

The Aesthetics of Insurgency: Formal Subversions and Dalit Feminist Praxis in the Works of Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract

The radical junction of formal innovation and Dalit feminist praxis in Meena Kandasamy's literary works is examined in this essay. This study contends that Kandasamy uses "aesthetics of insurgency," a purposeful use of narrative fragmentation, meta-fiction, and linguistic subversion—to undermine monolithic structures of caste and patriarchy by examining her novels, *The Gypsy Goddess*, *When I Hit You*, and the experimental trajectory leading to *Exquisite Cadavers*. The study examines how her "uncompromising diction" and the creation of a "Dalit Feminist English" function as resistant practices that reclaim agency for marginalised subjectivities, drawing on contemporary research (2020–2025). The research shows that Kandasamy's formal subversions are essential to her political mission of exposing institutional violence and reconstructing the Dalit female self, rather than just being stylistic choices. Furthermore, this paper situates Kandasamy's work within broader discourses of postcolonial resistance and intersectional feminism, highlighting how her narrative strategies disrupt conventional literary expectations.

Keywords: aesthetics, insurgency, subversion, trajectory, Dalit Feminist, marginalized, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

With what academics often refer to as "uncompromising diction" and a "raw, visceral style" that purposefully upends the current quo, Meena Kandasamy has become a powerful and revolutionary voice in contemporary Indian literature [2], [10]. Her body of work serves as more than just narrative; it is a militant attack on the systemic and historical silencing mechanisms that have long suppressed Dalit voices, particularly those of Dalit women who negotiate the perilous nexus of patriarchal violence and caste hierarchy [4], [15]. In this context, her writing not only challenges literary traditions but also confronts deeply entrenched socio-political structures that normalize exclusion and marginalization.

Kandasamy is increasingly positioned in recent scholarly debate from 2020 to 2025 not only as a novelist but also as an activist-writer who uses language and narrative structure as precise tools for social justice [1], [6]. This essay contends that the "aesthetics of insurgency," a strategic framework in which formal innovation is closely tied to political opposition, defines her creative endeavour. Kandasamy dismantles the conventional, frequently Eurocentric, linear novel to more accurately reflect the broken and repressed reality of the subaltern experience by utilising strategies ranging from extreme narrative fragmentation to the use of "Taminglish" (a combination of Tamil and English) [13], [17]. Such linguistic hybridity not only

resists hegemonic norms but also validates lived experiences that are often excluded from dominant literary discourse.

This analysis argues that her formal subversions are the core site of her praxis rather than considering her stylistic choices as ancillary to her message. Kandasamy's work aims to reclaim agency, reconstitute the Dalit female self, and elicit a deep, indignant engagement from the reader that goes beyond the "partiality of empathy" found in mainstream literary consumption, whether she is narrating the horrors of the Kilvenmani massacre or the claustrophobia of domestic abuse [24]. By using this perspective, her writing becomes an essential "testimony of pain and protest" that calls for both social change and artistic acknowledgement [5], [18]. Moreover, her texts compel readers to move from passive consumption to active ethical reflection, thereby transforming literature into a participatory space of resistance. This expanded critical engagement underscores the urgency of recognising Dalit feminist narratives as central, rather than peripheral, to contemporary literary studies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DALIT FEMINIST PRAXIS AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Dalit feminist praxis, which emphasises the intersections of caste, gender, and class, forms the theoretical basis of Meena Kandasamy's work [5], [14]. According to academics, her writing is a "testimony of pain and protest," exposing exploitation and reconstructing selfhood through body-centered discourse [5], [18]. This framework challenges the homogenising tendencies of mainstream feminism by foregrounding the lived realities of Dalit women, whose experiences are often marginalised within both patriarchal and upper-caste feminist narratives.

Dalit feminist praxis insists on the inseparability of identity and oppression, arguing that caste cannot be disentangled from gendered violence. In this regard, Kandasamy's work becomes a site where theory and lived experience converge, transforming abstract political ideas into visceral literary expression. Her narratives resist dominant epistemologies by privileging subaltern voices and disrupting structures that sustain inequality.

Furthermore, the politics of resistance embedded in her writing aligns with intersectional feminist thought, which critiques systems of power as mutually reinforcing rather than isolated. By employing a confrontational and unapologetic narrative voice, Kandasamy reclaims linguistic authority and challenges the cultural capital associated with standardised English. Her strategic use of language, imagery, and narrative rupture not only documents oppression but actively contests it. Thus, Dalit feminist praxis in her work is not merely representational; it is performative, enacting resistance while simultaneously theorising it within a broader socio-political and literary context.

2.1 LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON

Meena Kandasamy's approach to the English language is an intrinsically political act of seizure rather than just an acceptance of a universal language. She does not inherit English passively; instead, she reclaims and reshapes it into a tool of resistance. She uses a "discourse of subversion" to undermine both the historically constructed authority over the female body and the very linguistic apparatus of colonisation [3]. In this sense, language is not neutral in her work—it is deeply implicated in systems of power, hierarchy, and exclusion. English, as a colonial legacy, carries with it structures of dominance, yet it also offers possibilities for transgression when appropriated by marginalised voices.

English is frequently seen by Dalit writers as a "double-edged sword" because it is both the language of the erstwhile coloniser and a calculated means to transcend caste-coded restrictions embedded within

regional vernaculars. While vernacular languages often carry caste markers that reinforce social hierarchies, English can function as a relatively unmarked linguistic space that allows Dalit writers to articulate their experiences without immediate social categorisation. However, this does not mean that English is free from power dynamics; rather, it requires transformation. In order to resolve this tension, Kandasamy reconstructs English into what may be called "Dalit Feminist English," a linguistic register that deliberately rejects politeness, passivity, and structural "purity." This transformed language refuses to conform to grammatical rigidity or aesthetic expectations imposed by dominant literary traditions.

This linguistic rebellion is not merely stylistic but ideological. By rejecting standardised forms, Kandasamy challenges the very notion of linguistic authority. Her English is infused with Tamil idioms, rhythms, and cultural references, producing a hybridised mode of expression that resists homogenisation. This hybridity destabilises the hierarchy between "standard" and "non-standard" language, thereby questioning who has the authority to define literary value. The resulting language is disruptive, unpredictable, and deeply rooted in lived experience, making it a powerful vehicle for articulating marginalised subjectivities.

"Witty arguments" and a "sharp poetic voice" that skilfully subvert the Brahmanical caste system and patriarchal structures are defining characteristics of this linguistic resistance [5], [10]. Her writing often oscillates between poetry and prose, blurring generic boundaries in a way that reflects the fluidity of resistance itself. Scholars observe that her style frequently deviates from the "civilised" limitations of the conventional British novel by imitating the rhythms of protest poetry, oral storytelling, and testimonial narratives. This blending of forms creates a dynamic textual space where personal and collective histories intersect, amplifying the urgency of her political message.

Moreover, Kandasamy's language is intentionally confrontational. It refuses to comfort the reader or provide a sense of aesthetic distance. Instead, it demands engagement, often provoking discomfort and unease. This strategy aligns with what may be described as an ethics of disruption, where the purpose of literature is not to soothe but to awaken. Her praxis entails "radical thinking" that aims to combat marginalisation using "narrative techniques of resistance"—such as fragmentary structures, abrupt tonal shifts, and the refusal to adhere to standard punctuation [6], [13]. These techniques mirror the fractured realities of oppression and resist the illusion of coherence often associated with dominant narratives.

the refusal of conventional punctuation, for instance, can be seen as a symbolic rejection of imposed order. It disrupts the reader's expectations and forces a reconsideration of how meaning is constructed. Similarly, her use of repetition, direct address, and rhetorical questioning creates an interactive reading experience, compelling the audience to confront their own complicity within systems of inequality. In this way, language becomes not just a medium of expression but an active participant in the process of resistance.

Kandasamy makes sure that her writing is never merely a passive object of aesthetic consumption by "weaponising" the word. This metaphor of weaponisation is crucial, as it underscores the intentionality behind her linguistic choices. Language, in her work, is sharpened to expose, challenge, and dismantle oppressive structures. It becomes a means of reclaiming narrative authority, allowing marginalised voices to speak on their own terms rather than being mediated through dominant perspectives.

Furthermore, her "uncompromising diction" eliminates the euphemisms typically used to obscure systemic violence. Instead of softening harsh realities, she foregrounds them with stark clarity, ensuring that the brutality of caste and gender oppression cannot be ignored. This refusal to sanitise violence is a political act, as it resists the tendency of mainstream discourse to dilute or depoliticise marginalised experiences.

By naming violence directly, Kandasamy reclaims the power to define her own reality and assert the legitimacy of Dalit feminist narratives.

In her hands, metaphor transforms into manifesto, and the sentence becomes a site of resistance. Her writing does not merely describe suffering; it actively contests the conditions that produce it. This transformation of language into action reflects a broader understanding of literature as praxis—a space where theory and activism intersect. Through her linguistic innovations, Kandasamy not only critiques existing power structures but also imagines alternative modes of expression and identity.

Additionally, her use of irony and satire plays a significant role in her linguistic strategy. By exposing contradictions within dominant ideologies, she destabilises their authority and reveals their inherent absurdity. This critical use of humour does not diminish the seriousness of her subject matter; rather, it enhances its impact by making it more accessible and resonant. It allows her to engage with complex issues in a manner that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally compelling.

Ultimately, Kandasamy's language operates as a form of epistemic resistance. It challenges dominant ways of knowing and creates space for alternative perspectives rooted in Dalit feminist experience. By transforming English into a tool of insurgency, she redefines the possibilities of literary expression and asserts the centrality of marginalised voices within contemporary discourse. Her work demonstrates that language is not merely a means of communication but a powerful instrument of social transformation.

Thus, in Kandasamy's literary universe, language is never neutral—it is always charged with political significance. It is a battlefield where meanings are contested, identities are negotiated, and power is both challenged and reconfigured. Through her radical linguistic practices, she not only reclaims the right to narrate her own experience but also reshapes the very structures through which literature is produced and understood.

2.2 RECLAIMING AGENCY

For Meena Kandasamy, writing is a means of regaining agency and repairing one's identity [10]. By claiming Dalit identity and offering a "voice for the voiceless," her work challenges the "partiality of empathy" in popular discourse [4], [24]. According to this theoretical framework, her aesthetic choices are the actual means by which insurgency is carried out, rather than being subordinate to her politics.

Her narratives actively resist the silencing imposed by dominant caste and gender structures by foregrounding lived experiences that are often erased or misrepresented. Through a first-person, confessional mode and an assertive narrative voice, Kandasamy reclaims subjectivity for Dalit women, transforming them from objects of representation into agents of articulation. This shift is crucial in dismantling the asymmetrical power relations embedded in literary and cultural production.

Furthermore, her work interrogates the limitations of empathy when it is detached from structural understanding, compelling readers to move beyond passive sympathy towards critical engagement. By centring anger, pain, and resistance as valid forms of expression, she redefines agency not as compliance with normative expectations but as a radical assertion of presence. In this way, her writing becomes a transformative space where identity is continuously reconstructed and reclaimed.

3. FORMAL SUBVERSIONS IN *THE GYPSY GODDESS*: FRAGMENTATION AND META-FICTION

Kandasamy's first attack on the conventional novel form is *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), which deviates from the "social realism" that is typically associated with Dalit literature. In order to address the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre, in which 44 Dalit agricultural workers were burnt alive by landlords, it is often

examined as an experimental piece that uses a radical postmodern framework [22]. Instead of offering a typical historical or journalistic account, Kandasamy challenges the fundamental frameworks through which we experience tragedy by combining narrative fragmentation with a "aesthetics of the archive" [17]. Through her form, she makes the case that the harsh reality of caste cleansing cannot be contained in a linear, "neat" narrative.

3.1 NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION AND NON-LINEARITY

The novel's "multi-narrative structure" and its deft use of "montage and polyphony" are highlighted in recent criticisms (2020–2025) that highlight the shortcomings of the linear novel [11], [21]. The novel declines to begin at the "beginning." Rather, it recounts the murder through telegrams, police reports, political speeches, and memories from ancestors. In addition to reflecting the chaotic, broken lives of the survivors, this non-linearity keeps the reader from experiencing the "catharsis" that sad fiction usually provides.

The stylistic decision is an enduring aesthetic rather than just an avant-garde fad. Kandasamy simulates the claustrophobic sensation of the prisoners imprisoned in the hut by depriving the reader of the "rest" of a period or a paragraph break. The physical act of reading is a taxing exercise in witness because it forces the reader into a direct, unmediated engagement with the trauma. The act of reading itself turns into a protest against the "easy" consumption of Dalit suffering, reflecting the unrelenting, structural nature of systematic violence that provides neither relief nor pause [24], [25].

3.2 META-FICTION AND READER ENGAGEMENT

Kandasamy uses strong meta-fictional strategies to further subvert the "passive consumer" model of reading. The narrator is an obtrusive, humorous presence that constantly violates the fourth wall rather than a far-off, all-knowing spectator. She uses a strong, caustic sarcasm to criticise the public's and state authorities' historical lack of empathy toward the reader, who is frequently considered to be the affluent, urban elite [24], [26]. The Great Indian Novel's "rules" are regularly ridiculed in the narrative. For instance, the narrator candidly discusses with the reader how to describe a communist leader without coming across as a hagiography or how to write a hamlet novel without resorting to pastoral clichés.

THIS DIRECT ENGAGEMENT AIMS TO:

Rehumanise Victims: It elevates individuals from being reduced to “mere statistics” in police records or scholarly footnotes into complex, fully realised human subjects with agency, memory, and voice [25].

- **Expose the “Sanitised” Language of Power:** By juxtaposing bureaucratic and legal jargon with vivid, visceral depictions of violence, it reveals how institutional language obscures, normalises, and depoliticises caste-based atrocities [26].
- **Incite Ethical Outrage:** The meta-fictional strategy disrupts passive reading, ensuring that the audience cannot remain detached “tourists” but are instead compelled to confront their own position within systems of privilege and indifference [25], [26].
- **Disrupt Narrative Comfort:** By unsettling conventional storytelling techniques, it challenges readers’ expectations of coherence and emotional distance, thereby forcing a more active and critical engagement with the text.
- **Interrogate Power Structures:** It exposes the complicity of state, media, and dominant cultural narratives in sustaining caste hierarchies, making visible the systemic nature of oppression rather than presenting it as isolated incidents.

- Transform Literature into Activism: By merging narrative with political urgency, the text becomes an instrument of resistance that not only represents marginalised subjectivities but also demands accountability and social transformation.

4. WRITING THE SELF IN *WHEN I HIT YOU*: AUTOFICTION AND VOICE RECLAMATION

Meena Kandasamy's "aesthetics of insurgency" in *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) marks a significant shift from the collective, historical trauma explored in her earlier work to the intimate, claustrophobic geography of the domestic sphere. This transition foregrounds the home not as a site of safety, but as a locus of control, surveillance, and violence. Through this shift, Kandasamy reorients Dalit feminist discourse toward the everyday realities of gendered oppression, demonstrating how large-scale structures of power are reproduced within private spaces.

The novel is structured through the sophisticated lens of autofiction, a genre that deliberately blurs the boundaries between the authorial "I" and the narrative "I." This ambiguity resists the voyeuristic expectations often imposed on "trauma literature," where readers seek authenticity through biographical transparency. Instead of offering a stable or confessional narrative, Kandasamy destabilises the relationship between fact and fiction, compelling readers to question their assumptions about truth, authorship, and representation.

Through this formal strategy, the text examines the intricate nexus between the personal and the political. The protagonist's experiences of domestic abuse are not presented as isolated incidents but as manifestations of broader systems of caste and patriarchal power. Autofiction thus becomes a tool of resistance, allowing Kandasamy to reclaim narrative authority while simultaneously critiquing the structures that seek to contain and define her voice.

In doing so, the novel transforms individual suffering into a collective political statement, asserting the importance of voice reclamation as a central aspect of Dalit feminist praxis.

4.1 AUTOFICTION AS RESISTANCE AND INTELLECTUAL SOVEREIGNTY

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy adopts an autofictional mode that blurs the boundaries between lived experience and literary construction, positioning the text as a "part autobiographical narrative" that exposes the structural fragility of toxic masculinity. This is particularly significant in its critique of abuse within ostensibly "progressive" or Marxist circles, where ideological commitments often mask deeply entrenched patriarchal practices. By dismantling such "manufactured truths" [28], Kandasamy reveals how systems of power persist even within spaces that claim to resist them.

For Kandasamy, writing becomes an act of "supreme rebelliousness," functioning simultaneously as resistance against psychological and physical domination and as a means of reclaiming selfhood. The narrator mobilises her intellect, literary knowledge, and personal history—the very resources her abuser seeks to regulate—as tools of intellectual sovereignty. Through intertextual references and reflective commentary, she asserts her agency as both a thinker and a creator, refusing to be reduced to a passive subject of violence.

The text's formal subversions are particularly evident in its use of unsent letters and interior monologues, which operate as cinematic "cut-scenes" interrupting the linear flow of the narrative. These fragments create a layered narrative structure that allows the protagonist to maintain a private, autonomous inner world beyond the reach of her abuser. Such moments of introspection not only preserve her subjectivity but also function as acts of silent resistance, enabling her to articulate thoughts and desires that cannot be openly expressed.

By merging personal narrative with meta-commentary on the act of writing itself, Kandasamy transforms individual trauma into a broader critique of the patriarchal “script” that demands female silence and compliance [23]. In doing so, she redefines authorship as a space of empowerment, where storytelling becomes both a method of survival and a declaration of intellectual independence.

4.2 CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES AND THE PANOPTIC HOME

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy employs a distinctive “cinematic gaze” to render scenes of domestic abuse as though they are being filmed, directed, or replayed through a detached visual frame. This technique transforms the narrative into a quasi-visual text, where moments of violence are not only recounted but staged with an almost clinical precision. By invoking cinematic language—cuts, frames, and observational distance—Kandasamy enables a mode of storytelling that resists emotional simplification while intensifying the reader’s awareness of the mechanics of abuse.

A crucial dimension of this technique is the deliberate split between the “Writer” (the reflective, narrating self) and the “Young Wife” (the experiencing, victimised self). This narrative bifurcation allows the protagonist to examine her own suffering with a degree of analytical distance, thereby disrupting the immediacy of trauma without diminishing its intensity. The “Writer” becomes both witness and interpreter, documenting the systemic nature of violence while reclaiming narrative authority. In contrast, the “Young Wife” embodies the vulnerability imposed by patriarchal control, highlighting the lived reality of subjugation. This dual perspective creates a layered narrative that is simultaneously intimate and critical. The domestic space in the novel is constructed as a “panoptic home,” echoing the logic of constant surveillance and control. The husband’s monitoring of the protagonist’s actions—her movements, her speech, and particularly her digital presence—mirrors a disciplinary regime in which the subject internalises surveillance. This environment transforms the home, traditionally imagined as a private and safe space, into a site of coercion and regulation. The panoptic structure ensures that the protagonist is perpetually visible and accountable, thereby reinforcing the power dynamics that sustain her oppression. Recent critical studies (2024) emphasise that the novel frames gendered violence not as an isolated or personal misfortune but as a manifestation of broader structural inequalities. The abuse depicted is embedded within intersecting systems of caste, patriarchy, and cultural expectations, which collectively shape the conditions of the protagonist’s suffering. By situating personal trauma within these larger frameworks, Kandasamy challenges narratives that individualise or trivialise domestic violence. Instead, she foregrounds its systemic nature, compelling readers to recognise the socio-political forces that enable such violence.

Within this context, “language reclamation” emerges as a central tool of resistance [1]. Kandasamy’s use of deliberately “uncompromising diction” [2], [17] refuses euphemism and confronts the reader with the stark realities of abuse. The language is direct, unembellished, and often unsettling, disrupting the aesthetic distance that might otherwise allow readers to disengage. This stylistic choice is not merely expressive but strategic, as it seeks to dismantle the cultural silences surrounding gendered and caste-based violence.

Through this interplay of cinematic technique, narrative fragmentation, and linguistic resistance, the novel enacts a powerful “reclamation of agency.” By exposing the nexus between caste hierarchy and sexual violence, Kandasamy transforms the act of narration into an act of defiance. The protagonist’s ability to observe, analyse, and ultimately articulate her experience becomes a means of resisting the structures that seek to silence her. In this way, the novel not only represents oppression but actively contests it, demonstrating how formal innovation can function as a critical tool in Dalit feminist praxis.

4.3 RECLAIMING THE BODY THROUGH "UNSENT" NARRATIVES

The protagonist's movement from "submission to subversion" in *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy operates as a powerful metaphor for the broader Dalit feminist project of reclaiming the body from histories of control, violation, and silencing. This transformation is not sudden but gradual, marked by moments of resistance that emerge within conditions of intense surveillance and coercion. The narrative foregrounds how the female body, particularly within patriarchal and caste-based structures, is often treated as an object of regulation—disciplined, monitored, and rendered "useful" according to oppressive norms.

Kandasamy underscores the inseparability of the "body" and the "text" by presenting writing itself as an embodied act. The protagonist's experiences of domestic abuse—such as her husband's obsessive monitoring of her social media activity and his deliberate erasure of her creative output—symbolise attempts to control not only her physical autonomy but also her intellectual and expressive agency. The destruction of her poetry becomes an extension of bodily violation, illustrating how silencing a woman's voice is intrinsically linked to the subjugation of her body.

Within this context, the motif of "unsent" narratives gains particular significance. The protagonist continues to write messages, thoughts, and fragments that remain unshared, creating a private archive of resistance. These unsent writings function as a counter-space where she asserts her subjectivity, even when outward expression is curtailed. They represent a form of silent defiance, preserving her voice against enforced erasure and allowing her to retain a sense of self within an environment designed to annihilate it.

By employing a "sharp poetic voice," Kandasamy transforms the Dalit female body from a site of exploitation into a locus of resilience and self-sustainability [34]. The language of the novel is direct, unfiltered, and often confrontational, refusing to aestheticise or soften the brutality of abuse. This linguistic strategy reclaims the body from its imposed meanings—purity, honour, utility—and redefines it as a site of agency and resistance. The protagonist's voice, shaped through pain yet sharpened by defiance, becomes a tool through which she renegotiates her identity.

Importantly, the novel culminates not only in the protagonist's physical escape from her abusive marriage but also in her symbolic and linguistic triumph. She ultimately writes the very narrative that the reader encounters, thereby reclaiming control over her story and its representation. In doing so, she repositions her abuser within the text, reducing him from a figure of dominance to a peripheral character subject to her narrative authority. This act of authorship signifies a profound reversal of power dynamics, where the once-silenced subject becomes the creator of meaning.

Thus, the process of reclaiming the body in Kandasamy's work extends beyond physical liberation to encompass narrative and linguistic empowerment. The "unsent" narratives, initially constrained within private spaces, evolve into a published text that asserts visibility and agency. Through this transformation, Kandasamy demonstrates that writing itself can function as a radical act of survival and resistance, enabling the reconstruction of selfhood in the face of systemic violence.

5. EXPERIMENTAL CRITIQUE: *EXQUISITE CADAVERS* AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

In terms of its experimental formal critique of representational regimes, *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) by Meena Kandasamy represents a developing and more specialised field of research, whereas *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You* have garnered substantial scholarly attention. This relative critical gap

reflects the text's resistance to conventional analytical frameworks, as it deliberately disrupts narrative coherence, genre expectations, and readerly comfort. Rather than offering a stable or easily interpretable narrative, the novel challenges the very foundations upon which representation is constructed and consumed.

Central to this work is its rejection of the reductive expectation that a Dalit woman writer must produce "trauma narratives" or simplified autobiographical accounts tailored for a Western or elite readership. Kandasamy actively contests this commodification of suffering, refusing to allow her writing to be confined within the boundaries of what might be termed "trauma consumption." Instead, she foregrounds complexity, contradiction, and formal experimentation, thereby asserting her autonomy as a writer and thinker.

Moreover, *Exquisite Cadavers* interrogates the ethics of representation itself, questioning who has the authority to narrate, interpret, and validate marginalised experiences. By fragmenting narrative structure and exposing the mechanics of storytelling, Kandasamy reveals the limitations inherent in traditional modes of literary representation. In doing so, she not only critiques dominant literary paradigms but also expands the possibilities of Dalit feminist writing as a space of innovation, resistance, and intellectual intervention.

5.1 THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PAGE: MARGINALIA AS NARRATIVE

In *Exquisite Cadavers*, Meena Kandasamy employs a striking dual-narrative structure that fundamentally reconfigures the spatial and conceptual architecture of the page. The central narrative recounts the fictional story of Maya and Karim, a young couple navigating intimacy, displacement, and precarity in London. However, this seemingly conventional fictional thread is continuously interrupted and, in a sense, displaced by extensive marginalia that occupy the periphery of the page. These margins contain the author's own reflections—notes that document political developments, personal anxieties, and the real-life circumstances shaping the writing process. As a result, the page itself becomes a contested site where fiction and reality coexist, collide, and destabilise one another.

This structural innovation is not merely aesthetic but deeply political. It functions as a deliberate response to what may be termed the "identity-politics trap," wherein marginalised writers are often reduced to biographical subjects, their works read primarily as transparent reflections of lived trauma rather than as complex artistic productions. By physically separating yet simultaneously juxtaposing fiction and authorial commentary, Kandasamy resists this reductive mode of reading. The fictional narrative is "protected" at the centre, while the so-called "facts" are relegated to the margins, thereby subverting conventional hierarchies that privilege realism and authenticity over imaginative creation.

At the same time, this arrangement complicates any attempt to draw a clear boundary between fiction and reality. The marginal notes do not merely supplement the narrative; they actively reshape the reader's understanding of it. They reveal the pressures—political, emotional, and intellectual—that inform the act of writing, thereby foregrounding the labour involved in literary production. The inclusion of contemporary socio-political events, such as the assassination of Gauri Lankesh, situates the text within a broader context of dissent and resistance, reminding the reader that literature does not emerge in isolation but is deeply embedded in lived histories and ongoing struggles.

Furthermore, the use of marginalia disrupts linear reading practices. The reader is compelled to navigate between the central narrative and the peripheral commentary, creating a fragmented and dynamic reading experience. This oscillation mirrors the instability of the realities being represented—particularly those shaped by caste oppression, gendered violence, and political unrest. In this sense, form becomes

inseparable from content: the fractured structure of the text reflects the fractured conditions of existence it seeks to portray.

Kandasamy's technique also challenges the authority of the "main text" itself. By granting equal, if not greater, significance to what is traditionally considered marginal, she redefines the boundaries of narrative space. The margins, often associated with exclusion and secondary status, are transformed into sites of critical intervention and authorial agency. This inversion resonates with the broader politics of Dalit feminist writing, which seeks to centre voices historically pushed to the periphery.

Ultimately, the architecture of *Exquisite Cadavers* compels readers to reconsider their expectations of narrative coherence, authorship, and authenticity. It demands an active, engaged mode of reading that acknowledges both the constructedness of fiction and the material realities that inform it. Through this innovative use of marginalia, Kandasamy not only expands the formal possibilities of the novel but also articulates a powerful critique of the frameworks through which marginalised literature is often interpreted and consumed.

5.2 GAPS IN CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP AND "EXPERIMENTAL PROTEST"

Within the 2020–2025 corpus of critical work on Meena Kandasamy, in-depth scholarly engagement with *Exquisite Cadavers*—particularly its radical formal fragmentation—remains an emerging and underdeveloped area of study [Recent Insights]. While her earlier works such as *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You* have attracted sustained critical attention, this later experimental text continues to challenge conventional modes of literary analysis, thereby creating a noticeable gap in contemporary scholarship. This relative critical silence is not accidental; rather, it reflects the difficulty of categorising a text that deliberately resists coherence, genre stability, and narrative closure.

Nevertheless, *Exquisite Cadavers* is increasingly being recognised as the culmination of Kandasamy's "experimental protest aesthetics," where form and politics converge in their most radical expression [18]. Unlike her earlier narratives, which, despite their innovations, still retain a degree of narrative accessibility, this work pushes fragmentation to an extreme, refusing linear progression and stable characterisation. The text operates as a self-conscious artefact, constantly drawing attention to its own construction and thereby foregrounding the politics embedded within the act of storytelling itself.

Kandasamy's engagement with the "theatricality and performativities" of writing becomes particularly significant in this context. By exposing the mechanics of narrative production, she disrupts the illusion of transparency traditionally associated with realist fiction. This performative dimension transforms the text into a space where authorial presence, reader expectation, and socio-political commentary intersect. The narrative does not simply represent reality; it enacts resistance through its very structure, compelling readers to confront the instability of meaning and the limitations of conventional literary frameworks [17], [18].

Moreover, the deliberate act of "pushing fiction aside" to foreground political and personal contexts signals a decisive break from the expectations placed upon Dalit literature within academic discourse. Scholars have often sought to categorise Dalit writing within fixed paradigms of testimony or realism, thereby imposing restrictive interpretive frameworks. Kandasamy resists these "academic constraints" by refusing to conform to such expectations, instead creating a text that is fluid, hybrid, and resistant to singular interpretation. In doing so, she not only challenges dominant literary norms but also critiques the institutional structures that seek to contain and define Dalit expression.

This experimental approach raises important questions about the relationship between form and accessibility. While fragmentation and self-reflexivity may render the text less immediately accessible to

some readers, they also open up new possibilities for representing the complexities of marginalised experiences. The disjointed structure mirrors the fractured realities of caste oppression and gendered violence, thereby aligning form with content in a manner that is both innovative and politically charged. At the same time, the relative lack of extensive scholarship on *Exquisite Cadavers* points to a broader issue within literary studies: the tendency to prioritise texts that are more easily assimilated into existing critical frameworks. Kandasamy's work challenges this tendency by demanding new modes of reading and interpretation that can account for its experimental nature. Future research must therefore move beyond traditional analytical models to engage more fully with the complexities of her later work.

In this regard, *Exquisite Cadavers* can be seen not merely as a literary text but as a critical intervention that redefines the boundaries of Dalit feminist writing. It exemplifies how experimental form can function as a powerful mode of protest, expanding the possibilities of both literary expression and political critique.

6. DISCUSSION: THE EVOLUTION OF 'DALIT FEMINIST ENGLISH'

The creation of what might be called "Dalit Feminist English"—a linguistic technique that reclaims the language of the coloniser to articulate Dalit experiences with a distinct "subaltern edge"—is a key contribution of Meena Kandasamy's work. This is not merely a variant of English; rather, it is a politicised and transformative mode of expression that is consciously "gender-coded" and "caste-marked" to function as a tool of resistance.

By reshaping English through the incorporation of vernacular rhythms, cultural references, and confrontational diction, Kandasamy destabilises its perceived neutrality and universality. This linguistic innovation challenges dominant literary norms while foregrounding marginalised identities that have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse.

Moreover, "Dalit Feminist English" serves as both a medium of articulation and an act of defiance, enabling the expression of anger, pain, and resistance without compromise. In doing so, it redefines language as an active site of political struggle, where identity is asserted, contested, and continually reconstructed.

6.1 TAMINGLISH AND VERNACULAR RESISTANCE

By using "Taminglish"—a Tamil-English hybrid—and the "irregular use of vernacular words" [17], [26], Meena Kandasamy reclaims English. This is not a failure to learn the so-called "Queen's English," but a deliberate refusal to allow the language to remain "sanitised" and detached from lived realities. Instead, it is a conscious political act that disrupts linguistic hierarchies and redefines what constitutes literary legitimacy. By incorporating Tamil rhythms, idiomatic expressions, insults, and culturally embedded references into her writing, she moves beyond "academic constraints" and repositions herself as an activist-writer whose language is inseparable from her politics.

This hybridisation of language enables her to produce what may be termed a "hybrid English novel," one that challenges conventional narrative forms and foregrounds marginalised subjectivities historically excluded or "civilised" by dominant literary traditions [26]. The infusion of Tamil within English destabilises the presumed neutrality and universality of the latter, exposing its complicity in structures of power.

Furthermore, the use of Tamil-inflected English actively "de-centers" the elite, English-speaking reader by disrupting their linguistic comfort zone. It compels them to confront unfamiliar expressions and cultural nuances, thereby highlighting the divide between the language of authority and the language of resistance.

In doing so, Kandasamy not only reclaims linguistic space but also asserts the legitimacy of subaltern expression within global literary discourse.

6.2 UNCOMPROMISING DICTION AS AN OFFENSIVE WEAPON

An "unfettered flow of words without regard for customary rules" is a defining feature of the linguistic methods employed by Meena Kandasamy [17]. This "raw stylistic register" and "uncompromising diction" function as deliberate "offensive weapons" to confront and dismantle structures of gender violence and caste oppression [2], [17]. Rather than adhering to conventional literary decorum, her language resists refinement and instead embraces intensity, disruption, and confrontation as essential modes of expression. She challenges the patriarchal construction and "utility" of the Dalit female body by employing "bold, unfiltered language" and at times "sexually provocative" content, which destabilises normative expectations of modesty and silence imposed on marginalised women. Through this strategy, she refuses the objectification and regulation of the female body, transforming it into a site of assertion and resistance. Words associated with the body are reclaimed from the stigma of caste-based "pollution" in Kandasamy's vocabulary, where they are re-signified as emblems of strength, autonomy, and self-sufficiency [1], [16]. Moreover, her use of a "sharp poetic voice" enables the Dalit woman to emerge as the narrator of her own dissent, desire, and lived experience. In doing so, Kandasamy not only disrupts oppressive linguistic norms but also reclaims narrative authority, ensuring that marginalised identities are articulated with agency and power.

7. CONCLUSION

Meena Kandasamy's literary career signifies a significant paradigm change in the field of modern Indian literature. Through what this paper has called a "aesthetics of insurgency," Kandasamy effectively unites grounded political praxis with avant-garde formal experimentation. According to her research, the classic novel, with its tidy conclusions and straight lines, is structurally incompatible with the Dalit woman's life, which is characterised by the complex interconnections of gender, caste, and state brutality.

By dismantling the "sanitised" assumptions of the English language and substituting it with a visceral "Dalit Feminist English," Kandasamy enacts a linguistic resistance rather than just describing injustice. From the protective marginalia of *Exquisite Cadavers* to the breathless, 879-word line in *The Gypsy Goddess* that reflects the bodily experience of a massacre, the formal subversions examined in this study act as safeguards against the commercialisation of Dalit suffering.

In the end, Kandasamy's "uncompromising diction" and her use of autofiction as a means of "identity repair" show that writing is the highest kind of agency. She reimagines the Dalit identity as an active agent of struggle rather than as a helpless victim of misfortune. Her work continues to be an essential "testimony of pain and protest," offering a model for a literature that is both politically uncompromising and intellectually demanding as scholarship develops (2020–2026). Her "aesthetics of insurgency" makes sure that the Dalit voice is felt as a transformational force that may demand drastic societal change, rather than just being heard.

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