense her defiance is in the very act of recording the outcaste's story. Kandasamy's articulation of rebellion is multifaceted: as a woman, a writer, an Eelam sympathiser in India, an anti-caste activist, and a critic of gender-based violence. She is the critical outsider whose ethical activism and authorship have earned her the privilege of locating herself alongside the survivors of her story. With cinematic intimacy, she documents the everyday realities of the two women; we must remember that these are originally Sony Cam footage, later turned into written records, which turns her into both an audience and a witness. As she gathers the disparate sources of her 'story', she realises she becomes a subject of her writing. Thus, all three women are bound by a shared quest for identity, dignity, and solidarity. The Anglophonic narrative that Kandasamy had once lamented over is dismantled in her own words, in her stance:

> *"I think it comes from political positioning. One of the problems with many pieces of writing is that they tend to be neutral on everything. The general idea of a public intellectual is to be on the fence; ...A lot of my writing is expressive physically and*

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politically because it is informed by the resistance that is both individual and collective."(Kandasamy 2021 as cited in S. Shalini 2021)

Conclusion

Literary authorship is an ideological enterprise. Authorship's relation to processes of power has been central to understanding the construction and motive of a text. Within the tradition of canon formation, the objectivity of authorship is suspect, as it often disguises the manipulative concerns of morality and virtue. From *Paradise Lost* to *Culture and Anarchy*, from *The Faerie Queene* to *The White Man's Burden,* the 'third-person omnipresent' author is a bystander working towards preserving the superstructure.

The Subaltern Studies Collective has repeatedly emphasised the location of privilege, or lack thereof, in our reading of history and subjectivity. Subaltern Studies, an important offshoot of Postcolonial Studies, introduced a new revisionist lens for literary authors to examine history, anthropology, race studies, and cultural studies. Historians like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and David Hardiman gathered new modes of researching 'third world' history. Inspired by Marxist and Post-structuralist thought, this group of thinkers looked at South Asian historiographies and their representation of the subaltern in contexts of gender, caste, and ethnicity. Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) became influential in revising literary authorship from the perspective of ordinary women and their accounts of everyday life. The literary canon exposed only select humanist portrayals to privilege, thus silencing alternative modes of storytelling. The text, in both aesthetics and politics, therefore becomes a necessary historical archive for readers who now emerge as new witnesses, as new modes of storytelling. My paper attempts to explore the existential and political dimensions of literary authorship, as represented by Meena Kandasamy. Through a select study, I have attempted to examine how literary authorship defines victims of gender-based violence, tackles questions of ethics and authenticity, interprets social injustice, and captures their subjectivity as historical agents.

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