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Exquisite Cadavers: Technique and Philosophy

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Abstract

Exquisite Cadavers is a work of fiction by Meena Kandasamy. The Novel exhibits the bold and undeterred spirit of the writer in favor of marginals. In her first experiment with fiction writing, Kandasamy had to face some criticism for the assimilation of too much autobiographical elements in her writings. She is overwhelmingly self-assertive with her pen. Any kind of wooliness and redundancy need to be scrupulously eschewed for confirming the norms of contemporary world order. Her endeavour here is to project the women's consciousness in foreign land. Maya, the protagonist, all her experiences characteristically bear some impact of her homeland. Time and again engendered marks of her roots echo in her thought process. Having spent so many years in England, she could not reconcile herself to the ways of western world completely. Standing on the win-win situation, she all of a sudden realizes that there remains only compromising atmosphere all around. She is forced to think about of the worst and prepares herself accordingly.

Keywords: Compromising situation, Oulipo, empirical, Regional influences, Kin, innovation

Introduction

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy was born in Nineteen Hundred and Eighty Four in the city of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Both of her parents were in scholastic profession. In her early age she developed interest in poetry. Under the impression of a female celluloid star in Bollywood, she adopted the name Meena. Pursuing her higher education, she set out for the state of Kerala. Her first independent social exposure occurred in Kerala. Later on, she did her Ph.D. from Amma University Chennai. She started poetic composition at the age of seventeen. She earned her doctorate in Social-linguistics in English. Her creative writings characteristically deal with caste-annihilation, feminism and linguistic identity of marginals and down-trodden. In this way her poetry is a tool for activism. Her first collection Touch that has the Foreword by Kamala Das. It was published in the year 2006. Ms. Militancy appeared next year. Her two poems Mascara and My Lover Speaks of Rape brought first prize in all india Poetry Competetion. Her works published in several anthologies and journals including Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry, Kavya

Bharati, Indian Literature, Poetry International Web, Muse India, Outlook, and The Indian Express. She was invited to participate in International writing programme at the University of Iowa in two thousand and nine. She was selected the Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow. At the University of Kent in the Year two thousand and eleven, she took part in *Asylum Jazz Poetry Concert*. That was organised in Pittsburgh. She was also an important feature in the *Fourteenth Poetry Africa International Festival, Durban* in 2010 and The Jaipur Literature Festival in 2011. She was also shortlisted as short fiction women writer of the age less than forty years and who hailed from South Asia by Zubaan Books New Delhi. She published Gypsy Goddess in 2014.

Meena Kandasamy very closely observes in her works the issues regarding caste and gender and the social stigma based on that. She has also, to face threats from right wing writers for her fearless criticism of social malpractices. She is also an active member of WNNI- *The Network of Women In Media in India*. She translated original works from Tamil Language into English. Talisman by Thirumavalvan and

Thirukkural are best examples to display her passion as a translator. She also acted in a Malayalam movie *Oroalppakkam*. She had lately been awarded *Herman Kesten Prize* by PEN Centre Germany in 2022. Her notable works are as follows- *Talisman* 2003, *Touch* 2006, *Ms Militancy* 2010, *Waking is Another Dream* 2010, *The Gypsy Goddess* 2014, *This Poem will Provoke You* 2015, *When I Hit you: or, A portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* 2017, *We are not the Citizens* 2018, *Exquisite Cadavers* 2019, *The Orders were to Rape You* 2021, *Thirukkural: The Book of Desire* 2023. Presently she is living in the East London City at U.K. During one hour long Zoom Meeting conversation with us on January 10, 2024 she was there at Belgium then.

Objective of this study is to trace Humanistic Perspectives in the works of Meena Kandasamy. She is an active political figure. Her presence on media forums is now supposed to be a matter of pride. Her outspoken statements set her stand on the side of radical activists. She has too much admiration and so many awards to her credit abroad. Her recognition in the homeland is not so bright as it must be. This Thesis is a mere humble attempt to put her voice assertively. The extremism that shadows her works from time to time is only a remedial way of suppressed utterances. She is a Humanist at heart. That's why her works need to be analysed through humanistic perspectives. The Methodology adopted herein is descriptive and analytical in nature. Original texts of primary sources have been thoroughly ransacked and findings have been put forth with utter honesty. Many a fact has been explained in the light of a conversation that we successfully had with the author herself to get the her feel of the pulse on different issues.

Oulipo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), is a French literary movement founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. It explores the potential of literature through the use of constrained writing techniques, viewing constraints not as limitations but as catalysts for creativity.

Oulipo writers embrace mathematical and puzzle-like constraints in their work, believing that restrictions can lead to innovative and unexpected literary results. Unlike movements like Surrealism, Oulipo rejects spontaneity and the subconscious as primary sources of literary inspiration, preferring systematic and self-imposed limitations. A well-known Oulipo technique is *N+7* where nouns in a text are replaced with the noun seven entries later in the dictionary. Other techniques include the "snowball" method, where lines of poetry increase in length.

Prominent figures include Georges Perec (author of *A Void*, which famously omits the letter "e"), Italo Calvino, and Jacques Roubaud.

While sometimes seen as a niche movement, Oulipo's influence on contemporary writers exploring similar creative experiments is undeniable.

In essence, Oulipo is a literary workshop that investigates the power of rules and limitations to unlock new possibilities in writing, demonstrating that boundaries can be a source of creative freedom.

Materials and Methods

The methodology adopted for this study is qualitative in nature, focussing on content analysis and thematic

exploration. The research involves textual analysis to interpret symbolic meaning, identify metaphysical elements, and discuss the narrative strategies used by Meena Kandasamy to convey the integration of the work of art. By conducting a detailed analysis of this work, the researcher aims to uncover the underlying ideas. Through close examination of the text, the researcher will explore how the author uses symbolism and metaphors to convey deeper struggles of consciousness. By delving into the narrative strategies employed by Kandasamy, the study seeks to shed light on the intricate form of Novel writing offering new insights into the interconnectedness of several aspects of it. Ultimately, this qualitative study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how various dimensions interact and influence each other in the realm of Fiction.

Exquisite Cadavers is the third work of fiction by Meena Kandasamy that has been set in the chapter Fiction of the thesis. It was published for the first time in U. K. in the year 2009 by Atlantic Books. The story is that of Karim and Maya. The Asian couple presently living in different capitals of the Continent. It was an interfaith couple. Karim had studied film-making and he now wants to produce Feature Films. He is ambitious about his career as a Film-Producer. His dreams in this respect are sky high. His dedication towards his career is admirable. Remains of Arab Revolution yet flash in his eyes. Maya, his wife, is the one cause of deep concern to her husband. She realises that her stepping into interfaith marriage is no way acceptable to her parents. Karim is a bird of passage. He is unstable both physically and mentally. Maya's job is not a secured one. Her work culture and behaviour with the colleagues are not up to the mark. She is impulsive and libertine to a good extent. Her whims and caprices make her feel insecure everywhere. At least, she had such apprehensions. She is also a chain-smoker. These lousy habits of hers irritate not only others in her company but also she herself is affected badly by it. When she thinks peacefully about it she decides not to smoke again. But as soon as the packet falls into her palms she fails to resist her temptations. And stands up only when there remain only butts. The news of sudden pregnancy comes to her as a bolt from the blue. Soon after it is revealed that Karim's brother is missing in Tunis Karim decides to search after his brother. He suspects that his brother had been taken into custody for belonging to a peculiar faith. European security agencies are prejudiced against a certain religion. Karim had to leave behind Maya and the unborn child. Maya cannot leave her home city to give company to her husband. In fact, she is not willing to go anywhere be it Karim himself. Conflict appears before her eyes. She had to choose between her partner and her home city. In fact, it is a strain related to her life directly. Her husband is her future and her home city is her history. So she had to select between her future and her history.

In this fascinating experimental writing Meena Kandasamy fuses fiction and reality. It is an innovative tale in domestic London life alternated with Indian political horrors. Writer embraced *Oulipo technique*. Kandasamy grew up in southernmost corner of Deccan known as Tamil Nadu and attracted towards Left wing ideology. Living in London, she confirms that her solidarity and concern are in alignment with the oppressed and the exploited. Paradoxically, she is creating her art in form, format and font under capitalist

environment. At the end of the novel conflict appears to be subsiding. Karim goes back to Tunis. Where his brother is supposed to be wrongfully detained. Maya had a sudden brain-wave though short-lived. Maya feels the urge to look beyond narrow confines of relationship and the home and decides to join Karim. All of a sudden the unadorned notes stops as if the fictional creations must do so when in confrontation with political injustice. Thus, fiction, memory and reality are intimately intertwined at the same time keeping their entities intact.

Exquisite Cadavers deals with the conflict in the mind of a modernist Woman Maya, who lives in the great city of London. She has an affair and then interfaith marriage with Karim, a film-maker. She also has developed a habit of chain-smoking. Her sudden pregnancy creates even worse situations for her unstable job. She has to choose any one of the two-- either her better half or her roots. That is to say between the sweet memories of bygone days and the near future. In the Preface to the novel she confirms that readers regard her as the writer of realistic novels as was the case with *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. that work is infused with autobiographical elements out and out. That's why she thought of innovative ways of writing. This is the reason the present novel adopts Oulipo Technique. It is a French word means a loose gathering of writers who seek to create works using constrained writing Techniques.

It is a style of writing where the writer breaks up the conventional line so as to derive quite different meaning out of utterances. The story begins abruptly in a dramatic situation. A few of the pages bear Impression of magic realism on them. The main story runs in bold letters and impressions are recorded on the edgeside of the pages. Talking about the influence of Tamil poetics she remembers that in Tamil Literature each of the landscapes correspond to a particular metaphor for human experiences. Thus Mountains signify Rendezvous, forests are associated with waiting and sea shores universally signify pining for. Relationship between Cedric and Maya is not very warm. Cedric is very much curious about Maya's creative faculties. He wants to know how does Maya represent in her works the incidents really happened in her life? She answers calmly that she selects only nice things from life to pen on. Meena Kandasamy makes Maya think about herself in an audacious way. She is too much enthralled with herself. Novelist quotes Kaniyan Poongundranar the sixth century B.C. philosopher poet from Sangam Age-- Yaadum oore, yaavarum Kelir that means 'anywhere is home, everyone is kin'. She drags the meaning to another level by correlating it with her teenage remembrance of certain adjectives such as riff-raff, vagabond, loafer- hurled at her by her mother. Rift-raft, Vagabond, loafer. She took all these insulting words as new aspirational standard. Thus she starts loving her failures. After the death of her mother Maya leaves no stone unturned to discourage her father from marrying another woman. But Maya's desire very soon shattered to nothingness. Maya sets out for the Western World. Both Maya and Karim did not have loving and careful impressions of their respective fathers. The negligent

parenting played a vital role in shaping the complex consciousness of the Karim takes great pains to repair the shakable parts of his marriage. Maya overjoys his comments. Karim looks in Maya's person 'a Juliet' and on other occasions 'a femme fatale' on yet another occasion 'callous, cantankerous beauty'. On the other hand, Maya treads on different path. She recalls her childhood days when there was strict prohibition by elders on watching movies. Still her friends used to call her 'filmy'. Karim is perplexed over the rapt behaviour of Maya. He works out that the moment Maya watches movies turns to be someone stranger--

It is a process that lacks the faintest semblance of passivity: to watch Maya watch a movie is to watch her watch herself watch the movie; it is coping with her hitting the pause button on the remote intermittently to launch into a long-winded discussion on the motives of each of the protagonists; it is the realization that she is projecting herself into one or more of the characters she sees on the screen; it is the patience required in dealing with her panic over the possible dreary outcomes she has started anticipating for every given scenario that emerges. p. 31

Maya is unlikely to make the show her real worth. She assumes herself as the guilty lover, the cuckolded wife, the absurd girlfriend, the patron left behind, the child orphaned, the abused teen, the bullied school kid, and the nerd girl whom none wants to ask out on a date. Maya is much concerned with a variety of cruelty on women around her. She mentions several cases in India and Sri Lanka where minors are victimised even today again and again. There runs a parallel sequence of events related to movies and newspapers, in her mind. She thinks that:

As a woman, if your existence is reduced to one part of your body, how do you feel whole grain? I carry this disembodiment everywhere. Like a contagious virus, I pass it on. p.36

Limitations

First Limitation in this study is its fragmentary structure. Episodes do not have strong interconnections. Links are very poor. The whole work is truly in the shape of a Novella. Second limitation is its distractive writing style. Meena Kandasamy for the sake of Novelty, sacrifices the content of the work to a considerable extent. Time and again, the work seems to be a report of social audit, a book on sociology as well. Lastly, factual informations are deliberately eschewed and internal conflict has been unnecessarily focused on.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy in this work employs a new form of fiction writing called oulipo. She finds this style is capable enough to convey the struggle of consciousness. The distraction is the real technique which helps interconnecting facts and the fiction. The moral conflict in the mind of

characters resemble with a number of references from the recent past which gives the work a political touch with utter fineness. Maya symbolizes the ultimate human struggle. Her dauntless attitude shows extreme devotion to the life itself.

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