

Revolution in Space: A Lefebvrian Analysis of Spatial Production in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract

In literary studies, space is increasingly recognized as a crucial dimension in the construction and contestation of power, identity, and ideology. No longer a passive backdrop, space emerges as an active site of social production, memory, and resistance. This paper examines the spatial politics in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the spatial triad – perceived, conceived, and lived space. Kandasamy's fictional retelling of the 1968 massacre in Kilvenmani (a place in Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, India) functions as a cartographic critique of caste violence and rural oppression in Tamil Nadu, India, illustrating how space is both shaped by and instrumental in maintaining structural injustice. Drawing on Lefebvre's assertion that views social space as a socially produced construct, the study explores how physical environments – fields, huts, and state institutions – are saturated with ideological power, historical trauma, and subaltern resistance. The novel engages in a process of spatial reclamation, transforming Kilvenmani into what Edward Soja defines as 'Thirdspace' – a lived, imagined, and contested geography. This paper contends that the text is not merely a narrative of protest, but a radical spatial intervention that reimagines rural geographies as contested terrains of structural violence, political memory, and revolutionary potential.

Keywords

Spatial production, caste geography, Lefebvrian space, subaltern resistance, Thirdspace theory, postcolonial spatiality

Introduction

In literary studies, space has evolved from a passive backdrop to an active participant in constructing ideology, identity, and meaning. It is increasingly

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understood as socially produced and shaped by political, historical, and cultural tensions deeply entwined with power. Spatial dynamics, particularly in postcolonial and Dalit narratives,² reveal how marginalisation, exclusion, and resistance are mapped onto lived geographies. As Doreen Massey observes, space is “not static, but always in the process of being made” (*For Space* 9), offering a crucial lens for examining how literature reconfigures geographies of oppression. Literary texts from marginalised voices are read as reshaping space, creating what McLeod (138) terms “alternative cartographies” grounded in lived experiences. This demands a critical reading that interrogates how spatial arrangements encode power and how narrative form contests or reimagines such structures.

Across the humanities, spatial theory has become a vital interdisciplinary tool for understanding how environments are socially produced. Frameworks by thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja are invaluable for analysing the intersection of space and power. Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991) presents a triadic model: perceived space (material and physical), conceived space (ideological and planned), and lived space (experiential and symbolic). This framework offers a particularly useful lens for unpacking narratives of marginalisation and spatial injustice. Here, narrative acts as spatial intervention, disrupting dominant orders and articulating subaltern imaginaries.

Meena Kandasamy’s debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) exemplifies these spatial politics. The work fictionalises the Kilvenmani (Keezhvenmani) massacre of 25 December 1968, when forty-four Dalit agricultural labourers – including women, children, and the elderly – were locked inside a hut and burned alive by dominant-caste landlords in Tanjore (now Nagapattinam) district, Tamil Nadu. The massacre was a brutal response to the labourers’ demand for a wage increase from five *padis* to six *padis* (traditional grain measures) per *kalam* (large sack) of paddy. It was part of a Communist-led union campaign. Historical accounts often highlight both the scale of the atrocity and patterns of the justice system’s failure: many reports downplayed caste, courts acquitted the accused landlords, and state responses appeared to mute the political implications of the crime. In Dalit memory, however, Kilvenmani persists as both a site of violence and a symbol of resistance, fuelling political mobilisation, land reform struggles, and practices of memorialisation.

² Dalit narratives are literary works that articulate the experiences, struggles, and resistance of Dalit communities against caste-based oppression. The term *Dalit* refers to historically marginalized communities in India who were subjected to systemic discrimination. Historical records demonstrate not only the systematic exclusion enforced by the caste system but also the subsequent reclamation of the term by marginalized communities as an emblem of identity, dignity, and resistance.

Kandasamy's novel opens with a prologue that presents a letter from a landlord to the Chief Minister, echoing historical documents in which landlords decried "communist influence" among workers. Rejecting conventional linearity, the narrative unfolds through polyphonic voices, direct reader address, local legends, and intertextual references. Her "Taminglish" style blends Tamil and English, refusing to sanitise the brutality or conform to elite linguistic norms. The titular "Gypsy Goddess," drawn from a local legend, symbolically encompasses all massacre victims rather than any single character, transforming the text into a collective memorial. Through its fragmented, reflexive form, the novel invites readings that dismantle official histories, critique state complicity, and reclaim rural Kilvenmani as a contested political landscape where caste, class, and land intersect.

The narrative dismantles constructions of the 'Other' (Das 18), critiques exoticized portrayals of India, and disrupts linear historiography. Herrero highlights this disruption, noting her polyphonic narration and reflexive form as a challenge to "dominant, elitist historiographies" (72). In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kilvenmani is not a static rural backdrop but a contested landscape where caste, land, and labour intersect with violence. The setting is saturated with trauma, memory, and ideological struggle. Kandasamy's technique confronts readers with the brutality of the massacre, demanding empathy and recognition of systemic caste injustice. She acknowledges the fatigue of historical repetition, writing, "Most people are tired of history and also tired of history repeating itself, so I am constrained to try a new way to chart and plot my way past their boredom" (14). The novel's experimental structure excavates suppressed histories, framing them within ongoing political and spatial struggles for Dalit dignity. Through polyvocal narration and disruptive form, the novel reframes rural space as a dynamic terrain of caste, class, and resistance.

In this context, literature becomes a powerful medium of spatial intervention, capable not only of memorialising violence but also of reconfiguring landscapes marked by oppression. In Dalit narratives, space is inherently political: shaped by exclusion, landlessness, and segregation, yet filled with potential for reclamation. Kandasamy underscores this, writing: "You will learn that criminal landlords can break civil laws to enforce caste codes. You will learn that handfuls of rice can consume half a village" (25). This paper argues that *The Gypsy Goddess* is not merely a protest novel but a radical act of spatial reconfiguration. Using Lefebvre's spatial triad and related frameworks, it examines how the novel politicises and transforms space, showing how memory, defiance, and narrative innovation reclaim terrains inscribed with caste

oppression. Rather than portraying rural India as passive or pastoral, the novel reframes it as contested, agentive, and charged with resistance and remembrance.

Lefebvre's theory: A primer

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* is foundational to contemporary spatial theory. His central thesis is that space is not a passive container but a social product, shaped by and reflective of power, production, and ideology. Space, he argues, is both a medium and outcome of social practices: "*(Social) space is a (social) product*" (26). Departing from classical views of space as neutral or physical, Lefebvre theorizes it as dialectical – constantly produced and reproduced through human interaction, economic structures, and symbolic systems.

Lefebvre introduces a tripartite model, commonly known as the spatial triad, to analyse how space is produced and experienced through three interrelated dimensions: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. These are dynamically intertwined, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how space both shapes and sustains social relations.

Spatial practice corresponds to perceived space – the material, physical use of space in daily life. It refers to how people move through, build within, and interact with environments. This includes infrastructure like roads, housing, and routines that structure experience. Lefebvre notes, "spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. It defines places... and determines how they are to be used" (41). This dimension reflects how social relations are physically reproduced.

Representations of space, or conceived space, refers to abstract, conceptualized space shaped by planners, architects, and institutions. It includes maps, urban planning, and policy, dominated by those in power, who regulate spatial organization. As Lefebvre notes, "Representations of space are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose. . . to knowledge, to signs, to codes" (33), emphasizing how conceived space is embedded in structures of power. This space often marginalizes lived experiences of oppressed communities.

Representational space, or lived space, encompasses emotional, symbolic, and experiential aspects. People infuse environments with memory, meaning, and imagination. It is shaped by cultural practices, resistance, and subaltern perspectives. Lefebvre describes it as "directly lived through its associated images and symbols," tending "toward more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols" (39). Counter-narratives and alternative imaginaries often emerge here, especially from historically erased communities.

These dimensions are mutually constitutive. Whether in villages, slums, or institutions, spatial arrangements reflect the interaction of material conditions, ideology, and experience. For Lefebvre, the production of space is inherently political. It shows how capitalist and state systems organize space to reinforce hierarchy: “A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary... must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language, and on space” (54). This insight is key to analysing marginal spaces not merely as sites of exclusion but as terrains of resistance. Widely used in literary and cultural studies, Lefebvre’s theory allows scholars to explore how texts challenge dominant spatial orders. As according to Edward Soja, Lefebvre enables us to read space as “ontologically real and epistemologically active” (10).

Spatial theory and Dalit contexts

The relationship between space and social hierarchy is central to understanding caste-based oppression in India. Spatial theory offers critical tools for examining landscapes not as physical locations but as ideological constructs that reflect and reproduce power. In Dalit narratives, space is never neutral, it holds histories of segregation, exclusion, and resistance. The text *The Gypsy Goddess* engages with these dynamics in ways that illuminate how caste geography operates as an inscription on land, the body, and memory.

Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia – “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society... something like counter-sites” (24) – enables a deeper reading of key spaces in the novel. The police station, prison, and burned hut function as heterotopias: real locations that expose caste contradictions. These are not neutral or just spaces; they are sites of crisis where law and violence intersect.

Edward Soja’s notion of Thirdspace adds further depth. It blends physical, imagined, and lived dimensions into complex spatial realities (56). Kandasamy’s Kilvenmani emerges as a space that embodies both deprivation and violence, yet also memory and political possibility. Through its fragmented narrative and refusal of closure, the novel constructs a geography of resistance that challenges conventional portrayals of rural space.

This spatial intervention is especially significant in Dalit literature, where landlessness, exclusion, and bodily vulnerability are recurring themes. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai write, “The Dalit body is the site through which humiliation is marked spatially” (88). This marking is tangible and visible in the placement of homes, restrictions on movement, and institutional exclusion. Kandasamy’s narrative is positioned to confront these realities and reimagine rural space as both a site of violence and a terrain of insurgent memory.

Lefebvre's idea of counter-space emerging through conflict with dominant spatial orders (*The Production of Space* 381) resonates in the novel's depiction of collective struggle. The peasants' organizing, their secret meetings in forbidden fields, and defiance of spatial norms are acts of re-territorialization, specifically moments where space is reclaimed physically and symbolically. In this sense, the novel itself offers a vision of counter-space, resisting dominant caste geographies and imagining a landscape charged with disobedience, struggle, and political visibility. Rather than merely recording violence, the text re-scripts caste geography, foregrounding spatial oppression while asserting the power of imagination and memory. The novel transforms literature into a site of confrontation, where ideologies are challenged, suppressed histories surface, and resistance is inscribed onto the map of rural India.

Kilvenmani as caste-space: The spatial practice of oppression

Kilvenmani is portrayed not as an idyllic rural space but as a fractured landscape shaped by the entrenched logic of caste. Here, caste and class intersect through material conditions, cultural customs, and symbolic rules that sustain systemic inequality. In this case, space serves as an active force that upholds domination rather than a passive background. The village's geography tangibly reflects caste oppression: Dalit dwellings are pushed to the outskirts, mobility is restricted, and access to land is systematically denied. As Massey observes in *Space, Place and Gender*:

Different classes in society are defined in relation to each other and, in economic terms, to the overall division of labour. It is the overall structure of those sets of relationships which defines the structure of the economic aspect of society. One important element which any concept of uneven development must relate to, therefore, is the spatial structuring of those relationships – the relations of production – which are unequal relationships and which imply positions of dominance and subordination. (87)

In Kilvenmani, spatial inequality reproduces social inequality, embedding caste dominance within the material practices of rural life. Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice deepens this understanding by highlighting how everyday use of space, from paths taken to land allocation, reflects and sustains social hierarchies (Lefebvre 33). In the novel, these practices are clearly marked by caste stratification and landlord rule. The landlords, from dominant castes, control property, housing, employment, and the mobility of Dalit labourers. These "segregated spaces" (Phadke 102) are evident in the restrictions governing where Dalits walk, live, or work. As Kandasamy recounts:

I was also informed by this kind lady that the Pallars and Paraiyars and other lowered castes are not allowed to walk past the street where he lives. She suggested, unlike Google Maps, that in the interests of my own safety, I take a one-foot-wide, worn-out path that snakes around his backyard. (94)

This careless brutality is a reflection of the way how caste literally shapes visibility and mobility.

Such restrictions make visible the spatial encoding of caste power in Kilvenmani. Dalit residents are excluded not only socially but also through the physical organisation of the village: their homes are pushed to the peripheries, far from resources and the dwellings of dominant castes. Access to temples, water sources, and public paths is curtailed. The fields, though appearing to be shared sites of labour, remain under landlord ownership and are worked by landless Dalits whose mobility and autonomy are closely controlled.

Lefebvre notes that space “is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic” (31), a point vividly reflected in Kilvenmani, where the organisation of space is deliberately used to uphold caste hierarchy. The landlords’ homes, centrally located and elevated, assert visual and economic dominance. By contrast, the Dalit hamlet is geographically isolated and low-lying – its vulnerability laid bare during the 1968 massacre, when burning the huts became both violence and spatial assertion. Everyday practices reflect spatial humiliation. As Maayi recalls, Dalits could not carry out funeral processions through caste-Hindu streets or use regular tumblers for tea, relying instead on “a *serattai*, the coconut-shell... because they were not served in tumblers” (Kandasamy 168). Water, too, was restricted, as “other women from the *cheri* could not take water from the wells or the lakes, [and] had to wait for a caste-Hindu woman to take pity and pour water into her pot” (168). Transport and entertainment spaces imposed similar segregation as coal-powered buses separated Dalits, and cinema tents made them sit apart (168).

Kandasamy does not treat this violence as a singular event but as part of the ongoing rural life. Spatial oppression is continuous, enforced by custom, silence, and state power. In Lefebvre’s terms, spatial practice ensures “continuity and some degree of cohesion” (33); in Kilvenmani, cohesion is built on fear, forced labour, and exclusion. Landlord dominance is preserved not only through wealth but also through spatial codes that silently uphold caste order. Even resistance must navigate these codes. Union meetings are held in secrecy, in fields after dark, beyond surveillance. Movement is monitored. The village thus becomes a site of covert struggle, where space is not merely inhabited but actively

reclaimed. Economic disparity further intensifies spatial injustice. As the narrator notes,

60 per cent of the land lies with 5 per cent of the people at the top... and below this are the wretched of the earth: the landless agricultural labourers of Tanjore, who own nothing, not even the land on which their tiny, mud-walled hut stands. (61)

She further questions: “Could a people be silenced by not allowing them to even store the seeds of their labour, by denying them the yields of their harvest?” (55). In this way, Kilvenmani’s spatial design embeds caste dominance into both the material layout and the symbolic order of rural life.

Institutional spaces in the novel reveal another dimension of spatial control. The police station functions as a Foucauldian heterotopia, exposing power structures via an alternate regime of control (Foucault 24). Judicial complicity is starkly portrayed: “The court sees the picture as the landlords have painted it” (Kandasamy 154), while Dalit testimonies are dismissed as “faulty, unreliable, contradictory, smacking of falsehood, lacking in credibility and an afterthought” (163). Kandasamy writes, “The High Court judges were defending the landlords better than their defence lawyers... they used their understanding of caste and feudal practices to bail out all the accused” (163). These moments reveal how legal institutions reinforce caste spatiality, transforming the law into a mechanism of systemic injustice.

The police, likewise, are depicted as enforcers of caste codes. The police, rather than acting neutrally, serve landlord interests:

But they know that the policemen also practise untouchability: they have seen how the police have filed false cases against them, how the police are nothing but a private army on the payroll of the landlords, how the police are waiting for their own revenge. The police, as puppets of the ruling classes, will not make the law work for the poor. (Kandasamy 54)

The state’s inaction before the massacre, and failure afterward, underscores institutional complicity in maintaining caste-based spatial oppression. Through Lefebvre’s spatial practice and Foucault’s heterotopia, Kilvenmani emerges as a space that embodies both oppression and resistance.

The massacre site itself becomes a charged counter-space. The hut, once a place of shelter, is transformed into a spatial symbol of annihilation and memory. After the fire, the space it occupied is not merely empty – it is haunted. It becomes what Foucault calls a heterotopia of deviation, a site layered with grief, suffering, and unacknowledged rage. In reclaiming this space through her narrative, Kandasamy transforms it into a memorial that resists erasure, indicating

that literature itself serves as an intervention in the spatial order by inscribing marginalised histories onto the cultural map.

Kilvenmani emerges as more than a physical location; it is a layered geography shaped by trauma, memory, and resistance. Drawing on historical fact and infusing the narrative with urgency, Kandasamy reconstructs the village as a site where caste violence is directly confronted and where counter-spatial imaginaries take shape. The narrative collapses temporal and spatial boundaries, showing how the past haunts the present and how space retains the imprint of historical injustice. As the narrator reflects, “The future had been tied to the past. ... We always ended up hearing this history wherever we started” (142). Here, Kandasamy underscores the persistence of history in everyday life.

Kandasamy’s intervention is not merely narrative but spatial. She challenges the removal of Dalit geographies from both history and literature, rejecting the tranquil village of nationalist myth in favour of a landscape marked by caste inscription, violence, and defiance. Here, memory resists burial, the margins assert presence, and resistance, though suppressed, persists through remnants and ruins. Through material arrangements, symbolic codes, and institutional complicity, the village is structured to exclude and dominate. But through political awakening and literary remembrance, this space is destabilised. The novel does not resolve these tensions but invites readers to recognise how landscapes bear the imprint of injustice and to imagine how they might be reclaimed in both political and imaginative terms.

The peasant struggle as spatial reimagination

Kandasamy frames the peasant struggle as more than a fight for economic justice; it becomes a radical reimagining of rural space. Rejecting the conventional image of the village as a place of timeless harmony, she depicts Kilvenmani as a contested landscape where caste hierarchies are violently inscribed and actively resisted. The peasants’ uprising is not only a political confrontation but also an attempt to dismantle oppressive spatial arrangements, reclaiming both land and the right to occupy and shape it.

This vision aligns with Lefebvre’s theory of spatial production, which holds that space is socially produced and saturated with power. In Kilvenmani, this appears in caste-coded spatial arrangements, where dominant-caste landlords occupy central, elevated areas, asserting their dominance materially and symbolically, while Dalits are pushed to peripheral spaces, far from vital resources and constrained by enforced routines. Dalits live in fragile huts on the village outskirts, far from essential resources and visibly subordinate to landlord estates.

The landlords' expansive, centrally located properties reinforce their control over land and labour, sustaining spatial divisions and caste-based subjugation.

The arrival of Communist organizers initiates a crucial shift in the production and understanding of space. Their actions reframe organizing not only as political resistance but as spatial reclamation. As Kandasamy notes, "The Communists imagine themselves to be warriors and revolutionaries, and they have trained the people not to be afraid of anything" (89). Meetings, once clandestine and restricted, are openly held in the landlords' fields, slogans appear on village walls, and Dalits increasingly defy established caste boundaries. These acts produce what Lefebvre identifies as counter-space, "a space of confrontation, of negotiation" (381) that challenge and disrupt existing caste geographies, repurposing fields and margins as sites of political agency.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on carceral geography echoes this point in broader terms. She notes that "capitalism requires inequality, and that inequality is organized spatially" (16). In Kilvenmani, the inequality of caste and land ownership is inscribed directly onto the geography of the village. Communist-led resistance is thus not simply about wage increases or legal rights; it reclaims fields as meeting grounds and transforms the margins into places of assertion.

However, this resistance triggers violent responses, further emphasizing spatial oppression. The state apparatus, particularly the police, actively reinforces caste domination. The police "used wooden lathis instead of whips, and when it really got out of hand, they fired on the crowd. A striking [protesting] peasant died, a sub-inspector the culprit. History was already repeating itself" (145). Far from neutral, law enforcement acts explicitly in the interests of dominant-caste landlords, systematically undermining peasant resistance. Kandasamy explicitly illustrates this collusion:

[T]hey construct our case according to instructions from the landlords and their politicians. Our testimonies are watered down, so that it appears as if we contradict ourselves and each other. Framing a flimsy case, the police prepare the ground for the landlords to have sufficient escape routes. (146)

The police's complicity reaches its apex in their overt facilitation of landlord violence, as Kandasamy observes: "The police, who had provided their lorries to these killers that night, did not produce any evidence that contested the claims of these landlords. They were mute puppets in khaki uniform" (148, 154). These actions starkly reveal the state's role in maintaining caste dominance through spatially mediated violence.

Kandasamy's literary form complements this spatial critique. Her fragmented, non-linear narrative disrupts conventional storytelling, paralleling

the disruption of spatial norms within the village. Through irony, direct language, and grounded realism, she emphasizes that violence and resistance are inherently local and spatially specific, echoing Massey's idea of space as relational, constructed through social interactions rather than internalized history (5). Importantly, Kandasamy does not idealize the Communist intervention. While they catalyse resistance, the novel acknowledges tensions between ideological promises and the lived realities of caste oppression. This nuanced portrayal ensures that counter-space does not simply replicate another form of spatial dominance but remains rooted in material specificity and lived experience.

Despite systemic violence, peasants achieve a significant reimagining of their spatial conditions, even if temporarily. Through collective action, they begin reshaping their environment, challenging spatial constraints, and transforming silent and controlled landscapes into volatile, politically charged terrains. This transformation aligns with Lefebvre's assertion that genuine revolution necessitates spatial change, not merely institutional or economic reforms. The peasant struggle actively redefines rural geography, disrupting caste-based spatial orders and introducing new possibilities founded on solidarity, defiance, and collective empowerment.

Language, narrative, and representational space

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, language functions as a mode of spatial resistance rather than simply a vehicle for storytelling. Kandasamy disrupts traditional narrative forms like linear storytelling, realism, and passive observation to challenge the caste-coded spatial hierarchies of Kilvenmani. Her approach closely aligns with Henri Lefebvre's notion of representational space, the lived and symbolic layer of spatial experience where marginalized groups infuse places with meaning through memory, emotion, and imagination. Representational space, according to Lefebvre, is "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (39).

Within Lefebvre's spatial triad, representational space is the most fluid and contested domain. Unlike conceived space (ideological maps, plans, or property ownership) or spatial practice (daily routines and built environments), representational space emerges from how people emotionally and culturally inhabit their environments. It is here that counter-hegemonic visions of space are forged not just through physical resistance, but through symbolic and narrative reoccupation. Kandasamy's literary choices make the novel a textual map of lived experience, anger, and defiance.

One of her most striking strategies is direct address. She breaks the fourth wall to implicate the reader, questioning narrative expectations and

implicating audience complicity. This is evident when she asks, “Why can’t you follow a standard narrative format? I am giving you some options so that we formulate an atrocity plot-generator for the East Tanjore district” (51). Such interventions resist passive consumption and satirise the demand for neatly packaged tragedy. Elsewhere, she reminds the reader of their own role in the production of meaning and memory: “If you are finding this difficult to follow, remember that not only am I weighed down by the task of telling a story, but also that you are equally responsible for your misery” (29). Through these provocations, Kandasamy collapses the boundary between observer and subject, making visible how spatial violence is both represented and reproduced through modes of storytelling and reception.

Kandasamy’s language is also deliberately unpolished and visceral. Her sharp, ironic, and politically charged style rejects aesthetic distance and resists the narrative sanitization of caste violence. She directly confronts literary conventions and reader expectations, mocking the desire for narrative neatness in the following words: “It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result... its English a crime against the language” (28). In doing so, she satirizes the literary establishment’s discomfort with fragmented, defiant storytelling. Her critique continues as she asks, “Are you still hunting around for the one-line synopsis and the sixty-second sound bite? Do you want me to compress this tragedy to fit into Twitter? How does one even enter this heart of darkness?” (22). This rhetorical provocation resists passive consumption and critiques the commodification of atrocity.

By rejecting linearity and coherence, Kandasamy mirrors the fractured and violated geography of Kilvenmani. Her prose resists convention – disordered, layered, and uncompromising. This deliberate narrative disruption intensifies the emotional charge of representational space, turning language into an instrument of protest, remembrance, and spatial defiance.

In Foucault’s sense, discourse is never neutral: it is bound up with power. Kandasamy rejects dominant narratives that erase or rationalize caste violence by foregrounding anger, ordeal, and obscenity as legitimate modes of testimony. Her narrative exposes the complicity of state and social institutions while directly confronting the limitations of storytelling. This is conveyed in the following admission: “Because we do not know how to tell our story. Because we do not rehearse. Because some of us are tongue-tied. Because all of us are afraid and the fear in our hearts slurs the truth in our voice” (152). This formal strategy is embodied in the voice of Ramalingam, an agricultural labourer who demands truth-telling without mediation, declaring:

I don't know what you feel, or whose side you are on but I have told my story, sister... I want you to write this all down and put it in the papers and tell the truth to the whole world. Let everyone read about what happened here and let them burn with anger. (129–130)

Ramalingam's voice refuses to be silenced. His rage is unfiltered: "I feel as if all I need to do is to thrust my hand out and I will catch some mother-fucker from that mob... he was asking us, 'which are the streets we should beat up, which are the streets we should burn'" (124).

These deliberate ruptures in tone embody what Zecchini describes as Kandasamy's refusal to "decorate, neutralize or camouflage its subject" (79). Her prose refuses linearity, reflecting the violated and fragmented space of Kilvenmani. The narrative unfolds in disjointed fragments, reflecting a geography shaped by trauma and systemic control. Through testimonial rage, non-linear form, and stylistic abrasion, Kandasamy aligns language with resistance, compelling readers not merely to witness violence but to confront it viscerally.

Her rejection of conventional narrative structures is rooted in the peasant experience: "The story, working hard to break the stranglehold of narrative, does not dabble in anything beyond agriculture.... [A]ll of fiction's artefacts used in this novel... are borrowed from a peasant's paradise" (25). By grounding narrative tools in agricultural metaphors, Kandasamy fuses the representational space of the novel with the lived realities of the villagers, reinforcing the symbolic connection between language, land, and labour. She further questions the cost and consequence of political alignment: "Were suckling infants underground comrades? Were schoolchildren full-timer Communists giving speeches from big, public platforms?... Were they running a state or a slaughterhouse?" (139). Such questions interrogate state and ideological complicity, highlighting how caste violence distorts justice and co-opts even the rhetoric of resistance.

The narrative voice is self-aware and deliberately rejects objectivity, speaking from solidarity rather than detachment. These rhetorical questions emerge not from above, but from within the violated and politicized terrain of Kilvenmani. This embodied voice echoes Lefebvre's insight that representational space "is alive: it speaks" (42). Kandasamy's narrator moves with the story's emotional and spatial rhythms rather than observing from the margins.

The novel's nonlinear, fragmented, and polyphonic structure enacts a spatial reordering. Without a singular protagonist or narrative closure, the form mirrors the fragmented memory and contested geography of caste oppression. Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace – a realm where real, imagined, and lived experiences intersect – aptly describes this narrative mode. Kandasamy's narrative shifts fluidly from historical recollection to symbolic rage, from intimate

testimony to collective grief. As the narrator notes, “It would be better than making you chase every story on the caste violence unleashed on the untouchables in every *cheri* in every village” (51). The result is a mosaic of truths, dispersed across bodies, memories, and silences.

Grief and rage are central emotional registers of this representational space. Kandasamy does not soften the brutality of caste violence but she presents its emotional and physical reality through unfiltered voices like Ramalingam’s. His testimony defies aesthetic restraint, conveying anguish and fury that saturate the landscape. These moments give trauma spatial weight, transforming violence from an isolated event into a lingering presence embedded in the geography of Kilvenmani. While literature cannot undo the violence, it can bear witness. The novel seeks no justice through resolution but through remembrance. Narrative space becomes a memorial, ensuring that the violence suffered by Dalits remains visible, preserved in collective memory, and that the dignity denied by dominant histories is reclaimed.

The burned hut as a spatial monument

The hut where forty-four Dalit labourers were burned alive is not merely a site of atrocity; it becomes a spatial monument, a political and memorial site that resists effacement. Meena Kandasamy transforms this destroyed structure into a symbol of both the brutality of caste violence and the endurance of resistance. Though reduced to ashes, the hut persists in the narrative as a charged locus of meaning, layered with history and grief, and carrying the potential for counter-memory.

Lefebvre reminds us that “space is political and implies the exercise of power” (*The Production of Space* 234). The burning of the hut exemplifies this: it was not just an act of murder but a calculated assertion of spatial dominance by dominant-caste landlords. The victims were targeted not as isolated individuals but as a collective force asserting political agency through unionization and defiance. Their shelter which is temporary and fragile was turned into a weaponized site of reprisal, its destruction serving as a spatial declaration of annihilation.

The hut, already marked for vulnerability by the geography of caste, stood on the margins of the village, constructed from flammable materials: easy to burn, easier to forget. But what the landlords intended as obliteration, Kandasamy reconstructs as inscription. Through her narrative, the hut is remembered not just as a location of death but as a site of collective memory, grief, and resistance. The visceral account of the massacre forces the reader to confront the inhumanity of caste violence. Kandasamy writes:

[S]o united they stand as they squeeze themselves inside and lock the door... and in that precise yet fleeting moment of loss and rage everyone realizes that they would die if their death meant saving a loved one... and the hut is fatally bolted for the final time from the outside by the mob... the fire that is a merciless man-eating angry god who demands that everyone submits to suffering. (105-106)

The narrative does not sanitize or obscure. Instead, it offers unflinching imagery of skin blistering, bones cracking, blood boiling, and children burning. The hut becomes a crucible of violence that refuses closure. Its destruction is not merely historical but it is reanimated in fiction, becoming a living heterotopia, what Michel Foucault describes as a real place layered with contradiction, grief, and transformation.

More than a heterotopia, the hut becomes what Edward Soja terms a Thirdspace – a convergence of physical geography, imagined memory, and emotional reality. Kandasamy's depiction of the burning is not just a recounting but a spatial performance of trauma. The hut becomes a vessel that holds not only the dying bodies, but also the long silences imposed by caste structures. It stands as a memorial to pain in the absence of formal recognition, described in harrowing detail:

. . . and instead, they burn all night fuelled by their own fat until the firemen come in the morning to wake them up by dousing their remains with cold water so that the police can pick up the pieces to match the mangled body parts..." (106)

Kandasamy denies the reader the comfort of metaphor or abstraction. Her prose lingers in the physical details – the “cracks on the small child’s skull” (107), the “skin on their hands ready to come apart” (107), the “coal-black colour of charred skin” (106). These are not just embellishments but spatial facts. The hut is not permitted to disappear into metaphor; it remains grounded in the violated flesh of its victims.

Unlike monuments protected by the state, the burned hut receives no formal commemoration. There is no plaque, no preservation. The only monument it receives is the one Kandasamy builds with words. Through this act of literary revalorization, she transforms a space of destruction into one of dignity and historical insistence. As Lefebvre suggests, marginalized spaces, once devalorized by dominant spatial practices, can become sites of renewed meaning and political resistance (*The Production of Space*, 381). The hut’s symbolic centrality also inverts spatial hierarchies: the landlord’s mansion, the police station, and the courtroom, all intact, institutional, and complicit are rendered morally hollow in

contrast to the ash-covered remains of the hut. It becomes, in Kandasamy's narrative, the true moral centre of Kilvenmani.

By framing the hut as a spatial monument, Kandasamy refuses rural romanticism and exposes Kilvenmani as a battleground of caste and class violence. The hut's destruction is not an isolated tragedy but part of a long continuum of spatial injustice endured by Dalit communities across India. In her unflinching prose, the hut becomes more than a setting of violence; it becomes a symbol that continues to burn in the political and emotional consciousness of readers, demanding not only memory, but reckoning.

Conclusion: Revolution is spatial

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Meena Kandasamy powerfully asserts that true revolution is inseparable from the reimagining of space. Kilvenmani is not a passive rural backdrop but a violently structured geography where caste oppression is embedded in its very layout. Huts, fields, and pathways become battlegrounds where hierarchies are enforced and reproduced. Huts, fields, and pathways become battlegrounds where hierarchies are enforced and reproduced. The novel shows how everyday practices, ideological control over land and labour, and lived emotional geographies intersect to sustain domination. The Dalit labourers' movements, exclusions, and vulnerabilities are literally inscribed into the village's terrain. Caste is not an abstract category; it is a lived spatial reality. Refusing to romanticize the village as a space of innocence, Kandasamy exposes the brutal realities underlying its geography. Rural Kilvenmani is not timeless or harmonious; it is political, conflict-ridden, and deeply divided.

The burning of Paappa and Ramayya's hut marks the violent climax of spatial oppression. What was intended as a fragile shelter becomes a mass grave, transforming a dwelling into a site of atrocity. Yet Kandasamy refuses to let this destruction remain an act of silence. Instead, she rebuilds the hut in narrative memory, inscribing it with grief, rage, and resistance. Through her vivid, harrowing depiction of the massacre like the cries, the burning bodies, the disintegration of flesh, she forces the reader to confront spatialized violence in its full horror. This reconstruction aligns with Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia: a real site layered with contradiction, where death, memory, and power collide. More than a heterotopia, the hut becomes a Thirdspace in Edward Soja's terms – a convergence of physical, imagined, and lived geographies. Though physically annihilated, it endures in political memory as a monument to defiance, existing not through state commemoration but through the counter-memory sustained by literature and collective remembrance. Kandasamy's refusal to aestheticize or offer closure mirrors the structural persistence of caste violence.

Her fragmented, self-reflexive narrative style challenges both literary form and the spatial hierarchies it critiques, transforming the burned hut from a symbol of defeat into one of insurgent survival that continues to haunt the conscience of the nation.

Eventually, *The Gypsy Goddess* demonstrates that revolution is, fundamentally, spatial. As Lefebvre argues, counter-space emerges through conflict with dominant spatial orders, Kandasamy enacts this theory by reclaiming violated landscapes as terrains of memory, protest, and radical imagination. To resist caste is to resist the spatial orders that sustain it. The Dalit struggle is not only for economic justice but for spatial dignity: the right to inhabit, to resist, to remember. By centring grief, rage, and collective memory, Kandasamy destabilizes both the geography of Kilvenmani and the literary geographies that have historically effaced such struggles. Revolution, in her vision, demands a remapping of space, rewriting the margins into centres of historical and political meaning. By fusing language, narrative, and space, the novel leaves readers with an urgent understanding that true transformation must emerge not only through seizing institutions or redistributing wealth, but through reclaiming the spaces where oppression was lived, lives were extinguished, and where, through memory and defiance, resistance continues to burn.

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