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The Guerilla "God" and the Fire-Spitting "Goddess"*:* A Reading of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* as Protest Novels.

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This paper attempts a comparison between Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" and Meena Kandasamy's "The Gypsy Goddess" as two fiercely political novels that polemicize against caste oppression and political hypocrisy deploying a host of postmodern structural, narrative and subversive strategies. By relying mainly on a discourse analysis of the narratives, this paper tries to map the similarities and the differences between the two novels in their treatment and emplotment of the caste dialectics as it existed in two different but overlapping socio-cultural settings in South India. The contention is that the two novels, despite the differing cultural locations of their authors, display a wide range of similarities in themes and narrative strategies, and the differing reception that they were accorded has to do with certain firmly entrenched cultural predilections, consumption patterns and even marketing strategies.

Key words: Arundhati Roy; Kandasamy; Caste; Untouchable; Caste Atrocities.

Introduction: Decoding the *God* and the *Goddess*

For most readers and critics, the "God" in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is Velutha, and there is little denying the fact that the carpenter, born to an untouchable Parayan[1] family in

the novel, who dies following police torture at a young age, bears a striking resemblance with Christ who was born in a manger, fell himself foul of law and was haunted by the authorities. However, who the "Goddess" is in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), is a question that does not lend an easy answer. She might be an amalgamation of the seven gypsy women who were murdered along with their babies after they strayed from their camp and were later deified into a single deity in the novel, or Neelayadakshi, the only Tamil deity with blue eyes or any one of the numerous goddesses worshipped in Tamil Nadu. Meena Kandasamy, on her part, seems happy to leave this vague, just as she refuses to be unequivocal about the connection between her title and the novelistic plot. For her, this kind of connection is not a *sine quo non* of a novel (2014, p.39). But what is true of Roy's God figure and Kandasamy's Goddess is that they both are outcastes, like the authors themselves. The deities these young generation Indian novelists flaunt in their titles and foist upon their unsuspecting readers are not the revered Godhead of the mainstream pantheon, and in this sense, there is no disputing the appositeness of their titles to the thematics of their fiction, which are exploitation, expropriation, oppression and excommunication based on caste, gender and class.

These concerns owe themselves mainly to the social and historical trajectory that these authors occupy. It is again the overlaps and disjunctures of their personal trajectories that accounts for the similarities as well as differences in their treatment of these themes. Both Arundhati Roy and Meena Kandasamy are outcastes in the orthodox social geography of South India. Using two seminal terms they put to use best in their narratives, we can say that one is a "touchable" outcast(e) and the other an "untouchable" outcast(e). In fact, the whole problematics that these two novels present spring from the dialectics involving these semantic, and by extension, semiotic categories, involving the binary vis-à-vis "touchable", versus "untouchable", as this paper seeks to demonstrate.

The status of Roy and Kandasamy as outcast(e)s has to do with deeply entrenched notions concerning caste in Indian psyche. The lived everyday reality of India shows us that caste forms the

very cast of the Indian mind. Kandasamy being born a Dalit is hence, an "untouchable" and "outcaste" despite her prodigious talent and knowledge of English, considered to be a mark of elitism in postcolonial India. In the case of Arundhati Roy, her "outcasteness" does not owe to her birth as an untouchable. Both her parents were eminently "touchable" people belonging to the top rungs of the caste- hierarchy. But they belonged to two different faiths and had been guilty of breaking love laws that set down "who should be loved, and how much," as she puts it in *God of Small Things* (henceforth referred to as *God*). Like Rahel, the author's alter-ego in the novel, Arundhati was born to a Malayali Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Brahmin father, and thus acquired the privileged caste- suffix "Roy". It is this experience of being cast out as outcastes, that animates the humanist protest in the novels. To a great extent, it is also the differential trajectories of these experiences that account for the differences in their tone and tenor.

Exposing Casteism and Political hypocrisy

God has been variously described as a family saga, a romance, and a gothic novel. Indeed, the multi-layered novel fits all these descriptions and much more. Another equally apposite label for it will be a trauma novel. It chronicles the trauma of three generations of Ipe family as well as Velutha and his family. The trauma these characters experience is both personal and institutional. However, it is not only these prominent characters who experience trauma. The large ensemble of characters, who people the novel including Murali, a peripheral figure whose presence does not extend beyond a few paragraphs at the beginning, embody the essential traumatic fate of the third world individual. For Roy, to be born into a disprivileged section in a country like India, where different kinds of 'despairs compete' for primacy, is itself a recipe for trauma (1997, p.19). However, one of the most important themes of the novel is caste atrocity. It is the division of society based on this archaic and anachronistic custom that anchors the plot and propels the narrative.

Due to a concatenation of circumstances, Ammu and her children find themselves identifying more with the untouchable lower-caste men and women than with her own family members. Being a

woman, a widow, and a divorcee of a consensual marriage solemnized without the consent of her parents, she carries all the attributes that qualify her to the status of a pariah in the Anglophilic Syrian Christian family to which she belongs. The way she gravitates towards the young Velutha, a Parayan by birth owes a great deal to the pariah status that the society cast on her and her children. Probably, her liaison with Velutha sprung as much from a desire to exact revenge on her family, as from the longings of her youthful loins.

Ammu's defiant love and marriage to Baba and the adulterous liaison with Velutha are forms of individual rebellion against institutionalized social norms as epitomized by her authoritarian father and tyrannical brother. The discovery of this forbidden love coincides with Sophie Mol's death, the precipitous fall of the family fortunes and the unravelling of Estha's young mind. In a nutshell, the novelist shows how individuals are largely helpless against the organized and entrenched power of archaic social institutions and conventions. Velutha becomes the scapegoat of Ammu's "transgressions". The "touchable" policemen know that as an "untouchable", his life is a small price to be paid to save the "honour" of the "touchable" Ipe family.

Unlike *Goddess*, the novel does not present a neatly divided cast with clear drawn boundaries separating the 'villains' and the 'victims.' The villains in the plot are the institutional structures, belief systems and social norms that people the characters' lives with prescriptions and proscriptions. For Roy, neither religion, nor institutions nor societal norms are innocent; in varying ways and in differing measures they are all noxious and exert a toxic influence on the existence of the individual. At least in the novel, the author, as epitomized by her alter-ego Rahel, seems to advocate a version of anarchy that places no restraints on individual freedom, be it in the choice of mates or words. The architectural designs that Rahel draws as a student at the Engineering College in Delhi with its monstrous and "bizarre" designs epitomize this. In a sense, they are "anarchitectural" designs rather than architectural ones. The novels structure also betrays the author's and her alter-ego's penchant for lack of order bordering on chaos. But for some of the smart cues and

clues that the novelist inserts at infrequent intervals, the readers would find themselves lost in the labyrinthine structure of the plot.

Compared with *God*, *Goddess* contains a fiercer and more violent form of protest against caste atrocities. If the "God" in the title of Roy's novel epitomizes a Christ-like figure, in tune with the Christian image of the carpenter from Nazareth, who ends up as a victim of authoritarian powers, Kandasamy's "Goddess" resembles a Durga out to smite and smash everyone in her path. Not unsurprisingly, the arch-villain of the novel, Gopalakrishna Naidu, himself ends up being smote and quartered into pieces in this seething rage. In a sense, another common denominator, the Plymouth cars in the two novels, points to the tonal difference, in the way the novels articulate their protest. The Plymouth in *God*, owned by Pappachi and inherited by Chacko is sky blue in colour; the Plymouth in *Goddess* owned by Gopalakrishna Naidu is dark red. Roy uses Pappachi's Plymouth as an extended metaphor to showcase the vicissitudes of the aristocratic family's fall from fortune. The Plymouth in *Goddess* is a symbol of Gopalakrishna Naidu's power and pelf. Its red colour that contrasts sharply with Pappachi's sky blue, is in keeping with the varying tonal background of the story. Though the Plymouth has not been developed to an objective correlative in *Goddess*, its colour jives well with the atmospherics of the work.

There is more blood, fire and violence in *Goddess*. Caste and its inhuman mechanisms are the targets of both writers. But the rage that Roy expresses is lower in intensity. Roy being an uppercaste writer, despite her outcaste status enjoys the privilege of observing caste violence from a clinically detached perspective. Her alter ego, Rahel, has first-hand experience of its toxicity; it is after all, caste proscriptions that lead to her mother's mental breakdown. But Roy is not one who went through the experiences of being an untouchable or bore the stigma of being a Dalit. The brutality that Velutha, the Dalit character in *God* undergoes is gory, and Roy's description of it lurid; nevertheless, she infuses her prose with irony and humour suggesting a lesser emotional involvement compared with Kandasamy.

On the other hand, the Kilvenmani massacre, that *Goddess* describes, is gorier and ghastlier in scale than the individual tragedies

that *God* chronicles. Kandasamy also uses humour, but it is a darker humour that springs from centuries of hurt and trauma embedded in the Dalit DNA. This is evident even in the depiction of hunger, one of the main motifs of *Goddess*. This is a motif that dominates many Dalit writings, including such masterpieces like *Akkarmashi* and *Joothan*. The epigraph, drawn from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* gives a foretaste of the novel's preoccupation with this theme. *God*, on the other hand, written from the perspective of a well-fed semi-Syrian Christian girl largely shoves this motif to the background. Even the deprived characters in the novel seem better-fed compared with the villagers of Kilvanmeni. This demeaning hunger was the lot of Dalits in India for centuries. Limbale writes*:*

Bhakari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger, what would have happened to sin and virtue, heaven and hell, this creation of God? If there was no hunger how a country, its borders, citizens could, parliament, constitution came into being? The world is born from a stomach, so also the links between mother and father, sister and brother. (2003, p.50)

The fury and resentment in the novel are fed by this hunger. And the novelist makes no attempt to tame the fury and the hatred it engenders. From the epigraph to the acknowledgements given at the end, the novel mentions the hunger that generations of Dalits had to put up with:

Epigraph

Slaughter and terror did not stop them. How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children? You can't scare him—he has known a fear beyond every other—John Steinbeck, *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* (2)

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A long list oof than-yous to:

> Amma, for putting up with a moody rascal who happens to be her daughter…Appa, for listening to my never ending outrage, for talking to me about the hunger and poverty of childhood with a pain in his eyes that my words cannot capture… (Kandasamy , 2014, p.275)

What seethes in these lines is the rage and anger of generations that faced hunger, physical dismemberment, emotional bullying and symbolic and material deprivation. As trauma theorists argue, the impact of trauma lingers through generations in the form of epigenic changes it causes on the gene pool of individuals/entire social groups (Wolyn 2016). Kandasamy, being a Dalit writer, might be feeling the impact of this more than Roy with her privileged Brahminical and Syrian- Christian heritage. The following lines in *God* attest to this:

Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything the Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, seeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. (Roy, 1997, pp.73-4)

While the fury of the lines in *Goddess* reflects the sentiments of one who carries the sense of hurt and humiliation in her DNA, the milder tone of *God*, suggests the feeling of guilt and empathy felt by one whose family belonged to the right side of the caste divide. Hence, despite the use of biting irony and satire by both, Kandasamy's lines contain greater explosive potential. If Roy appears like a guerrilla fighter out to outwit and outfox the casteist forces, Kandasamy has the makings of a suicide bomber, out to annihilate caste and everything it represents and associates with. This has to do not only with the differing caste backgrounds of the two writers but also with the cultural and historical milieus. Roy, the mongrel child of a Kerala Syrian

Christian mother and a Bengali father, grew up in the communist dominated Kerala, while Kandasamy, born to Dalit parents, grew up in the more tradition-bound and orthodox Tamil Nadu. Though, caste is a salient presence in the psyche of both Kerala and Tamil Nadu, it operates less overtly in Kerala. Incidents of caste violence as those happened in Kilvenmani or more recently in Valliyoor, where two Dalit siblings were attacked with sickles by their schoolmates have seldom been reported in the state[2]. Since large portions of Malayalees live in semi-urban centres with no well-defined caste boundaries, intermingling between the castes in cultural and political life is an inevitable phenomenon in Kerala. The segregated villages in Tamil Nadu present a different landscape. The differing intensity in the anti-caste polemics by the two writers, to a great extent, owes to this differing socio-cultural topography.

Similar Strategies, Familiar Weapons

The subversive strategies that Roy and Kandasamy use to undermine hegemonic casteist notions are similar and can broadly be described as postmodern. Irony, parody, polyphonic inversion, parodic intertextuality etc. are some among these. Both narratives abound in polyphonic language games through their use of Manglish and Tamilish. Often this strategy appears playful and even discommoding, but it is used as an effective weapon to challenge authority and its adherence to a tyrannical hierarchy. Similarly, the tampering with chronology, which is completely fiddled with in *God* and meddled with in *Goddess,* has an antiauthoritarian and pro-anarchic spin. *God* begins at the end of the story, after Rahel's eventual return from America and concludes in the middle of the story with a description of Ammu and Velutha making love on the banks of Meenachal. In *Goddess*, we see the author distorting historical chronology by stealing herself into the plot to have a long conversation with the main villain Gopalakrishna Naidu at the latter's house. Given that Kandasamy was born in 1984 and Naidu was murdered in revenge killing by Dalits in 1980, this has to be considered a typical postmodern tampering of temporality. The self-reflexive style and verbal calisthenics that the novel indulges in similarly bear the postmodern stamp.

The central binary on which the novels pivot themselves is the touchable-untouchable divide. The etymology of these two "unEnglish" English words is curious. "Untouchable" is a positive word, which according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, means someone/ something unable to "be punished or criticized" or someone "unable to be defeated". The dictionary also indicates that it was in the Indian context that the word acquired the negative connotation, meaning people of the "lowest" social station. The word "Touchable," on the other hand, is given as a synonym of "tangible/palpable" by the same dictionary. By playfully using this word to mean upper-castes, the authors cock a snook at the endemically discriminatory institution, which people from others cultures find not only reprehensible but incomprehensible and even unrepresentable. For both Roy and Kandasamy, the precariousness of this semiotics itself should have consigned this institution into the scrapheap of history in a dynamic society. However, in India, untouchability has remained untouchable, meaning "impossible to be defeated." Even questioning its tacit legitimacy is fraught with risk, and artists who dare to do so will have to face the music. Once a people are thus branded they become "eminently" disposable/ "killable" to use Edward Said's terms (1981/ 2003, p.xxvii).

Kandasamy's criticism of the law-enforcement machinery is more stinging. Though Arundhati situates Velutha's custodial death in the frame of the larger picture of caste atrocities, the event, with its focus on an individual, who was a part, but stood apart thanks to his superior skills, is presented as a one off, rather than one of many instances. *Goddess* instead presents police atrocities against untouchables as an ongoing, recurring and persistent feature of daily life in Tamil Nadu. After describing how caste violence in the state follows a familiar pattern, the novelist lists the main villains, protagonists, nature, extent, "Victims" and "Venue" of caste atrocities (Kandasamy, 2014, p.72). In this catalogue, she lists the police as the prime culprits. For the people of Kilvenmani and other Dalit ghettoes (*cheris*), the police are nothing but a "private army on the payroll of the landlords' who practice untouchability and treat Dalits with uninhibited brutality (p.76).

Inspired by Marxist doctrines, the Dalits in Kilvenmani gather courage to take on the combined might of the police and the landlords. They shout slogans against the police: "Police dogs! Cause Trouble and You will pay Double" (Kandasamy, 2014, p.89). But the Marxist leaders, who goad them to fight, wash off their hands when things come to a head, as the leadership itself is composed of upper caste elements. The author cautions about the Leftist tendency to dub "feudal" and even "fascist…everybody who spoke of caste in place of class" (p.24). The Marxists with their highfalutin words and utopian dreams provoke the workers into militant activism, but shy away from confronting the real issue which is caste. By joining the coalition government under DMK, the Party again betrays the workers by assuring them that no "harm" would come to them. The fact was that the Party had "morphed itself" into enjoying "the charms of the parliamentary system" and was "playing by the rules" of a "new game" (p.125). The clear implication here is that the Party did little to bring justice to the victims of the massacre and treated the lower castes as a mere vote bank. Kandasamy's words here bear the distinct echo of Ambedkar's criticism of the Brahminic dominance of Indian communism (2003, p.406).

The image of the Marxist leaders with their duplicitous intentions here aligns well with the image of Comrade Pillai in *God*, who shows scant interest in protecting Velutha, a member of the party. What the untouchables in both *God* and *Goddess* fail to recognize is the invincibility/untouchability of caste in the Indian psyche and the hollowness of the revolutionary slogans that seek to reduce this issue into one of class conflict.

The Silent Suffering Woman and the "Unsilenceable" Woman

Both Roy and Kandasamy wrote their works when they were in their thirties. As women growing up in South India in the latter half of twentieth century, they could not but be aware of the restrictions and prescriptions placed upon women in their social milieus. Arundhati Roy once said in an interview with *News24*: "I grew up in Kerala and in every Malayalam film the woman was raped…I grew up believing that every woman gets raped".

If this was the artistic representation of women in films, in real life too their condition left much to be desired. Things were slightly different in Tamil Nadu. There are studies and newspaper reports that point to greater freedom enjoyed by and lesser discrimination faced by women in Tamil Nadu enjoy compared with Kerala (Duraisamy).[3]

This difference is reflected in the way the two novels discuss the gender theme. The women in *Goddess* display greater defiance and resilience, despite their subaltern status and lesser access to symbolic and cultural resources. This probably has to do with the class differences of the women in the two novels. Almost all the women in *God* are educated, English speaking women belonging to the upper caste and class. Upper caste norms and regulations place greater responsibilities and demand stricter decorum from women, while allowing men a greater degree of latitude. In *God*, Mammachi, herself a constant victim of domestic battery, indulges her son Chacko's waywardness and connives at his peccadillos but shows little tolerance when it comes to her daughter's transgressions. The upper caste women in *God* are more like birds in a burnished cage. They all end up as losers in life and love and die untimely deaths or live an unfulfilling life, nursing scars and bruises inflicted by boorish husbands and indifferent lovers.

The women in *Goddess* present a different picture. They personify defiance and rebelliousness, a kind of primitive abandon that men fear:

When women take to protest, there is no looking back. This time it is the tractors. This time it is a Polydol death. This time it is a disappearance. This time it is a strike for higher wages…The jails are full of fighting Madonna. They are not afraid. They are not afraid of arrests. They are not afraid of hurt. On any given day, they can outweep the wailing police sirens. The women are adept at all this: for the last three years, they have been stopping every job stealing tractor in its tracks, standing in front of it, screaming the choicest abuses. (Kandasamy, 2014, pp.74-5)

The novel continues:

How not to expect militancy from men who wake up before sunrise, wear nothing more than a loincloth?...How not to expect anger from women whose friendliest banter involves swearing to cut off each other's cunts? (pp.77-78)

As stated earlier, the greater agency of women in *Goddess* owes to their differing social background. Unlike Roy, Kandasamy hardly engages with the question of gender binary in the novel. Her singular focus is on caste and its brutal dehumanizing mechanisms. The self-reflexive meditations she indulges in on the art of novel writing and the tyranny of the poetic form in Tamil Nadu are deliberately pushed into the background to bring this main conflict into sharper relief. *God* on the other hand is a multi-layered work that integrates a variety of themes and traverses a varied geographic and demographic swathe in order to weld them together onto a cluttered narrative canvas. Gender, race, inter and intra-religious tensions, Anglophilia, professional rivalry, filial conflict, neocolonialism and globalization form the various themes that the novel engages with.

Being postmodern works, both novels make copious use of intertextuality and refer to local and Hollywood movies, world literature, popular songs, folk traditions, and myths. In *God*, Roy accomplishes the feat of building a bricolage using everything that comes in handy from Mahabharata to Shakespeare to *The Sound of Music* to *Chemmeen* and local scatological ditties, widely circulated in sixties and seventies. Kandasamy too makes use of a wide range of allusions to texts as varied as Vonnegut's *Jailbird* to Orwell's *1984*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Appansami's *Thenparai Muthal Venmani Varai* and MGR blockbusters. However, she scrupulously avoids allusions to the famous Hindu epics which many Dalit writers look upon as receptacles of Brahminic ideologies and legacies. In *God*, we see the tacit identification of the twins with Karna, the abandoned and disowned Pandava sibling; but characters in *Goddess*, stamped and stigmatized by Karma to life-long marginality and abjection, try to maintain a safe distance from such exclusivist traditions. Instead, they identify more with the blue-eyed deity, Neelayadakshi, whose eye colour suggests her bastard origin, in some land, uncontaminated by hegemonic casteist prescriptions.

In this identification and disidentification, i.e. the identification with Karna by Rahel and the disidentification with the heroes of Indian mythology by Kandasamy, we have another instance of Roy's and Kandasamy's differing stances. Though both writers see caste as a mechanism of dehumanization, Roy tries to subvert it using a tactical stance, that allows room for a dialogue or debate. Kandasamy on the other hand, as stated earlier, is more like a suicide bomber out to annihilate it and conceives no possibility of a tactical dialogue.

Conclusion: Differing Receptions

God and *Goddess* are powerful political novels that inveigh against the injustices of the caste system. They exhibit a range of similarities in themes, and probably greater parallelisms in lexicon and use of language. Both novelists are playful with English and flout norms of Standard English with anarchic abandon. Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch»ien's description of Roy's language in the *God* as a form of "linguistic anarchy" is equally applicable to Kandasamy's *Goddess* (2004, p.162).

However, the reception that *God* and *Goddess* received in the fiction world and the academia is a study in contrast. *God*, published in 1997, was an instant hit in the market, and its popularity peaked after being awarded the Booker Prize. It has now attained canonical status and is part of Indian English syllabus in most Indian universities. *Goddess* was published in 2014, and has not received half the critical attention, nor the market success as *God*.

A variety of reasons may account for this. One, as a cultural product meant for mass consumption, *God* made use of more market-friendly formulas, and came in more attractive packaging as is evinced in the cover-design. In keeping with its multifarious themes, the novel is multilayered and gothic in its very structure, with a language bordering on the baroque. But what one does not fail to notice in this baroqueness is the keen awareness the novelist displays about the fiction market and its peculiar preferences and predilections. In the novel, Roy talks about the new marketing strategies that Kerala Tourism and the local Kathakali dancers employ to lure in foreign tourists and how even the rats in the History house now sport "dollar signs in their eyes" (1997, p.234). To claim that Roy too seems to have had some dollar signs in

her head while writing her debut work will be harsh, but to say that she has a keen awareness of the preferences of the global fiction market will only be stating the obvious. If the Kathakali dancers in the novel have wised up themselves about the short attention spans of the foreign tourists and the need to truncate their elephantine stories to suit the needs of the changed times, Roy too realizes the need for a similar packaging of her novel. Even the varied settings of the novel have the formulaic material to lure both a national and international audience. The scenes that rapidly shift from the picturesque rural backwaters of Kerala to the salubrious tea estates of Assam, and from there to the gothic seriousness of Oxford and the noisy streets of Delhi and Calcutta, and briefly shuttle between London and Boston give one the dizzying experience of a roller coaster ride with plenty of jolts and suspense. Compared with this the geographical sweep of *Goddess* is narrower, confined to a few districts of eastern Tamil Nadu.

The polyphonic dimension of the novel is also of a lesser magnitude, with the characters primarily belonging to two lines of the divide that separate the "touchables" and the "untouchables". The cast of *God* is vaster, with characters drawn from various national, religious, and social divides. Another market-friendly formula that the novel exploits to its advantage is the use of romance. Italo Calvino in his metafictional *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981), hints at the importance of the presence of women in novels thus:

Your attention, as a reader is completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her, I have—no, the author has—been circling around the female presence, for several pages you have been expecting this female shadow to take shape the way female shadows take shape on the written page, and it is your expectation, reader that drives the author towards her; and I, too, though I have other things to think about, there I let myself go, I speak to her…You surely would want to know more about what she's like, but instead only a few elements surface on the written page, her face remains hidden by the smoke and the hair, you would need to understand beyond the bitter twist of her mouth what there is that isn't bitter and twisted. (p.20)

The women present in *Goddess,* unlike the woman in Calvino's novel (where the slow revelation and partial concealment are meant to titillate male fancies) are not presented as objects of male gaze. They represent a defiance against patriarchal authority and oppression and hardly get time to think of romancing or indulge in courtship rituals. On the other hand, thanks to half a dozen love stories, all of them transgressive in various measures, *God* eminently qualifies itself as a romance, in the traditional sense of the term. For long, love, with erotica writ all over it, has been the staple commodity of fiction in all its forms and in one way or other it has insinuated itself into all works of art. *God* revels in the use of the love theme to an extent that prompted Aijaz Ahmad to criticize Roy for the "aggrandisement of erotic relation in human life" (2007, p.114). *Goddess* being an intensely political work, deviates from this norm, in a way few postmodern works do. It features no romantic love of any variety, transgressive or otherwise. In all probabilities this must have been intentional, as such a preoccupation would have deflected its focus from the main theme.

Another reason for the differing reception the two novels got has to do with a deeper malady in the Indian psyche. Though caste forms the very cast of the Indian mind, there has been a singular refusal in mainstream discourse to talk about caste atrocities. National Crime Bureau registers are rife with statistic on crimes against Dalits including rape, arson, lynching and physical torture. But these atrocities seldom roil the mainstream consciousness as much as crimes against the touchable classes do. A movement like Black Lives Matter that sprung up in the USA following the George Floyd murder is yet to happen in India, following lynchings of Dalits or minorities. Arundhati Roy pointed out this in the aftermath of the uproar triggered by the rape and murder of Nirbhaaya. According to her, it was an "unexceptional reaction to an event that wasn't exceptional" (qtd. in Lall). Indian rage is selective and has over the centuries developed a keen sensitivity about whose crimes against whom matters and when. Like the love laws that Roy talks about, Indian moral code too has tacit rules regarding whose outraged modesty deserves an outcry, and whose deserve a conspiracy of silence and connivance. The Kilvenmani massacre is one such event that the country has shoved

to its recycle bin, a device more effective than the Freudian unconscious— from which all the suppressed desires show a tendency to strike back with Oedipal fury— as a receptacle of the unsavory and the unpalatable.

Goddess is a victim of this repressive mechanism that is equally efficient in suppressing bad memories as well as repressing its representations. Dalits in India, in this sense, are not only untouchable, but invisible to the mainstream. It is not merely their sufferings and the crimes against them that go unnoticed, but their artistic and intellectual merits. To this extent the relative invisibility of Kandasamy's *Goddess*, in comparison with Roy's *God*, has to do with the mainstream's fossilized caste sensibility. Probably, "fossilized" is a wrong word in this context because, the fossil in question is still alive; it has flesh and life, and is red in teeth and claws.

Endnotes:

[1]The etymology of the English word 'pariah' is traced to the Tamil word 'pariyan' which designates a lower caste in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

[2] https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tamil-nadu-complaining-school-caste-harassment-teen-siblings-attacked-sickles-inside-home-8888337/

[3] *https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/for-women-tamil-nadu-safer-than-educated-kerala/articleshow/52102872.cms*

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