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Digital LJ . . .

Digital Literary Journalism in Opposition: Meena Kandasamy and the Dalit Online Movement in India

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Abstract: In recent years, several marginalized groups in the Global South, including Dalits or “Untouchables” in India, have embraced web-based literary journalism as a mode of protest against the establishment. The Dalit protest movement, which advocates for the rights and protection of India’s 230 million outcastes, has gained momentum largely due to its combined use of digital media and literary journalism. The work of Dalit feminist author Meena Kandasamy illustrates how literary perspectives are integral to and coextensive with the advocacy journalism of digital news platforms and social media in online protest movements. In protest poetry, song, and memoir the personal bleeds into the political, as it does in activist journalism, fueling the social movement. Kandasamy’s literary journalism articulates Dalit literature’s anticaste political aesthetic, particularly through her strategic use of digital media. India’s activist digital media are currently propelled by the nation’s literary culture and its creative and imaginative modes of expression, bearing important implications for digital literary journalism studies.

Keywords: digital longform journalism – Dalit social movements – digital protest – activist journalism – Meena Kandasamy

In a longform narrative article published in the society section of *Outlook* magazine, feminist writer and journalist Meena Kandasamy attested, “my skin has seen enough hurt to tell its own story.”¹ Her nonfictional testimony formed the basis of her autobiographical novel, *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. In it, the power of digital media takes center stage when the author’s husband withdraws her online access. “What I find impossible to fathom,” she writes, “is how I now find myself in the position of having my online freedom curtailed. I never thought that it would be so important to me until it was.”² His chief means of control is through digital communication. Tension escalates when her deadline for a story on gender inequality for *Outlook* nears. After badgering her with “suggestions that I have slept with the entire editorial team at *Outlook*, . . . he takes my laptop out of my travel bag” prior to their departure to visit his family “and leaves it on the table. . . . ‘This is going to stay here,’ he says, . . . ‘Should I remind *Writer Madam* that she is also a wife?’” Undeterred, she resolves “to compose whole sentences and paragraphs at a stretch in my mind. It is an article that I entirely key in on my phone, a clunky Nokia E63.”³ However, “the new Mangalore SIM card that my husband has got for me does not have a data plan, and there is no way I can transmit my article. At some point, I want to call the editor at *Outlook* and read out what I have written for someone on his team to take down.”⁴ But she hesitates to do so for her fear of being discovered during the half hour she would need to complete the task. Now anxious,

My fear of him gives way to my fear of missing the deadline. In desperation, I come up with the riskiest of strategies. I remember my husband and the USB dongle that allows us to connect to the internet are never parted. What makes the dongle an internet-ready device is the data-powered SIM card inside it. When he has gone off to have his evening bath, I rummage through the pockets of his clothes and find the dongle. I quickly remove the SIM card, hide it in the side seams of my *kurta*, and leave everything looking as untouched as before. When my turn to use the bathroom comes, I hurry inside, my phone well hidden in a towel, replace the SIM card, and send the article across a very slow Opera browser, with no formatting, no italics. . . . I hurriedly put the SIM card back in the dongle so that there’s no trace of the crime.⁵

Upon her return, she checks her email from her *Outlook* editor: “Three words: *Got it. Brilliant.*”⁶

In this narrative account drawn from her own abuse at the hands of her husband in protest of the brutal treatment of women, Kandasamy recalls how the restriction of her access to digital media, and thus her capacity to meet her editor’s deadline for the magazine *Outlook*, wounded her more deeply than she expected. Her story is a metonym for digital media’s instrumental role



Writer and journalist Meena Kandasamy at the 2016 Kerala Literature Festival. Wikimedia Commons

in the current Dalit social movement, in which India’s lowest caste has refused to be silenced. The factual foundation of “this novel is shamelessly informed by my own experience . . . of marital violence,” Kandasamy affirmed, particularly in the context of pursuing her career as an author and literary journalist.⁷ It should be noted that similar novels based closely on their authors’ own journalism—as with Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, the topic of the inaugural conference of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies in 2006⁸—qualify as literary journalism.⁹

When asked about the scene, Kandasamy mentions that her “husband’s hatred of Facebook/email/cellphones/MacBook [is] not because they are capitalist icons, but rather because they enable her a freedom that he cannot sufficiently control.” She is careful to disavow media determinism, noting that communication technology can be both a tool for women’s liberation and for “possessive idiots [to] track their partner’s movements by installing spyware.”¹⁰ In her *Outlook* piece, her husband’s use of “twisted computer power-cords” to lash her suggests the vicious affordances of digital technology.¹¹ But the narrative structure of the earlier scene—captured in her dramatic scramble for a technological means to compose and submit her story on behalf of



Meena Kandasamy’s early work on UltraViolet (October 2008) is one of the activist online platforms where she developed the political aesthetic of her literary journalism.

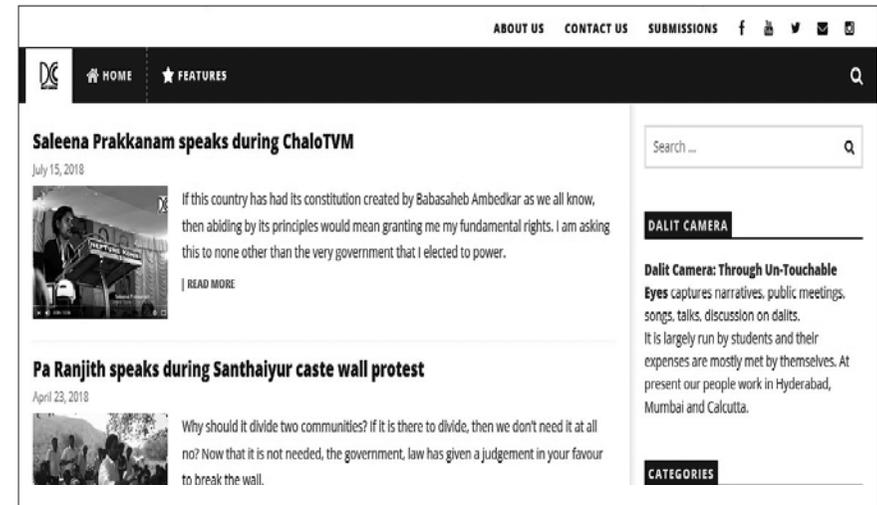
women's suffering—attests to the subversive power of digital technologies to circumvent censorious conditions for the production of literary journalism.

An outdated flip phone, a slow Opera browser, a smuggled and transplanted SIM card, all function as “weapons of storytelling” or key props in this “theatre of reality,” Roberto Herrscher’s concept that Isabel Soares describes as “the crossing of a threshold separating a source-only based journalism from a journalism of scenes and characters.”¹² The scene is part of the narrative’s larger message that resourceful and inventive use of available digital technologies, no matter how antiquated or disconnected, give voice to the untold stories of abuse in the struggle against patriarchal violence. Digital media for literary journalism, as the scene showcases, are the tools of liberation voiced through finely crafted narrative built on lived first-hand experience.

Digital Tools for Intimate Storytelling

Literary journalists typically project themselves into their own work. But most pointedly in the cases of Indigenous and Dalit literary journalism, it is done to cast attention on mass suffering. A recent study by Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga spotlighted in *Literary Journalism Studies* revealed that conventional news accounts written according to the inverted pyramid style, and attempting a level of objectivity associated with hard and breaking news, fail to engage audiences when reporting on mass suffering because they lack the personal voice of the subjective narrator and tools of storytelling associated with fiction.¹³ By contrast, the present study argues that literary journalism—and by extension, the poetry so integral to India’s online social protest movement that emerges from literary journalism—allow, as Lindsay Morton observes, for imagining, in Lorraine Code’s words, “one’s way into the situations of differently situated Others, including . . . the marginalized.”¹⁴ Dalits suffering a wide range of injustices that include murder and rape represent the sort of mass suffering to which Maier and his colleagues allude. The literary journalism of Kandasamy exhibits a way to imagine that suffering because the genre is effective in carrying out its primary purpose, in John Hartsock’s words, “to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object.”¹⁵ Contemporary social movements are rooted in the innovative use of new media and distrust of mainstream communication channels to unleash what Nick Couldry calls the capacity for voice and “the need to *narrate* our lives” on current issues.¹⁶

Oppositional voices resonate through Indian protest poetry, which is inextricably bound to its advocacy journalism. Kandasamy’s poetry bears a deep connection to journalism, a blending of the forms to which Thomas B. Connery pointed when he drew on Archibald MacLeish’s insightful exploration of poetry and journalism.¹⁷ MacLeish argues that



Dalit Camera's main page, pictured here, also produces a YouTube channel featuring Dalit narratives of struggle and resistance that blend journalism with artistic expression.

. . . an examination of actual poems and actual journalisms would lead any reader to the conclusion that the difference between them, wide though it is, cannot be stated in terms of “creation.” Both are re-creations, different in degree but not different in kind, for the material in each case is our human experience of the world and of ourselves; . . .¹⁸

Dalit poetry, music, visual art, and longform narrative journalistic accounts are now featured on websites such as *Dalit Camera*.¹⁹

The Dalit movement’s diverse use of genres and media to report on the Dalit culture and political condition is exhibited in Kandasamy’s multimedia project (with visuals by Samita Chatterjee) in the *Illustrated PEN*, a weekly digital publication “that aspires to be at the intersection of literature, journalism, and visual storytelling, where images and words come together in an ever-emerging and essential creative form.”²⁰ Kandasamy’s contribution is a nonfiction graphic narrative that combines comics journalism and illustrated reportage. Like the rest of her journalism, the piece is focused on social justice through personal narrative. Through this multimedia narrative, she recounts the forms of retaliation she endured after “her defense of the organizers of the 2012 Hyderabad Beef Festival” and voices “her condemnation of the subsequent violence.”²¹ The final frame of the piece depicts Kandasamy surrounded by faceless men converging on her, captioned with a tweet she received threatening gang rape.²² The images haunt the reader; the writing captures the violence of the multiple rhetorical tactics used to silence her.

as Jennifer Martin has noted.³⁰ As with aboriginal cultures in North America and Australia, the Dalits of India can be characterized as another marginalized population, “who,” as Duncan McCue has observed of the Canadian aboriginal peoples, “have certainly been *underrepresented* in journalism,” given the lack of stories about them and their communities. In addition, “they have also been *misrepresented*,” McCue argues, so that their suffering is made to seem natural.³¹ The Dalit digital movement has seized online channels to tell their own stories of oppression and, crucially, to share strategies for dissent.

Inspiring that online movement is Kandasamy’s journalism in *Outlook*. Its defiance of retrograde gender politics recalls the writing of literary journalist Fanny Fern for the *New-York Ledger* in the 1850s.³² The murder of citizens in India for consuming beef prompted Kandasamy to advocate for tolerance and depoliticization of dietary preference in her *Outlook* articles.³³ She has also used that publication to voice her dissent for India’s crimes (“mass graves in Kashmir . . . mass rapes in Bastar,” and “a caste society that massacres an entire Dalit village in one night”) and censorship of literature, transgressions that led to her migration to England.³⁴ This subversive bent in her career traces back to the development of her web presence through digital publications in the early 2000s, a time when she assembled her first WordPress site to make her poems and journalism more accessible, and thus more powerful as activist media, in one place online.

The Dalit Movement’s Literary Origins

“The Untouchables have no Press,” wrote Babasaheb Ambedkar, founder of the Dalit protest movement he spearheaded during the 1920s.³⁵ In an article on caste bias in obituaries,³⁶ Kandasamy corroborated his claim with evidence from contemporary media’s failure to cover the death of the man responsible for ensuring Ambedkar’s legacy lived on.³⁷



B.R. Ambedkar, social reformer and leader of the Dalit protest movement. Wikimedia Commons.

As an alternative to mainstream media’s censorship of reporting on Dalit deaths, the internet circumvented such barriers for the publication of Dalit news. Kandasamy elsewhere noted Chandra Bhan’s question, when he wrote in his journal the question of “why from a population of over 200 million Dalits (more than the combined population

of France, the U.K., and Germany) . . . the caste intelligentsia was not prepared to explain why . . . there was not a single Dalit columnist in the English language press,”³⁸ Kandasamy identified the root of the problem, which applies across media through Bollywood and radio, when she wrote, “Not only do the mainstream media refuse to give prominence to incidents of Dalit atrocities (treating them as space-filler events like the regular crime beat) but it also effectively denies space to grass-root Dalit movements.”³⁹ The internet now provides that space for personal stories of social consequence.

Dalit literature and journalism originally arose as mutually reinforcing tools of protest, as the founders of the Dalit Panthers, a radical Dalit group formed in 1972, were all writers for the periodical press.⁴⁰ Sparking the movement were two texts, “Dalit Panthers’ Manifesto” and the poem “The Dalits Are Here,” whose genres illustrate India’s long history of convergence and continuity between political and literary modes of expression at the crucible of activism and aesthetics.



Babasaheb Ambedkar, jurist, reformer, and founder of the Dalit protest movement.

The personal and political serve similar functions in this case, as literary production from the onset of Dalit literature also included autobiographies, which should “not [be regarded] as individual literary texts, but as life stories written in the context of a movement to bring about change.”⁴¹ Although several Dalit texts can be identified from earlier times, the real force and originality of Dalit writing traces back to the 1970s. Fueled by Ambedkar’s principles, the writers who established the Dalit Panthers affirmed and expanded his critique of Gandhian Indian nationalism to launch a new social movement that rapidly became a pan-Indian phenomenon.⁴²



Cover of the Dalit Panther Manifesto, 1972. The Dalit Panthers were a militant group founded in Bombay, India and modeled after the Black Panther Party in the U.S. The group consisted of journalists and writers associated with the Dalit literary renaissance.

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Notes

- ¹ Kandasamy, "I Singe the Body Electric," para. 1.
- ² Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*, 59.
- ³ Kandasamy, 76–77.
- ⁴ Kandasamy, 77.
- ⁵ Kandasamy, 77–78.
- ⁶ Kandasamy, 78.
- ⁷ Kandasamy, "Interview: Meena Kandasamy on Writing about Marital Violence," para. 7, 4.
- ⁸ IALJS, "Celebrating *The Jungle*."
- ⁹ Connery, "Fiction/Nonfiction and Sinclair's *The Jungle*: Drinking from the Same Well," 167.
- ¹⁰ Kandasamy, "Interview: Meena Kandasamy on Writing about Marital Violence," para. 15.

- ¹¹ Kandasamy, "I Singe the Body Electric," para. 5.
- ¹² Soares, "A Global Context," 131; Herrscher, *Periodismo narrative*, 48–49.
- ¹³ Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga, "Reader Reaction to News of Mass Suffering," 1011–29.
- ¹⁴ Morton, "The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism," 106; Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 207.
- ¹⁵ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 132.
- ¹⁶ Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 106.
- ¹⁷ Connery, *Journalism and Realism*, xix.
- ¹⁸ MacLeish, "Poetry and Journalism," 7.
- ¹⁹ Dalit Camera, para. 1, 5f.
- ²⁰ Kandasamy and Chatterjee, "How to Make a Bitch Give Up Beef," para. 1.
- ²¹ Kandasamy and Chatterjee, graphic 1. First published in "The *Obliterary Journal*, an anthology of comics and artwork centered around the theme of meat-eating, published by Blaft Publications in Chennai, India," Kandasamy and Chatterjee, para. 2.
- ²² Kandasamy and Chatterjee, graphic 13.
- ²³ Roiland, "Derivative Sport," 184.
- ²⁴ Roiland, 185.
- ²⁵ Kandasamy, "Meena Kandasamy on the Pursuit of Writing," para. 11, 10, 5.
- ²⁶ Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*, 77.
- ²⁷ Ziccardi, *Resistance, Liberation Technology*, 163.
- ²⁸ Abi-Habib, "'Men Treat Us Like We Aren't Human.'"
- ²⁹ Kandasamy, "Good Indian Girl's Guide to Online Misogyny."
- ³⁰ Martin, "Writing Aboriginality," 19.
- ³¹ McCue, "Seeking *Debwewin*," 23.
- ³² Dowling, *The Business of Literary Circles*, 70–71.
- ³³ See, for example, Kandasamy, "A Cowed-Down Nation."
- ³⁴ Kandasamy, "I Am an Anti-National . . . Count Me Out," para. 2, 1, 3.
- ³⁵ Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables," 440.
- ³⁶ Kandasamy, "Mourning and the Media's Bias," para. 5.
- ³⁷ Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 126–27.
- ³⁸ Bhan Prasad, *Dalit Diary, 1999–2003: Reflections on Apartheid in India*, April 4, 1999, 1, quoted in Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 126.
- ³⁹ Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 127.
- ⁴⁰ Satyanarayana and Tharu, "Dalit Writing: An Introduction," 20–21.
- ⁴¹ Satyanarayana and Tharu, 20.
- ⁴² Satyanarayana and Tharu, 20–21.

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