

Meena Kandasamy

THE WOMAN WITH TOO MANY NAMES

I am another person in my passport and all my school records. I am Ilavenil Kandasamy.

Mouths contort downwards, and eyebrows point heavenwards whenever the introductions are made.

Whatever does that first name mean? Spring, I say. And I clarify when I see the confused look lingering on their faces. I was named after the season and not the source, or stream, or shiny, sprightly elastic objects. I smile all the while as if to make up for the unpronounceable name. And I volunteer more information as if it could explain the genesis of such a complicated name: My father was a Tamil professor. Sometimes I attempt an etymological attack: This name is made of two parts, Ila denoting young or starting, and Venil denoting summer, clearly aware that being named Ilavenil is way better than Summer-starts. But nobody gets my point most of the time, and I bear the burden of uniqueness. I still haven't met another Tamil woman carrying my name. It took Google to educate me, to let me learn that I shared my first name with Steven Pinker's wife.

When I was younger, and much more worried about identity, this name seemed to ruin my whole life. I went to school with a lot of north Indians, and unlike my Tamil friends, who quickly caught on to this name, the others had trouble. Your name sounds like a train, they would say, reducing my day to a night that had to be wept away. My teenage years were more perilous—how were boys going to latch on to me if they had trouble even pronouncing my name? So I shortened my name for personal purposes, and insisted that I be called Ilaa. Small enough to be remembered but slow enough to be sexy.

But when I became a writer, I wanted a name that was easy to spell, a name that nobody could get wrong. So, I chose the name that my family called me. Meena, after the fish-eyed Tamil goddess, Meenakshi. As a young man in his thirties, my father saw eighteen beautiful girls in eighteen different bride-seeing ceremonies, but never managed to find the woman of his dreams. So he went to Meenakshi's temple in Madurai, and promised the deity that his firstborn daughter would be named after her. Soon he met the nineteenth woman, who became his wife, my mother. Meena was the name I carried until it was time for me to go to school. At that juncture, he cheated on this wish-fulfilling goddess, and opted to give me a unique Tamil name.

This craving to exercise the choice for a pure Tamil name is rooted in the socio-political history of my culture. Traditionally, the oppressed and untouchable castes were not allowed to name themselves after anything that reminded others of success, happiness or pleasantness. Though they held their right to name themselves, caste diktat ensured that they could only choose from a minimal list of abominable names.

If I were to offer proof of evidence (apart from the names that appear in the genealogical trees of my family, and the families of those from similarly oppressed backgrounds), I would have to quote the Manusmriti, a codification of Hindu laws that was published during 1 C.E. Here's the relevant extract (II-31, 32) *Let the first part of a Brahmin's name denote something auspicious, a Kshatriya's name be connected with power and a Vaishya's with wealth, but a Shudra's express something contemptible. The second part of a Brahmin's name shall be a word implying happiness, of a Kshatriya's a word implying protection, of a Vaishya, a term expressive of thriving and of a Shudra's an expression denoting service.*

My father is not alone in this longing to retrieve his language and identity. In Tamil Nadu, anti-caste/Dalit political movements, like the Liberation Panthers, have organized mass change-of-name ceremonies in the last few years, where people give up their original names that carry Hindu-Brahminical-Sanskritic connotations, and take up secular, powerful Tamil names. Since the 1960s, when the Dravidian movement in my state sought to counter Aryan-Hindi supremacy, people have renounced names that carry symbols of subordination. They christened themselves with new names to reflect new hopes and dreams. Such gazette-notified name changes seek to make political statements, even though they operate on the personal level of the name, which is at once a public and private identity.

If this is the turbulent history of first names, last names are no less complicated. I carry my father's name as my last name, unlike some of my friends, who have the privilege of a caste or class pedigree that they can sport. Being a Meena Iyer, Meena Pandit, or Meena Oberoi could open many more doors, but hell, that's not who I am. I also carry my father's name because he has no sons to carry it for him.

Sometimes, I have also thought of dropping it. I spent half-a-dozen years fantasizing about becoming the future Mrs. Politician-parliamentarian-boyfriend-with-a-ten-syllable-name only to realize after coming here that a famous name can provide me with status, societal respect and recall value, but not love. With one long short message I brought that affair to an end, knowing that it is much more important to be my own person, to make my own name. Or, even if I were to tragically end up in anonymity with this name, I could still console myself with the fact that I didn't need the crutches of someone else's name to take me places. And given my uncontainable spirit, I always wonder if my last name will be my last name. I believe, and sometimes foresee that it is going to undergo too many fluctuations.

Tomorrow I am getting myself tattooed. At Nemesis, in Iowa City, where Washington St. meets Linn St. This time, I am playing it pretty safe. I am going with God's name.