

## Meena Kandasamy

in conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

**Sanjida O'Connell:** I'm with Meena Kandasamy, a translator, a novelist, a poet, and we're in our publisher's office; we're both published by Atlantic Books and we're in a room surrounded by books, shelves from the floor to the ceiling, and I've spotted our own books. It's just wonderful to be surrounded by all these stories that I would love to read. Meena, can you tell me about your first novel, *Gypsy Goddess*?

**Meena Kandasamy:** The first novel, *Gypsy Goddess*, was about a massacre which took place in the village of Kilvenmani in Tamil Nadu. It happened on Christmas Day 1968, when 44 old men, women and children were burnt alive by feudal landlords who were upset that landless Dalit workers were demanding higher wages. For me, it's something very personal because of where it happened; my father comes from that region, and I wanted to write about it because I think it's a very crucial chapter in my country's history.

When I sat down to write that story, it led me to visit a lot of things: one, for instance, the caste system; the other is about what happens to workers. For instance, what is happening to agriculture in India? So many farmers are killing themselves today, but it's interesting to see the history of that. And also the questions of what becomes history and what doesn't become history? So, a big massacre like this, 44 people being killed, doesn't get into history books. You don't read about it. So why are we leaving some things out of our history? These are all the questions that I wanted to explore.

**SO:** And the caste system has touched your own family as well, hasn't it? Because your mother was originally from a lower – or labelled 'lower' – caste?

**MK:** Yes, I think for us, the fact that I'm from a mixed caste background also plays a role in it because, obviously, my mum is a Shudra; she comes from a lower caste background, but my father comes from a nomadic tribe which is not technically a caste, but which for purposes gets treated, or it gets stigmatised, in terms of how the caste system applies to people. His caste survives by, let's say, ritual faith-healing or begging. Even the word for the caste becomes a slur word. So, I think that kind of hurts you even before you fully know what it is.

**SO:** The story about the massacre, it ends with the judgement of the Madras High Court, who blames the agriculture workers themselves who burned to death. He blames them for the loss of their own lives. And there's a line in your novel which says, 'That we regret the fact that we have not found sufficient evidence on record to implicate the accused in this incident.' It's such a terrible thing to have happened but then the way that the authorities dealt with it and in the way that you yourself have written about it with this combination of anger, but it's also humorous, there's a real dark humour going on throughout your novel.

**MK:** It's very interesting that I'm speaking to you, because you are a novelist who writes thrillers and crime novels, and in a sense, I was like, 'I know I'm writing literary fiction', but I also was thinking at the back of my mind, 'this is a crime novel'. Everybody knows who did these massacres, everybody knows it's this landlord. And that's the new thing in crime, isn't it? Everyone knows who did something. Then you're watching the person walk away scot-free, and how all the systems are doing little acts of criminality on their own in order to allow this guilty person to walk scot-free.

And for me, the thing is, it's not only the massacre in Kilvenmani. This is the history of all caste massacres in India. So, you look at Bathani Tola, a whole village of Dalit people is killed. Nobody spends a day in jail. The landlords go away scot-free. It's not an exception. So why is justice not being served to these people?

And when the systems of justice fail them, what are they doing? Do they take the law into their own hands? So, I think these are the questions that, for me, were something that reflected Indian democracy in general because, obviously, if the country is not giving justice to people who deserve it then, naturally, they're going to look outside the system in order to find the justice that they want.

**SO:** It's told in an unconventional way. I thought it was really interesting that you have all these preoccupations with storytelling and you actually begin the novel with a chapter called 'Notes on Storytelling', where the writer, the narrator of the story, is deciding how to tell the story and what will be good for the reader. There's a great line where the narrator says, 'My Facebook fans who have flocked around me in eager expectation of the clinching first line have already deserted me', and I wondered why you had decided to use such an unconventional structure.

**MK:** One of the things was to tell the story, but sometimes I also think you have to step back as a writer and let documents tell the story, or let people tell the story. For instance, there is a chapter in the book where the post-mortem reports of all the people who died, is just given as a list, which is how the police are using it in their documents to prosecute. Just the way in which entire people's lives, which are fleshed out for the purpose of the novel – so, you know this person had a name, this person had a life, this person had dreams, this person had family – but all of that goes away. What you have is what remains of them. So, a person becomes an Object one, Object two, and they say, 'visible male genitalia', 'body burnt beyond recognition.' When somebody becomes tabulated, objectified and exhibited within a list like that, the fact of their humanity is taken away from them already in the process, and it was important to let that language unravel itself because for the justice system these are not people who are fighting, these are not people; they are numbers. When you are doing something like this, in a sense, you are abandoning your duty as a novelist, to fill up the story, by just retreating. And also the novel as a form is about the individual, isn't it? And here it's a village, it's a collective, so how do you write a world with all those voices in it?

**SO:** I felt that some of the same themes in your novel about the caste system and the oppression of women were also in your poetry collections, *Touch* and *Ms Militancy*. Can you say what you're trying to achieve with your writing?

**MK:** I didn't start out as a writer, I started out as a translator, and I also started out volunteering in a lot of little NGOs and stuff like that; but I didn't know where to put my anger. So, I would go to these public hearings and people would say, 'The procession is not allowed through these streets because the caste Hindus are not letting our funeral procession pass through the street', or when there is a temple festival, 'The god of this temple cannot come to our streets because they say it's polluting.'

So, you hear all this, but even within the framework of, let's say, a truth-telling hearing, or a public hearing, you don't know what to do with this anger at the system, you know, because, obviously, all of these systems work but something else you are reacting to at a very human, but also a very outraged level, and you don't know what to do about it. Part of it is guilt because you can't help it and you're just angry. Part of it, is also you identify with what is going on.

I had to hide myself and my feelings somewhere and I was putting it into poetry. I was writing it without any idea and dream or expectation of publication. It was just like... I have to deal with my emotions and that's what I was doing in my poetry. I think the second collection was different, because I'm Tamil, but I was born and brought up as a Hindu. One of the things was, caste is huge, but also the fact that you are a woman is huge in this society. So, who is allowed to talk? How loud are you allowed to talk? What are you allowed to talk about? And how do you fashion yourself? So, once you're also a writer, then you become even more suspect, you know.

So, for me, I had to unpack what it means to be a woman and to write these really angry feminist poems, and that's how I wrote my second book of poetry called *Ms Militancy*. And when I wrote a novel, obviously all of this poetry, was feeding itself into the books, so I made a lot of strong female characters, and I also made them not just young women, but I had much older women because I also find older women missing in fiction and I think they deserve their due.

**SO:** You started off as a translator from Tamil into English and I was interested in your use of language in your own writing. Do you write in Tamil or English now?

**MK:** I always write in English. It's because of two factors: one is that my father is a Tamil professor and if I ever wrote in Tamil, I would have this image of my father standing over my shoulders and trying to look at what I'm writing. I'm also a product of India's very flawed language policy. Both my parents were working so they sent me to a school that was about a ten minutes walk from home. That school was a state-run school subsidised by the central government or the federal government and because it was subsidised by the federal government, we were not taught in our mother tongues.

Even though the school was in Tamil Nadu and almost all of us who attended it were Tamil speakers, the school only taught us English and Hindi. So, I learnt Hindi at school, which was the language nobody around us spoke except for during school hours, in the class. And then I learnt English ... and so my proficiency to write is obviously only in English, and in a sense I feel confident about it because I learnt in what I would think was a 'proper way', whereas my Tamil is my native language. I speak it at home, I speak it around me, I read in it, but I would never feel that confidence that comes from, you know, learning it.

The fact that English is not my mother tongue means that I always feel insecure about writing in it and I'm always double checking myself. In a sense, I think it's good for your writing because every word is a word that ... One, because you're paranoid that you're using it in the right way, you put a lot of pressure into picking just the right words. But also, as it's another language, you're really concerned because you don't want to say the wrong thing, or you don't want to use the wrong word. So, I think for a writer that kind of awareness is good. But I also think that going beyond the first language/second language divide, it's also a language that lets me inhabit a different self. There are the poems, for instance, where I would use four-letter words with an absolute freedom.

**SO:** Because that is your persona in the poem.

**MK:** Yeah, so you can inhabit another sense of self without, as I've said, having to worry about how is it going to trickle down into the family or...

**SO:** ...What would your father think of it?

**MK:** Yeah, yeah, so obviously it's an outrage, whether it's English or Tamil. But for me, in a sense, I could be a different person. It just stretches who you are and who you can be. And also, in a way, it bypasses what I would call a lot of caste-based gatekeeping or gender-based gatekeeping, which would exist within Tamil if I were writing in Tamil.

**SO:** I would like to talk about your second novel, *When I Hit You*. We know within the first few pages that this is a novel about a marriage that has gone incredibly, badly, wrong and it's about an abusive husband. Can you tell me a little bit more about the novel?

**MK:** Well, I think the short summary is: it's a misadventure with the marriage. It's a lot of violence involved and marital rape and stuff like that. For me, the writing of it was again the same question that haunted the first book. They were very similar for me because I was probing violence and how does violence act? How does it act on a communal level? Or, how are people going to justify it using caste, or justify it by social things, in the first [novel]. And in the second one, they justify violence in terms of gender. So, I was looking largely at psychological violence.

All of this was for me a continuation of exploring what violence means, but also for me, it was like, how do you write about violence without making it something that can be voyeuristic to a man who feels that's the right thing to do? So, I had to write violence without making somebody, you know, get off on it and that's not easy because if you put any victim in a troubling state, men are going to be clapping, you know, at least misogynistic, violent men are going to get a high out of it.

For me, these were the questions I was trying to probe. How do you write violence in a way in which it empowers you to write about it, but also empowers a female reader? That was one of the things. But also, the idea is that when people look at women who have been beaten up, we also have a societal understanding that this is a weak woman. This is a woman who can't stand up for herself. She doesn't know what's happening, or she doesn't know better, or she's lost in love.

But the idea that it could be a very intellectual person to whom this happens. The violence itself could be, not necessarily physical, but also... People stay, and people stay for all kinds of reasons, including, how does it feel to witness drama because you're also, you know, as much as your concern for many things... It's a lot of complex things I was trying to unpack there.

**SO:** This is really a clever and moving portrayal of a beautiful, intelligent woman who's the main character and, in her husband's words, she has 'thought crimes' and so you see this slow build-up of his coercion of her, reducing her contact with the outside world, changing the way that she thinks, which progresses towards rape, and then physical violence towards her. It's very clever in how it's done, because for those people who would say, 'Well, how would a woman put up with that? Why would she stay? Why would she allow that to happen to herself?', I think that question is answered.

**MK:** I think that one of the ways which women are made to suffer is because we are implicated in our suffering, you know what I mean? So, if you walk out, you're a bad person, so you have to stay; if you walk out, you're a thoughtless person; if you walk out, and you're not patient enough to explain to the other person why what they're doing is wrong...

**SO:** ...you haven't tried hard enough.

**MK:** You haven't tried hard enough, or you've not waited for the storm to pass. So, in all of these situations, it becomes the woman's responsibility to straighten

the man out or to wait until, you know, he's getting over all of his, you know, whatever hang-ups he has.

**SO:** There is a great line in there that encapsulates all of this where she says, 'I learn to criticise myself for who I am.'

**MK:** Yes, there is always the idea that, you know, once we become a more progressive society ... and a lot of hang-ups among left-wing feminists that economics is the question here. So, once you give women money everything is going to be sorted, or if she has money, she's going to be so empowered. It's economic equality which gets fronted all the time. But the idea is that very progressive people, especially on the left, can use a lot of left-wing dogmatic arguments to put you down and to erase who you are. The idea of self-criticism which, you know, is Maoist in its origin; the idea that every comrade must stand up and find out reflexively – and it's something that you have to do as a class, on where your class is going wrong, or what are your remnants of your being a petit bourgeois person and how it's affecting your revolutionary activity – that becomes something the wife has to do in order to critique herself. In that sense, she becomes a collaborator in her own victimisation. I would not use the word but it's 'gaslighting', isn't it?

**SO:** Yeah, they are an intelligent couple. She's interested in left-wing politics; he writes about Marxism – he's an academic. So, at the beginning it seems, on paper, it's going to be a very equitable relationship, you know. They both have the same principles, values, political beliefs. So, it shows that all of that is wrong. It's not about politics or money; it's about male violence.

**MK:** Yeah, male violence and also how all of this progressiveness, how has it made men still look at women? There's a big flaw there, like they are not just addressing women's issues in the same way; they're also very interested only in a particular type of woman. They are not interested in all women, because if you're a middle-

class woman, your rights get suspended. I think it is very important, you know, women have to be centred.

**SO:** I think it also has to do with our own biology but also that men tend to be more powerful, physically more powerful than women. And there's this awful section where the main character is frightened and she says it's not because of what's happening to her – awful though that is – but because the next time it will be worse. So, he can hold that threat over her.

**MK:** This is the pathology of violence in a sense that, obviously, you know that it happens. So, there's a precedent and you know the next time it is going to be worse because whoever is doing it is going to escalate it. Violence works also because of how much it can put you within the grip of fear.

**SO:** The structure of *When I Hit You* is interesting because, like *Gypsy Goddess*, you have gone backwards and forwards in time. You haven't told the story chronologically and the narrator is commenting on the story as well as being in it. And it's interspersed with, again, almost factual evidence, like the letters to the lover and there is another chapter about all the ways in which men have left the main character, like left a relationship. I wondered why you had chosen to structure it in that way.

**MK:** Well, I think the first obvious answer is that I didn't go to a writing workshop. Someone would have thrown all of this out and straightened me up, and said, 'this is how you do it'. The other thing for me is I always had this rational explanation, intrinsic to the book on why I was doing that. So, for instance, in *Gypsy Goddess*, every chapter is in a different perspective and I thought that shift of perspective enabled you to enter the story from another aspect and to inhabit that reality. But also enabled me to deal with the timelines, so the story is progressing and, as it progresses, you're hearing various things happen in various voices. So, it lets you go from one event to the other and tell the second event from another person's perspective. So, you can open with the meeting of the landlords where they're

plotting what to do to crush the rebellion that's waiting, and then you can go from that chapter to one where the village as a whole has gathered, and the Dalit people and the working-class people are deciding how to go next.

**SO:** So, I guess in *When I Hit You* you're drawing in all the different threads of all the different aspects of violence that you wanted to discuss?

**MK:** For instance, the woman is being punished in terms of who her lovers are, or what her past is and, therefore, it was important to build a shell around it and what happens if you have a 'history', so to speak, and so to put this chapter there. The fact that she still wants to write becomes another separate chapter on what she writes in order to survive. It wasn't written that way. No, I wrote a lot of fragments and then I spent three days in a hotel in Kochi, chain-smoking all the time, and putting these fragments in a way in which it made sense to me.

**SO:** When I read *When I Hit You*, I didn't Google you. I just read the book and then I got to the end of it and discovered that this is a true story and it's based on your own terrible and abusive marriage. And I wondered, first of all, why did you decide to write about your own experience and in this particular way? Because you could have completely fictionalised it. I know you can't say who the husband is, so he's never named, but you could have written it as a memoir, or you could have completely fictionalised it as a novel. And I wondered why you chose to write it in this particular format – so it's like a novel, but it's true.

**MK:** In a sense, yeah, it's what you call an autofiction because it obviously draws on autobiography, but for me, the decision to write it as a memoir was fundamentally not happening because of two reasons. The first is, in the story of what is my life, I think this is a very minor incident, so if I was ever going to tell the story of my life, I wouldn't – as an individual, as Meena, who lives the story – I wouldn't give it that much importance. I have so much else to say on my own life.

As a writer, the decision to not make it a memoir was because – and this is something I reflected on earlier – when you are looking at me as a novelist who's

writing, the questions to me are questions that relate to the art form of the novel, to why I'm telling the story, and to the fact that this story has an element of credibility because we believe fiction still has to have things that happen that are believable, you know.

You go back to this idea of a memoir and then what happens is that I'm saying I'm writing a novel, but instead you're saying, 'Oh, it's a memoir.' Then you're not looking at me as a novelist, you're looking at me as a raped Indian woman. You're looking at me as a beaten-up woman... the fact that I am owning and I am telling the story, the agency... for me, what's important is that *I'm writing*. 'What happened' is a blank there: I'm writing a massacre, I'm writing a bad marriage, I'm writing my bad marriage. All of that... the *I am writing* is the most important thing. When people make it a memoir it becomes something like, 'Oh, so this happened to you', where you're just a passive sufferer and, for me, that was not important.

**SO:** When you first published this novel, the subtitle was, *Or the Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. So, in that sense, you were deliberately signposting that it's about a writer, writing about her life.

**MK:** And also, what happens to the writer is a very important question. So, what happens when you're a writer in an abusive relationship? And, I think the fact that...and this is something that I actually learnt during the marriage is that, of all the things that I could do, the fact that I was a writer was the most annoying thing, you know. So, this is something that you really take away is that there is some extreme power to writing, in that sense, isn't it? You hold, you know, power over the story but also you can claim yourself. You can reclaim yourself. You can expose what is happening. So, all of these are things that, you know, of course you can't be physically strong enough to overwhelm somebody or overpower somebody or defend yourself but there are things that writing lets you... and I think, for me, I just wanted to occupy that space.

When you are woman of colour writing in the West, you are writing for two reasons. One, because something horrible has happened to you, or you come from a place where horrible things happen. This is the outside perspective. So, you are

not treated as a writer. Like nobody's asking you about the processes. Oh, do you keep a notebook? How many hours do you write? Do you write in the mornings? Do you play music? Do you like coffee? We are just diarists, you know. So, I think it is very subtle. So, they read us, but they don't elevate us to the state of other writers for them who are more philosophical and more intellectual and I'm like, 'No, No, No!' I'm not entering that game at all. You have to take me on the terms in which you take old, white male writers, otherwise I'm not going to, you know, perform my problems for you.

One of the things that I say is that not a single word of the book is false, but I claim the right to call it fiction because I am telling a story. So, whether the story happened or doesn't happen, whether Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall or didn't sit on the wall is not important for me. The fact is that I'm saying, 'He sat on the wall.'

**SO:** I've just a couple of final questions I wanted to ask you which I'm trying to ask everybody. What book would you recommend that other writers should read?

**MK:** I have lots of recommendations, but one book that I'm consistently recommending these days is Eduardo Galeano's *Children of The Days*, in which every single day of the calendar, he takes some event from world history and he's trying to look at the world like that and I think it's a really, really good book to dip into from time to time. I just love that book.

**SO:** If you could go back in time and meet yourself as a young woman who doesn't have a book deal, hasn't had any books published yet, what advice would you give about writing?

**MK:** This is very interesting because, as a young woman from the time I was 17 until I was about 24, I never slept a single night. I stayed up every night working, writing, reading, translating because I just knew that unless I worked my ass off, I wouldn't get anywhere. Maybe I would tell her to sleep more, but I also know that it's all that hard work that's paying off now.

Young women of colour, I'm sure, are very aware of how hard we have to work, in order to get there, in order to have a similar body of work to, even say, our white female contemporaries or white male contemporaries, to be given any attention. Yeah, and make meaningful relationships when you're younger, because that's something we tend to neglect a bit, when we look too much at just writing.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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