



**"FIRE" AND THE POETICS OF DALIT RESISTANCE:
MARGINALIZATION, STATE INDIFFERENCE,
AND THE SUBALTERN VOICE
A CRITICAL STUDY IN DALIT LITERARY**

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the close literary and socio-political context of the poem "Fire" by Meena Kandasamy, as a significant text within the Dalit literary tradition. Based upon the theoretical frameworks of Dalit aesthetics (Limbale, 2004), postcolonial criticism (Spivak, 1988), and Subaltern Studies (Guha & Spivak, 1988), the article argues that the poem functions simultaneously as documentary testimony, a political indictment, and an act of collective mourning. The study focuses on the poem's formal strategies, its fragmented syntax, onomatopoeia, repetition, and spatial metaphors, as deliberate aesthetic choices that mirror the fractured reality of Dalit existence. The article further situates the poem within the broader tradition of Dalit protest literature in South Asia, connecting it to the legacies of Ambedkar's social philosophy (Ambedkar, 1936) and the emergent protest poetry that has sought to give voice to the historically silenced.

Keywords: *Caste, Dalit Literature, Fire Imagery, Marginalization, Meena Kandasamy, Postcolonialism, Protest Poetry, Social Justice, State Violence, Subaltern.*

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1. Introduction

Fire is among the oldest and most potent symbols in human civilization. It warms, illuminates, purifies, and destroys. In Dalit literary tradition, fire takes on a particularly unsettling valence: it is the instrument of oppression, the signature of caste violence, and simultaneously the burning urgency of a people demanding to be heard. The poem "Fire" by Meena Kandasamy is a compressed masterpiece of protest literature that deploys the image of a community's huts burning to expose structural caste violence, state complicity, and the deafening silence of those in power.

Dalit literature is literature by, for, and about the Dalit communities of South Asia, emerged as a distinct and self-conscious literary movement in the twentieth century, most prominently in Maharashtra with the Little Magazine movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As Limbale (2004) argues in his foundational critical work, Dalit literature is defined by its authenticity of lived experience, its refusal of Brahminic literary conventions, and its insistence on the humanity and dignity of the marginalized. The movement was shaped profoundly by the social philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who famously urged Dalits to "educate, agitate, and organize" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 23).

Meena Kandasamy, born in 1984 in Tamil Nadu, is one of the most significant voices in contemporary Dalit and feminist literature in English. Her poetry collections, such as *Touch* (2006), and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), have been celebrated for their radical fusion of caste consciousness, feminist politics, and experimental poetic form. As Kandasamy herself has stated in interviews, she chose poetry consciously because "it deals with language, and language is the site of subjugation and oppression" (Kandasamy, as cited in Rege, 2006, p. 45).

"Fire" belongs fully within this tradition. Its unnamed speaker observes a catastrophe that is simultaneously immediate and representative, a burning that has happened before and will happen again. The poem's genius lies in its refusal of sentimentality: it is precise, accusatory, and finally devastating in its conclusion. This article offers a systematic analysis of the poem across several dimensions: its research objectives and questions, a review of existing scholarship, its historical and social context, thematic concerns, formal strategies, and its place within the Dalit literary canon.

1.1. Research Objectives

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze "Fire" by Meena Kandasamy as a representative text of Dalit protest literature, examining how it encodes the lived experience of caste-based violence and dispossession.
2. To explore the formal and stylistic strategies employed in the poem, including imagery, sound devices, spatial metaphor, and structural fragmentation, and to demonstrate how these aesthetic choices reinforce the poem's political content.

3. To situate the poem within the broader socio-historical context of caste atrocities in South Asia, particularly the documented history of the burning of Dalit settlements.
4. To examine the poem's engagement with questions of state complicity, media spectacle, and elite indifference through the lens of Dalit theory and Subaltern Studies.
5. To identify the poem's contribution to, and continuity with, the established canon of Dalit literature, including its relationship to the Ambedkarite tradition and contemporary Dalit feminist writing.

1.2. Research Questions

The analysis is based on the following central research questions:

1. In what ways does "Fire" function as a work of Dalit protest literature, and what specific markers of Dalit aesthetics, as defined by Limbale (2004) and Dangle (1992), does it exhibit?
2. How does the poem's formal structure, its fragmentation, repetition, sound patterning, and spatial organization contribute to and reinforce its political critique of caste violence?
3. How does the poem represent the relationship between the Dalit community and state institutions (such as the fire service and the media), and what does this reveal about the structural nature of caste-based marginalization?
4. What is the significance of the poem's final accusation, "indifferent bastards", in the context of Ambedkarite political philosophy and the Dalit literary tradition of naming power?
5. How does "Fire" compare with and contribute to other landmark texts of Dalit literature, particularly the protest poetry of Namdeo Dhasal and the testimonial tradition of Dalit women's writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dalit Literature: Definitions and Debates

The term "Dalit literature" has been the subject of significant scholarly debate since its emergence as a recognized category. Limbale (2004), in his seminal work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, argues that Dalit literature must be understood not merely as literature written by Dalits, but as literature that articulates the specific consciousness of caste oppression from the perspective of those who have experienced it. He writes that Dalit literature "expresses the pain and sufferings of the Dalit people" and simultaneously functions as "a literature of protest and revolt" (Limbale, 2004, p. 19). This dual function, testimony and protest, is central to understanding a poem like "Fire."

Dangle (1992), in his landmark anthology *Poisoned Bread*, provides an extensive survey of Dalit Marathi writing and argues that Dalit literature broke decisively with the

Sanskrit-rooted aesthetics of mainstream Indian literature. Dalit writers, he argues, chose a raw, unmediated language precisely because the polished conventions of bourgeois literary culture were instruments of the same caste system that oppressed them (Dangle, 1992, p. xii). This observation is directly applicable to "Fire," whose blunt final line "indifferent bastards" represents exactly this rejection of euphemism and poetic decorum.

Zelliot (1992) provides essential historical context for the Dalit literary movement, tracing its roots in the Ambedkar movement and the transformation of formerly "untouchable" communities into politically self-conscious Dalit subjects. She notes that the Dalit Panther movement of the early 1970s, modeled partly on the American Black Panther Party, produced an explosion of literary creativity that expressed both rage and aspirational dignity (Zelliot, 1992, p. 214). Kandasamy's poetry inherits this tradition of combining anger with articulate political analysis.

2.2. Meena Kandasamy in Scholarly Literature

Despite her significance as a literary figure, Kandasamy has received relatively limited sustained academic attention compared to her male counterparts in Dalit letters. Rege (2006), in her foundational study *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, analyzes Dalit women's testimonios and argues that Dalit women occupy a doubly marginalized position oppressed by both caste and gender, which produces a distinctive literary consciousness. Rege's framework is essential for understanding Kandasamy's work, which consistently refuses to separate caste analysis from feminist politics (Rege, 2006, p. 78).

Mukherjee (2020) has examined Kandasamy's poetry specifically in the context of Dalit feminist literary production, arguing that her work represents a new phase in Dalit literature characterized by its engagement with global feminist theory, its use of English as a medium of both access and subversion, and its experimental formal strategies. Mukherjee notes that Kandasamy's choice to write in English rather than Tamil is itself a political act, simultaneously accessing a wider audience and refusing the nativist assumptions that would confine Dalit experience to regional vernacular traditions (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 112).

2.3. Subaltern Studies and the Question of Voice

The theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies, developed by scholars including Guha (1982) and Spivak (1988), provides an essential lens for reading "Fire." Spivak's celebrated and controversial question, "Can the subaltern speak?", asks whether those at the very bottom of social hierarchies are capable of making their voices heard within existing structures of power and representation (Spivak, 1988, p. 271). "Fire" engages directly with this question: the community does cry out, the cries do travel upward, but they arrive as nothing more than the sound of snail shells crushed under boots. The poem thus dramatizes and confirms Spivak's insight that subaltern speech, however loud, may fail to register within structures of power designed not to hear it.

Guha (1982) argues in his study of peasant insurgency that acts of subaltern resistance are routinely misrepresented, diminished, or ignored by elite historiography. The poem's sardonic portrayal of the media, cameras that record "glimpses of destruction / (for tomorrow's papers)", echoes Guha's critique of how mainstream institutions process and neutralize subaltern experience (Guha, 1982, p. 4).

2.4. Caste Atrocities: Historical and Sociological Literature

The sociological literature on caste atrocities provides the historical substrate against which "Fire" must be read. Teltumbde (2010) offers one of the most rigorous analyses of caste-based violence in contemporary India, examining the Khairlanji massacre of 2006 as a case study in the multiple layers of violence, including physical, legal, and representational violence inflicted on Dalit communities. Teltumbde argues that caste atrocities are not aberrations but structural features of a society organized around a caste hierarchy, and that state institutions are systematically implicated in perpetuating rather than preventing such violence (Teltumbde, 2010, p. 89).

Thorat and Newman (2010), in their study of economic discrimination and caste, demonstrate that the material deprivation of Dalit communities including their confinement to inadequate, segregated housing, is not simply the product of poverty but of active, systematic discrimination. The "huts in proper rows" of the poem are thus not merely a description of poverty; they are a description of enforced spatial segregation (Thorat & Newman, 2010, p. 156). Omvedt (1994) further contextualizes this by showing how Dalit movements have consistently demanded not only political rights but the right to dignified physical space, the right, in short, not to have one's home burned.

2.5. Fire Imagery in Dalit Literature

Fire as a literary image has a complex history in South Asian literature. In the classical and devotional traditions, fire (agni) is associated with purification, sacrifice, and divine presence. Dalit literature systematically inverts and subverts these associations. Dhasal's poetry in *Golpitha* (1972) is saturated with images of burning, blood, and destruction that refuse the spiritualizing moves of the mainstream tradition (Dangle, 1992, p. 38). Similarly, the fire in Kandasamy's poem is stripped of any purifying or transcendent meaning; it is purely destructive, purely human in its causes, and purely political in its implications.

This inversion of classical fire imagery is itself a marker of what Limbale (2004) calls the "counter-aesthetic" of Dalit literature, an aesthetic defined not by beauty or transcendence but by witness, anger, and the refusal to let suffering be aestheticized into something palatable (Limbale, 2004, p. 42). "Fire" stands as a powerful example of this counter-aesthetic in action.

2.6. Historical and Social Context: The Geography of Caste Violence

To fully appreciate "Fire," one must understand the social geography of caste in South Asia. Dalit communities have historically been forced to inhabit separate, segregated settlements typically at the literal margins of villages and towns, in conditions of severe material deprivation. As Thorat and Newman (2010) document, this spatial segregation is not merely the product of poverty; it is the deliberate spatial expression of caste discrimination enforced over centuries. The poem's reference to "regular huts in proper rows" captures precisely this spatial reality: these are not randomly placed dwellings but the product of a systematic social ordering that assigns Dalit communities to the periphery of civic life.

The burning of Dalit settlements is one of the most documented forms of caste-based atrocity. Teltumbde (2010) chronicles numerous such incidents from the burning of Kilvenmani in Tamil Nadu (1968), where forty-four Dalit agricultural labourers were burned alive, to the destruction of Dalit colonies in Tsundur (Andhra Pradesh, 1991), and beyond. These acts of arson function as instruments of terror messages sent by dominant-caste communities to reassert social hierarchy after a perceived transgression by a Dalit individual or community (Teltumbde, 2010, p. 62). The poem situates itself squarely within this history, though it does so without naming a specific incident, giving the event a representative and recurring quality.

3. Textual Analysis: Close Reading of the Poem

3.1. Opening Stanza: Spectacle, Smoke, and Media Complicity

The poem opens with a scene that is simultaneously visceral and political:

*Black satanic fumes
shroud the blank blue skies
in puffing jet black soot;
few flashy cameras record
glimpses of destruction
(for tomorrow's papers) ...*

The opening three lines establish the physical atmosphere through dense sonic patterning. The repetition of the "bl" sound in "black," "blank," and "blue," combined with the hard consonants of "puffing" and "jet black soot," creates an acoustic heaviness that mimics the suffocating quality of smoke. The adjective "satanic" is significant: it draws on a theological vocabulary of absolute evil, applying it not to any human agent but to the smoke itself, the visible, material evidence of destruction. This is a deliberate choice; Kandasamy refuses to locate evil in a conveniently distant moral realm and instead makes it physically, immediately present.

The transition from smoke to cameras is sharp and devastating. The word "flashy" does double duty: cameras flash when taking photographs, but "flashy" also means ostentatiously showy, a word associated with vanity and superficiality. The media is thus

characterized, in a single adjective, as both technically present and morally absent. The parenthetical "(for tomorrow's papers)" is tonally caustic, a quiet, sardonic aside that reveals the transactional logic of media coverage. As Guha (1982) argues in his analysis of elite representations of subaltern events, mainstream institutions tend to process such events through frameworks that neutralize their political charge, reducing them to a consumable product (p. 4). The cameras do exactly this: they convert catastrophe into content.

3.2. Second Stanza: The Huts, the Fire, and the Community's Response

The second stanza is the poem's narrative core, describing the burning and the community's response:

*Our huts are burning—
Regular huts in proper rows.
Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)
feed the flames as we rush out
shrieking-crying-moaning
open mouthed hysterical curses
and as if in an answer—
when the blazing work is done
Fire engines arrive...*

The shift to the first person plural "Our huts" is politically deliberate. The poem does not adopt an external perspective; it speaks from within the community, claiming membership and solidarity. The line "Regular huts in proper rows" has the quality of an official description almost bureaucratic in its neutrality, which makes it doubly ironic. These "regular" huts in "proper" rows are regular only in the sense of being the standardized product of enforced poverty and spatial discrimination. The orderliness described is the orderliness of systematic marginalization, as Thorat and Newman (2010) document in their analysis of caste-based residential segregation (p. 156).

The phrase "Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)" deserves particular attention. By personifying the thatched roofs as "conspirators," Kandasamy introduces a bitter irony: even the material of which Dalit homes are built, imposed by poverty, since those with resources build in brick and concrete becomes an agent of their destruction. Omvedt (1994) has documented how Dalit communities have long demanded the right to decent housing as part of their broader struggle for dignity; the thatched roof here stands as a symbol of what is denied to them (p. 178).

The compound "shrieking-crying-moaning" is an extraordinary sonic invention. The three words occupy a single grammatical slot, hyphenated into unity, yet they represent three distinct registers of distress, sharp, sustained, and low. Read aloud, the compound creates an ascending and descending arc of grief, enacting in sound what it

describes. This is one of the poem's most powerful formal achievements: the form performing the content.

The arrival of the fire engines is described with devastating understatement: they arrive "as if in answer", the simile does crucial work. They arrive not in answer but "as if", the arrival is a performance of response, not a genuine response. And the timing, "when the blazing work is done", completes the indictment.

3.3. The Pivot: 'Deliberately Late'

The poem's most politically charged moment is given its own isolated stanza:

Deliberately late.

This two-word line is the structural and moral centre of the poem. Set apart from every other stanza, given its own space and silence, "Deliberately late" transforms a description of institutional failure into an accusation of institutional malice. The word "deliberately" does all the work: it asserts intention where power would prefer to claim incompetence. As Teltumbde (2010) argues in his analysis of state responses to caste atrocities, the systematic pattern of police and emergency service delay in Dalit cases is too consistent to be explained by mere inefficiency — it reflects structural complicity (p. 89). Kandasamy compresses this scholarly argument into two words.

The isolation of this line also constitutes a formal statement: the poem pauses, takes a breath, and makes its accusation directly, without rhetorical embellishment. This austerity of form mirrors the directness of the accusation. Limbale (2004) has argued that one of the defining features of Dalit aesthetics is this commitment to direct statement — a refusal to aestheticize or euphemize what is ugly (p. 42). "Deliberately late" embodies this aesthetic principle.

3.4. The Echo and the Snail Shell: The Failure of Voice

The poem's middle section traces the journey of the community's cries upward into the social hierarchy:

*These feverish cries continue
in the same shrilly pitch
echo, echo, echo and
finally reach...*

*Up there.
Reverberate and sound as loud
as snail shells crackling under nailed boots
and perhaps as distinct and defenseless.*

The triple repetition of "echo, echo, echo" performs the very reverberation it describes — a sonic mime that forces the reader to hear what power refuses to hear. The word "feverish" suggests both urgency and a kind of delirium: these are not calm,

measured appeals but cries born of desperation and trauma. The phrase "same shrilly pitch" indicates that these cries are constant — they have not diminished, they have not been answered, they continue at full intensity.

The cries do, finally, "reach / Up there" — but the line break enacts the distance and the difficulty of that journey. "Up there" is both a spatial designation and a social one: the physical elevation of those in power, their literal and metaphorical distance from the burning settlement below. This vertical spatial metaphor maps directly onto the structure of caste hierarchy, in which the upper castes have historically claimed the upper spiritual and social realm while condemning the lower castes to the literal and figurative bottom. As Ambedkar (1936) argued, the caste system is fundamentally a system of graded inequality that assigns social value spatially and hierarchically (p. 47).

The simile that follows — "as loud / as snail shells crackling under nailed boots" — is one of the most arresting images in contemporary Dalit poetry. Its power lies in its precise observation of asymmetric experience: the person wearing the boot experiences the crack of the snail shell not as sound but as a barely perceptible sensation underfoot — almost nothing. The snail shell is real, the crack is real, but it does not register. Spivak's (1988) question — "Can the subaltern speak?" — finds its answer here: the subaltern can and does speak, cry, scream — but the structures of power are so configured that those at the top simply do not hear (p. 271).

The addition of "perhaps as distinct and defenseless" is quietly devastating. The word "perhaps" introduces the only moment of genuine uncertainty in the poem: perhaps the sound is even less than the crack of a snail shell—perhaps it is not heard at all, in any form. And "defenseless" applies simultaneously to the sound, the snail, and the community: stripped of protection, vulnerable to being crushed.

3.5. The Double Catastrophe and the Final Accusation

The poem's closing section names what has happened and delivers its final verdict:

*This double catastrophe projected in sights
and shrieks evokes...
No response.*

*Those above are (mostly):
indifferent bastards.*

The phrase "double catastrophe" is analytically precise and resonates with the sociological literature on caste atrocity. The first catastrophe is material: homes destroyed, shelter lost, material existence reduced to ash. The second is symbolic and political: the community's grief goes unheard, their suffering is recorded as spectacle, their cries reverberate to silence. Teltumbde (2010) identifies this compound nature of caste violence

— the physical act is inseparable from the symbolic message it sends: you do not matter (p. 72).

The two-word stanza "No response" is structured as the poem's logical conclusion—the answer to everything that preceded it. It arrives with the force of a door slamming shut. And yet it is not the final word; "No response" is followed immediately by the poem's own response: the direct accusation.

"Those above are (mostly): / indifferent bastards." This is one of the most discussed endings in contemporary Dalit poetry. The qualifier "(mostly)" is both honest and politically sophisticated: the poem acknowledges that not every individual in a position of power is malicious, but it insists that the system as a whole produces and sustains indifference as its operational mode. This is consistent with Ambedkar's (1936) structural analysis of caste: the problem is not individual prejudice but a system that makes certain forms of indifference normal, expected, and unpunished (p. 67).

The word "bastards" is deliberately chosen for its register. It is coarse, direct, and taboo in formal discourse — precisely the kind of language that polite society, including mainstream literary culture, would exclude. By deploying it in the final line, Kandasamy performs the rejection of that polite culture's norms. As Dangle (1992) argues, Dalit literature appropriately refuses the linguistic conventions of a literary culture that is itself an instrument of caste hierarchy (p. xii). The profanity is not a lapse; it is a statement.

3.6. Ambedkarite Philosophy and the Poem's Political Vision

Ambedkar (1936) insisted that the problem of caste was structural — embedded in the social, legal, and economic institutions of Indian society — and could not be resolved through individual goodwill or reform from within the existing order. "Fire" enacts this insight with remarkable clarity. The poem does not identify a single villain or call for individual punishment; it indicts a system. The media that reduces catastrophe to spectacle, the fire engines that arrive deliberately late, the powerful who remain unmoved — these are all institutional actors performing their structural roles within a system organized around caste hierarchy.

Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, and organize" finds its literary correlate in the poem's three movements: education (the precise documentation of what happened), agitation (the emotional and sonic intensity of the community's grief), and a form of organization through the collective "we" of the poem's speaking position. Zelliott (1992) traces how Ambedkar's philosophy transformed the Dalit movement from a posture of appeal to one of assertion (p. 198). "Fire" is precisely such an assertion: it does not beg; it accuses.

3.7. Situating "Fire" in the Dalit Literary Canon

"Fire" resonates with key texts across the Dalit literary tradition. Namdeo Dhasal's incandescent poetry in *Golpitha* (1972) — documented and translated by Dangle (1992)

— shares with Kandasamy's poem an uncompromising directness, a refusal to aestheticize suffering, and a corrosive anger directed at social structures rather than individuals. Dhasal's imagery of burning, blood, and visceral violation belongs to the same counter-aesthetic tradition that Kandasamy inherits and extends into the terrain of feminist Dalit writing.

The testimonial literature tradition — running through Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) — is also present in "Fire" in its insistence on witness. The poem does not theorize abstractly; it observes with precision. Like the best Dalit testimony, it trusts the power of documented fact to make its political argument. Rege (2006) has argued that Dalit women's testimonios perform a double act of witness — to caste and gender oppression simultaneously — and this is visible in Kandasamy's poem, which, while focused on caste, is also implicitly about who is forced to live in thatched huts and who is left to cry in the streets (p. 89).

4. Conclusion

"Fire" is a poem of extraordinary compression and power. In a few dozen lines, Meena Kandasamy captures the social geography of caste discrimination, the architecture of institutional complicity, the phenomenology of collective grief, and the absolute indifference of power to those it has rendered disposable. She does so without sentimentality, without special pleading, and without the false hope that the powerful will be moved — because the poem understands, as Spivak (1988) would have it, that the structures of power are not designed to hear the subaltern's voice, even when it is screaming (p. 271).

The poem's formal strategies — its fragmented stanzas, its sonic intensity, its strategic use of parenthesis and parenthetical irony, its devastating final profanity — are not decorative but functional. Each formal choice reinforces the political argument. The form is the content; the aesthetic is the politics. This is what Limbale (2004) means by a Dalit aesthetic: not a style applied from the outside, but a way of making that emerges necessarily from the experience of being made to live, and watch, and cry, and be ignored (p. 52).

In the tradition of Dalit literature—from Ambedkar's philosophical writings to Dhasal's poetry, from Kamble's autobiography to the songs of the Dalit Panthers — "Fire" stands as a landmark text: aesthetically sophisticated, politically incisive, and morally uncompromising. It refuses the amnesia that power requires to sustain itself. It is an act of witness that burns, as the best literature does, long after the reading is done.

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