

Fictionalizing the Self: Autofictional Fragments in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract—By fictionalizing the self, autobiographical elements play a crucial role in analyzing the narrative instability, memory, and language in Meena Kandasamy's 2017 novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. The novel depicts domestic violence through fragmented, non-linear lenses of display and creates an autobiography that becomes an intense reflection of the protagonist's pain. This research article employs a qualitative research approach along with the theoretical concepts of autofiction and feminist narrative criticism to explore how Kandasamy creates a semi-fictionalized self to express the phenomena of gendered violence, postcolonial identity, and resistance. The novel's fragmented structure, metafictional devices, and autobiographical elements create an intervention into a conventional means of discourse (both fiction and memoir), acting as an intervention into the conflicting ways in which women are silenced, whether patriarchally or literarily, creating a strong counter-narrative. Through a close reading of select passages and with the layering of critical secondary texts, this paper illustrates how *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) functions as a site of feminist self-fashioning and subversive storytelling.

Index Terms—autofiction, autobiography, Meena Kandasamy, Indian literature, trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

Havenil Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, writer, translator, and activist widely known for her collections of poetry, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Her writings mainly focus on caste annihilation, feminism, and linguistic identity. She states, "Poetry is not caught up within larger structures that pressure you to adopt a certain set of practices while you present your ideas in the way that academic language is" (Taneja, 2017). The 2017 book *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* by Meena Kandasamy takes place in contemporary India. The unnamed narrator of the book falls in love with a university professor and consents to marry him. The narrative centers on the author's experience as a recently married woman who is socially isolated and subjected to severe violence at the hands of her husband. She finds refuge in writing and uses it as a potent weapon of resistance to combat her severely abusive married life, even though she is only trying to survive. In a review of the novel *When I Hit You* in *The Guardian*, Preti Taneja says, "The raw material of domestic abuse leads to a meditation on writing and a searing examination of a woman's place in contemporary Indian society" (Taneja, 2017).

The literary form of autofiction, blending autobiography with fiction, is positioned as an increasingly powerful way to tell the story of personal trauma that intentionally resists strict genre boundaries. First used by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, autofiction refers to a special brand of writing that combines lived experience with the author's fictional response, allowing the author to enact several narrative positions at the same time. This writing form has been especially welcomed by feminist authors who are trying to address the structures of domination to reclaim ownership over their own stories (Lee, 2021).

A clear example of current autofiction is in Meena Kandasamy's 2017 novel *When I Hit You*. Even though the story is typically read as fiction, it is impossible to overlook the author's personal experiences, which she has talked about in interviews and publications, of being repeatedly abused physically and psychologically by her husband while she was a young scholar. Indeed, it is her life story that also finishes the smudged circle of genre when moving between autobiography and fiction. The text occupies a fertile and ambiguous space of confession and creation, testimony and transformation (James, 2022). While Kandasamy's writing resembles specific trajectories of the memoir genre, she chooses not to present a straightforward, linear, factual memoir; instead, she presents a fragmented, plausibly metafictional narrative that obscures the boundaries between author and protagonist.

Autofiction is significant in *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) not only because it draws on autobiographical moments but also because it includes both significant formal experimentation and a political agenda. Kandasamy also challenges voyeurism—the impulse of confessional writing—as well as the silencing of women's voices that has characterized literary tradition. To examine how autofictional fragments in *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) enable

the narrator to respond to systemic patriarchy, make sense of trauma, and assign narrative agency, this study aims to examine the function and consequences of these fragments.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

For this paper on Meena Kandasamy's 2017 novel *When I Hit You*, the literature review focused on the scholarly works and books that examine the evolution of autofiction, trauma studies, and feminist narratives. The writings based on autofiction showcase the perceived difference in how fact or fiction divides and leaves a gap between theory and practice. In a letter to Philippe Lejeune, Doubrovsky declares that he wanted to fill this "empty square" (Lejeune, 1989, p. 63). Lejeune propounded that, as a primary need, the identities of the narrator, character, and author should be contained in an autobiography. The identity may or may not be accumulated by a specific "autobiographical pact" that alleges it within the text (Lejeune, 1989, p. 26).

In her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier (2021) discusses the growth of autofiction as a space where theory and lived experiences meet. Fournier asserts that auto-fictional narratives are often sites of feminist intervention, allowing marginalized writers to intervene as they disrupt dominant discourses (Fournier, 2021). Because Kandasamy's narrative integrates sociopolitical critique with a personal story, Fournier's concept of "autotheory" is valuable to think about. The book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010) presents a thorough analytic framework for life writing, especially for women-influenced writings. Smith and Watson suggest feminist autobiographical texts often employ fragmentation, irony, and multivocality as resistance. These features are overt in Kandasamy's novel, where non-chronological scenes are combined with metafictional commentary that resists the linear format of trauma narratives (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001) also provides wisdom concerning the difficulties of trauma narration. Gilmore argues that trauma dislocates narrative coherence, and the autobiographical subject emerges more from fragmentation than continuity (Gilmore, 2001). This fragmentation is not a failing of memory; it is a conscious and ethical aesthetic. Kandasamy's non-linear layout supports Gilmore's claim that trauma narratives need non-conventional modes of representation. Moreover, Cathy Caruth's pioneering work in trauma theory, especially *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), offers a lens to think about narratives as memorials of an experience that remains impossible to tell altogether. Caruth (1996) states, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event," a quality found in Kandasamy's novel, highlighted by repeated motifs and fractured temporalities (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

Concerning the particular topic of *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017), the existing articles have commented on how the novel challenges the domestic abuse narrative and the narrator's bildungsroman narrative. It argues that "Kandasamy does not allow the narrative to fall into facile empathy; she demands that her narrator's agency as a writer is at the forefront." Moreover, it is also interpreted that the novel is "a document of literary resistance rather than merely an account of personal suffering." Finally, Kandasamy has expressed her resistance to victimhood in interviews and essays. She said in an interview with *The Guardian* (2017), "I wanted to write a story that was not about a victim, but about a survivor, about someone who writes back." The research gap for this article on *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) lies in the limited scholarly analysis of Kandasamy's self-narrations that help her to overcome the trauma she faced in her married life.

The narrator slowly begins to raise her voice against her husband's physical abuse because it is emotionally haunting. As Urvashi Bahuguna describes in her blog, "The novel shows us how domestic violence isolates a person. It does not embolden most victims. It shows how leaving takes time, cunning, and opportunity. It shows how staying takes obedience, fear, and self-preservation" (Bahuguna, 2017). To sever the arm of torture, she becomes a writer who self-documents every second of her abusive marriage as a comfort claim in her life. In all honesty, many people think, "How can educated, independent, and clever girls put up with such indignity?" It is difficult to answer this question in full; the short answer is that we are all simply creatures of love. Respectively, to preserve love in their lives, we help to re-shackle it by being married to those people. A woman typically gathers love from her surroundings—nature, parents, and husband. However, in her case, the narrator could not fully harvest because her husband was oppressive.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research paper employs a qualitative literary theory-based approach and textual analysis that focuses on trauma studies, feminist narrative theory, and autofiction. Meena Kandasamy's 2017 novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* serves as the primary text for analysis. The article places the novel's important autofictional components, like self-referentiality, narrative fragmentation, and hazy author-protagonist boundaries, into theoretical and sociopolitical frameworks by using close reading techniques.

The analysis draws on secondary sources such as academic books, journal articles, and critical essays dedicated to examining autofiction as a mode of writing, as well as feminist and postcolonial readings of the narrative of trauma. The methodological goal of the study is to investigate not only the ways that Kandasamy uses autofiction but also the purposes of her use of autofiction: to understand how this genre affords opportunity for feminist reclaiming of voice and identity when faced with both intimate and structural violence. The paper also incorporates interviews with Meena

Kandasamy and published online posts to triangulate textual evidence with authorial purpose, considering carefully the problem of the author indicating the narrator in autofiction. In all cases, the paper stays aware of the complicating ethical and artistic implications of fictionalizing personal trauma.

IV. DISCUSSION

Meena Kandasamy uses domestic abuse as the raw material in her novel *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017), which leads to a reflection on writing and a critical analysis of a woman's position in modern Indian culture. In her 2012 article on her marriage for the Indian magazine *Outlook*, Kandasamy uses an unidentified narrator who speaks furiously in the first person (Kandasamy, 2012). *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) is an autobiographical fiction describing two anonymous figures from different backgrounds. The narrator of the novel is a writer married to a man, a professor from a slightly higher caste and class. He is in his second marriage after a failed first marriage with a higher-caste woman. He gradually and systematically pressures and dominates his wife, asking for access to her social media accounts, for example. He thinks this total access might create more intimacy in their relationship. As their marriage builds, he also begins to make corrections to her writings.

A. Fragmentation and Disruption of Narrative Coherence

The novel begins without providing any background exposition or chronological development. This absence of chronology indicates the fragmentations of the narrator's mental state that befit the psychological impact of abuse. As a trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth argues that the traumatic experience is easily represented frequently by the return of the victim in jumbled scenes. Kandasamy represents this through her fragmented writing, some not even a paragraph long, that recollects the ruptures and violence from her memory. In one of the novel's fragments, the narrator reflects, "This is not a story with a beginning, middle, and end. This is a series of wounds" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 123).

The marginalization of women, the power struggle between men and women, and the societal perception of women are issues explored in literature. This is shown in the auto-section of the book, which is where these incidents most likely occurred. It is known that these problems still exist in society, even if they may not have been brought up there (Carmody, 2021). To draw attention to the differences between how women are treated by their spouses and how they expect to be treated, the book employs literary techniques, narrative method, style, structure, and plot, or the absence in the present situation. How actual concerns are explored and connected to the audience, rather than just focusing on the narrator, makes it more than just a collection of writings to tell a story.

According to Smith and Watson, women's autobiographical writing often resists narrative coherence in the interest of resisting the masculine literary canon (Smith & Watson, 2010). Meena Kandasamy resists the reader's desire for narrative closure and refuses to package her pain into a fully resolved plot. By reading *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017), the reader gets a narrator who often blurs the boundaries of author and character.

B. Metafiction and Writerly Self-Awareness

The narrator is a writer attempting to use language to process her abuse. Her reflections about the process of writing serve as metafictional commentary and further support the text's autofictional identity. The narrator says, "I want to be the one who names. I want to be the one who writes. I want to be the one who tells my story and gives it shape, not him, not anyone else" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 89). It is both personal and political, and the narrator rejects the idea of creating herself as a patriarchal instinct. This relates to Lauren Fournier's idea of "autotheory," where the personal becomes a mechanism for feminist theorizing (Fournier, 2021).

When analyzing the fictionalization of the self, Meena Kandasamy states, "I fictionalize because the truth is too painful. I fictionalize because it allows me to scream without being silenced" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 102). These lines show the auto-fictional character of the novel directly while simultaneously highlighting the therapeutic aspect of it, a means of survival and reframing trauma without allowing it to consume an individual. The interplay between the fiction of truth and the active reality signifies the ethical dimension of the autofiction text, which is theorized by Leigh Gilmore (2001), who sees fragmented truths as ethical responses to trauma.

C. Intersections of Gender, Language, and Violence

The autofictional voice of the writer is not formed by gender but by her dual identity as a Tamil woman and poet. It shows that a language can be both a weapon and a site of struggle. The abusive husband in the novel tries to silence her by crippling her writing, restricting her speech, and undermining her self-worth. Meena Kandasamy narrates, "He tells me that women who write are whores. That I should be ashamed of every word I have ever written. That literature is filth if it comes from a woman's mouth" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 37). These incidents expose the systemic misogyny that is inherently entangled in cultural notions about women's authorship. For the narrator, writing is not just expressive; it is defiance. This notion is consistent with postcolonial feminist criticism, which situates writing as a site of resistance for women marginalized by subordinate identity (Spivak, 1988).

The narrator's refusal to be silenced shows her reconceptualization of narrative authority, while disempowerment arises. Her voice is unwavering, ironic, and often mordantly humorous, as in "If I die, let it be known that I died trying to finish a sentence" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 58). As the narrator recognizes writing as a weapon for her survival, she fictionalizes herself through her writing. Meena Kandasamy employs her satirical and ironic writing style to raise

awareness of the societal concerns covered in the novel. The harmony of humor and pain is evident and valuable in that it helps readers understand the content. She provides the humor so that the reader may make their judgments on the text. In the end, it enables readers to apply this knowledge to their own lives. She writes:

In the greedy quest for more and more dowry, or because women did not give birth to sons, or because they refused to sleep with their husbands every night, our culture started burning brides. Tradition never goes out of fashion. (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 187)

In the 2017 novel *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy makes use of her writing as a weapon to escape from her past life. She writes the novel to fictionalize her “self” as an awareness among women, and it empowers the society that sits back after experiencing the abuse or violence in their lives (Dwivedy, 2024).

D. Voice, Irony, and Subversion

The novel *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017) has an ironic and literary narrative voice. It is not about a passive victim relaying her abuse but a writer who reconstructs her sharp intelligence of trauma on her terms. Meena Kandasamy’s protagonist wears wit like armor—an ironic distance that highlights the surreal absurdity of her situation while also taking back control of language. She writes, “I must learn that a Communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind closed doors. This is dialectics” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 34).

Here, it is seen that the narrator is satirizing not only her abuser but also the dissonance between political ideals and tyrannical politics at home. The same irony and irony of irony reveal the ineffectiveness of political structures to uphold women’s dignity, particularly in private. The husband’s socialism is a facade for the narrator’s romantic idealism, which she is in the process of dismantling (Alapati, 2022).

Irony in autofiction is doing important work, as it enables the author-narrator to critique not only her abuser but also wider cultural constructs. By not resorting to sentimental or victimhood narratives, the narrator positions herself as a thinker. She exists in the space between the rigid binaries of theory and practice, love and violence, and writing and silence.

E. Intertextuality and Cultural Commentary

The literary references in Kandasamy’s work are multilayered, providing a perspective that is bigger than a personal story. The narrator points to literature, politics, and history, using her own experience as a touchstone in larger cultural and intellectual engagements. In one striking instance, she compares her situation to that of Tamil women raped during war: “In the end, all of this reminded me of what women in Sri Lanka, in Eelam, must have gone through at the hands of the army: the shutting down of their voice, their resistance, their rebellion, their sense of self” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 94).

The fragment links the domestic sphere to the geopolitical and works as an echo of the feminist expression, “the personal is political.” In addition, it demonstrates Meena Kandasamy’s commitment to writing as a collective testimony, not simply an autobiography. Her autofiction becomes a witnessing of human testimony, of articulating her pain and the pain of others that has gone unrecorded.

By connecting herself with other women across borders and histories, she ingeniously creates feminist solidarity based on struggle. The text’s transnational aspect also expresses its post-colonial consciousness, where trauma is conceptualized within state violence, gender oppression, and imperial histories.

F. Language as Resistance

In *When I Hit You* (Kandasamy, 2017), language is both a weapon and a safe space. The protagonist is always thinking about her attempts to write, what she can write, what she cannot write, and what she has to keep unspoken. The husband’s consistent attempts to destroy her writing, delete her emails, and dictate her internet usage symbolize greater attempts to silence women who dare to speak out. She writes:

He deletes the 25,600-odd emails from my Gmail inbox. All at one go. Then, to prevent me from writing to the Gmail help team and having my emails restored, he changed the password to something I do not know and cannot guess. He erases everything on my hard disk. Everything about my life as a writer is gone. There are no contacts. There is no email conversation that I can return to at a later date. There is no past. (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 139)

The rhetorical violence is a part of an ongoing pattern of erasure. However, it is through writing, although interrupted and disjointed writing, that the narrator tries to reclaim herself. By including these very instances of silencing and censorship in the narrative itself, Kandasamy reveals all the processes of suppression that are usually implicit. The writing itself is a revolution (Sharma, 2022).

The fractured form of the novel is a commentary on this kind of resistance, too. Short, fragmented “paragraphs,” disparate entries, and text breaks are techniques of inoculation against erasure. Each fragment contests the totalizing, contesting the narratorial agency that reflects the husband’s psychological agency. Thus, writing in fragments is both a symptom of trauma and a mode of survival.

V. CONCLUSION

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* exemplifies how autofiction can be both a literary and political act. Through fragmentation, metafiction, and writerly self-reflection, she assembles a narrative form that resists sequential storytelling to address the interplay of trauma, gendered violence, and self-representation. By putting herself into fragments of fiction, Meena Kandasamy produces a narrative space where survival, resistance, and reclamation intertwine. Her narrative technique does not allow for the erasure that so often takes place with women who persist in abusive domestic settings. Instead, it allows for the assertion of authorship, control, and visibility. By juxtaposing fiction with autobiography, Meena Kandasamy's narrative strategy also allows her to explore emotional truth around trauma without being held to the requirements of factual truth.

In addition, her works interrogate hegemonic literary and social structures that prop up patriarchal ideologies, condoning violence against women. The novel makes the personal political and the political personal, with Meena Kandasamy making visible an identity that is marginalized through caste, gender, and national politics, positioning herself as an activist. In the present moment, the novel shows that autofiction is not only an aesthetic arrangement in contemporary literature but also a radical act, especially for feminist or postcolonial writers who sought to dismantle dominant narratives. *When I Hit You* serves as a forceful demonstration of how auto-fictional fragments can be used to reorganize and recover a self, to defy erasure, and to repurpose trauma into literature. Kandasamy's work represents the spirit of feminist autofiction—fearless, unapologetic, and highly autonomous.

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