

Submission to Subversion: An Analytical Study of Meena Kandasamy's *'When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife'*

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Abstract—Meena Kandasamy tries to create an identity among the galaxy of Indian writers in English as a poet, novelist and translator. She deals with caste annihilation, feminism and linguistic identity. Meena Kandasamy's novel, *'When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife'*, deals with the suppression of women in the name of patriarchal society in educated families. She explains the story of a highly educated Indian woman from an affluent family who marries a respected college professor. He seems to be a man who is a social rights activist outside the home, but he abuses his wife at home. Kandasamy depicts a dreadful picture explaining her husband's strategies to keep her under his control. In this context, she delineates the emotions a woman undergoes while adjusting herself to the situation in the family. The writer attempts to develop the status of a woman by discussing more the turmoil she comes across in every part of her life. She wants to disclose to the world that a woman is a human being. She is wise enough to remain uncrushed and unperturbed despite challenges and hostilities. The novel vividly depicts the power game between men and women in Indian families and other societies.

Index Terms—feminism, confidence, globalization, self-sufficient, power game

I. INTRODUCTION

The modern woman in India has started searching for new avenues where she could enjoy much liberty and freedom. Middle-class women have come out as employees backing up their families in India. Globalization has allowed employment for many in the society. Though educated women have respect in the institution of marriage, they assert themselves over the male-dominated sphere besides fulfilling familial duties. They are now self-sufficient and fiercely ambitious not only in domestic affairs but also in the professional world.

It is believed that the institution of marriage is sacred, rooted in the socio-religious field of Indian society. It is observed that ancient women in India enjoyed much autonomy regarding autonomy, living standards, education, career option, marriage option, and familial issues. This freedom gave them equal opportunities for survival with self-respect. Since ancient times in Indian history, women gained a high social status, and some were respected for their knowledge and shrewd learning. During the Vedic age, women enjoyed an excellent status in the society. She was granted equivalent rights along with men and given a choice in selecting her spouse on her own. Gradually, the situation in the society changed as a joint family system, and the influence of caste in all fields of life affected women's interests and aspirations.

It is observed that the world seems to belong to man, and woman has to adjust herself to the patriarchal world order. The husband considers a woman his property, which can be owned and controlled. However, the traditional idea of a woman, being fair and weak, does not exist nowadays because she has transformed her identity from being a mere frail creature to an independent individual. In this connection, the evolution of women from homemakers to idols in different fields can be observed in the present-day world.

In India, a woman is caught up in the cage of family life, playing the roles of being a woman, wife and mother. It is observed that she cannot exist outside the frontiers of marital life in the patriarchal society. Moreover, she has to submit her 'self' to her husband. Sudhir Kakar in his book, *'Intimate relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality'* emphasizes: "In the ideals of the traditional culture, the "good" woman is a pativrata, subordinating her life to the husbands' welfare and needs in a way demanded of no other women in any part of the world" (Kakar, 1989, p.66). In this case, if a woman

disobeys the rules and regulations of her family, she will be blamed for spoiling the family's reputation. Female sexuality is viewed not as a personal private matter but as a family concern. Sexual constraints on married girls, control of their sexuality and the obsession with virginity are still prevalent in India. Still, in traditional Hindu families, women are supposed to take their meals after their husbands, elders, and children have finished eating. It shows that the Indian woman has been habituated to bearing male hegemony for centuries.

It is a matter of fact that the educated urban woman in India expects a change in her opinion of life towards family and society. This opinion later results in internal and external conflicts and moral dilemmas affecting her psychic conditions. She constantly fights against cultural barriers, which control her freedom to enjoy her own life. The urban woman does not want to be a submissive wife to her male partner. When her opinions are not heard in the marriage web, she is prepared to rebel against men without fear.

Modern, educated, and career-oriented women are sensitive to changing times and trends. They are aware of the cultural inadequacies for which they are subjected to in this patriarchal society. They defy their men in search of substantial identity and unrestrained freedom. In this context, they are caught up in a conflict between personal aspirations and social order. They reject the idea of being used as sexual objects. They challenge their victimization and find relief by redefining their morals. Their idea of freedom is adopted from the west because the urban woman in India today is equal to the woman from the west. They reject turning into a male addendum and want to have a considerable role in society.

Globalization has suddenly changed women's attitude about living their own lives. Since ancient times, the woman has never demanded any exclusive identity in the hierarchical order. She expects society to treat her as a human being. The urban woman now wants to enjoy autonomy having unrestricted freedom by breaking the existing cultural chains. In her book, *Lacan and post-feminism*, Elizabeth Wright declares: "Becoming a woman does not imply an opposition of sex and gender, but is the way a woman uses her freedom" (Wright, 2005, p.54). As there is an excellent chance for women to get employment in various fields such as software, pharmaceutical, etc., it paves the way for them to achieve economic autonomy in the society.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Over the last two centuries, the development of science and technology has changed the definition of life. Modern education and political consciousness among women have created new trends offering them a new kind of profession. As a result, they have started following their conventions where marriage is not a social or family concern. She feels it as a personal affair where a man and woman seek social, psychological and economic joy in having their freedom. Advanced technology social networking websites like Facebook, email and cell phones reveal the sensitive contours of a woman's psyche to society. It is taking another dimension in the post-modern era, where suspicion and unlawful interference curtailed women from enjoying their rights provided by nature. It is awful that women become vessels of men's desire in sexual matters where women lose control over their bodies in the name of pleasure. It is observed that the perception of educated and job-oriented high-class women in the professions such as software, business, law, etc. is changed on par with the trends prevalent in the society. They are expecting significant identity and unrestricted freedom. It shows that they have borrowed the ideas of the women in the west.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Stephanie Sy-Quia (2020) examined the trauma of anonymous female protagonist who meets a Marxist scholar and marries him after a short-lived romance like an ordinary woman in India. The story records their four-month marriage and how she has come out of the familial cage alive. When settling in family life, they shift cities for his job. As a result, she is away from her family and friends and without a job of her own. As she is kept away from the safety networks of home, family, friends, and colleagues, the new setup makes her undergo violence hidden within the house's four walls. It is horrible to notice that he torments her with the devices as weapons, as a result, she starts developing communication with the outside world. In this manner, he makes her submit herself to his cruelty by beating her with her laptop charger, wiping her email server, deleting her Facebook account, replying to her messages and monitoring her phone calls. He switches off her freedom in every aspect and restricts her to a world she does not consider her own (Sy-Quia, 2020).

Jonathan McAloon (2018) comments that the book is worth reading. The process of writing letters to unknown friends becomes precarious and unsafe for the narrator. However, the narrator says that she finds consolation when she writes letters to lovers on a forlorn morning. This act is her supreme rebelliousness against her husband's physical supremacy. It shows that Kandasamy's writing is also funny, tender and lyrical, usually simultaneously. When trauma is chronic, the other qualities only have the option to combine with it (McAloon, 2018).

Niranjan Majhi (2018) states that although the victim of domestic violence is initially humiliated and made fun of in the book "When I Hit You," as the story progresses, the level of torment increases and she is forced to endure various forms of physical torture instead of just verbal abuse. In the book, the narrator claims that when her husband accused her of having extramarital affairs or anything else, she kept quiet since her father had taught her that maintaining silence is a solution to all the problems. Yet, her silence has no beneficial effects of soothing her mind. The anguish is only

made worse by her silence. She is alleged to be living in a realm in her mind at one point in the book, where she is cohabiting with ex-lovers (Majhi, 2018).

IV. METHODOLOGY

In the context of defending the subject, qualitative research methodology is used. In this connection, the relevant data is gathered from secondary sources available in the form of text. The observations and opinions of the critics are analyzed, examining the issues that exist in the institution of marriage where a woman undergoes suppression and domination at the hands of her spouse in society.

V. DISCUSSION ON PROGRESSION OF SUBMISSION TO SUBVERSION

Generally, young girls dream of getting married to a prince-like boy. However, in reality, their dreams are not accomplished by their expectations. Thus, they try to adapt on par with their life partner's whims and fancies. In this process, they cannot maintain emotional balance as emotions naturally fluctuate among human beings in due course of time. It is the weakness that makes them fall prey to fatal mistakes. In the novel '*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*', Kandasamy portrays her experiences as an abused and dehumanized wife in South India. Her husband, a respected university English lecturer, gradually dominates every aspect of her life in her writing and speeches.

Men and women try to maintain a poignant relationship with their partners at every age. In the novel, the unnamed narrator and her husband accidentally meet while she is organizing an online campaign against the death penalty at the age of twenty-six. As she has Leftist ideology, she feels the man she will marry should believe that only Marxism can liberate people from their problems. As she is fascinated by his commitment to the cause, she believes that he can make a true revolutionary personality. During the earlier days of their relationship, everything is fine, and he seems to be an ideal husband to her. She admits that she is charmed by his idealistic and strict Communist views.

It is quite unfortunate that the narrator's husband's political ideology is evaporated within a few months of their marriage. He methodically illtreats her like a demon in every aspect, which is entirely against communist ideology. He starts complaining about even the slightest move she takes, only escalates his attitude which is observed in many domestic abuse cases. He starts isolating her in the name of disobedience, but she is not. She is inclined to leave her hometown Chennai after marriage, and then they move to Mangalore, where she has no acquaintances and neighbours around them. As a housewife, she spends her days indoors, only reading her messages on her mobile phone. He restricts her by not allowing her to speak very much on phone with her friends and relatives. He slowly forces her into isolation, and his language becomes unsophisticated and abusive. He forces her to shut down her Facebook account, hand over her phone, and eventually, she is not allowed to look at her emails. He starts abusing her verbally, physically, and mentally. It is a pity that the narrator's agony is not visible to the world because she is not allowed to see the outside world. He does not allow her to write something. Then, she asks herself whether her husband knows of love or not. He used to delete the history of an email, a book-in-progress, a random user-generated reference on Wikipedia, and all the Bluetooth devices her phone has paired up with, etc. In this situation, she thinks that it is very difficult for him to wipe out her memory though her husband deletes every material. She passes through all this agony with patience for some time like a typical Indian wife.

The narrator's husband's violence against her eventually causes her to become dumb as he has demanded silence all along. As she bears the humiliation silently, it invites further physical abuse. She realizes that she cannot win the situation and so she has to find another way to protect herself in the role of his wife. She describes his shifting personality and how he always plays different roles like the caring husband to people, the harassed victim of a suspicious wife and the pleading son-in-law to her parents. The narrator has lost not only her ability to communicate but also her autonomy and her voice, in which situation she is not allowed to write. Further, her husband also robs her self-expression. The narrator soon realizes that she cannot physically stand up to her husband as he regularly beats and rapes her. Still, she does exercise her intellectual right to retain her identity with which she can challenge her husband.

Therefore, in her insubordination of her husband's control, the narrator has not only written her own words but also included the words of great writers along with her own. The excerpts are equally lyrical and shocking that are expressed in a rebellious way. Kandasamy's discussion of the marriage system is one of the most revealing aspects of the book. She has mentioned her parents' words about the adjustment in the institution of marriage. Though she informs her about her husband's rude behaviour, her parents advise her to listen to him as silence is a shield and weapon. They also say that the marriage is a give-and-take, so that she has to adapt to the situation.

The narrator's parents' attitude reveals wider society's systematic support and justification of abuse and the changes that happen in the wedlock of every culture. The book demonstrates the authentic depiction of an abusive marriage. Her sorrow can be seen deepened when her parents justify the brutal actions of her husband, instructing her to be patient and have a child to mend the brute. Dr Tanu Kashyap in the paper, "Feminist Study in Meena Kandasamy's novels '*When I Hit You: or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young wife*' and '*The Gypsy Goddess*'", asserts: "Nature has not been that much partial as the people in this country are for the women. Women's capabilities are measured against the power that never flowed and accumulated in the hands of the other gender. Life is not a bed of roses for women in this country.

Every woman has but to pay the price of dedication, passion, attitude and the way she wants to live” (Kashyap, 2018, p.67). The book reflects the increasing prominence of the feminist voice around the world today. The narrator never loses her dignity amidst the most horrific events throughout the book. The precarious situations are often conveyed with a touch of humour, indicating that she has never lost her humanity in the face of dehumanization.

Ironically, some men show concern with the people outside the family but not with family members. The unnamed husband is a self-declared Maoist. He is a person who shows sympathy towards orphans and have-nots but fails to express the same to his life partner. He considers every small act of his wife as a mistake so that he uses it as a weapon to attack her mentally and physically. As a typical Indian wife, she bears his barbaric helplessness. She observes the shrinking on the excuse of family bonds prevalent in the Indian marital system. Like many, though she realizes it is wrong, it is inevitable for her to accustom herself to the social norms.

Therefore, the narrator becomes a caricature who absorbs herself into her husband's interests as a good housewife. She starts executing everything to please him, like cooking food, learning Kannada language and participating in sex when he desires it. She also allows him to delete her emails and accepts to keep herself away from Facebook. She stops attending to her phone calls and socializing with people. Despite the outside world's criticism about her appearance and isolation, she surrenders herself to the dominant male macho of her husband. Amidst intolerable domestic torture, she learns how to survive due to social demands where a woman has to bear all these painful encounters.

The narrator begins to consider sex as a mechanical and dry relationship. She recollects her past love affair with an old politician she loved most. She never feels the sensitive touch of her husband, but she considers it a marital rape. Priyanka Tripathi et al. in the paper, "When a Violated Body Strikes/Writes Back: Unveiling the Violence in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*" asserts: "The aspect of 'Freedom' and 'Control' are intertwined together to imperialize the women empowerment. In Meena Kandasamy's novel, the husband wanted to occupy the freedom of a woman writer and tried to have control over the space. In fact, he went on creating a new identity of her as per his wish" (Tripathi et al., 2019, p.58). It is a matter of fact that she is defeated in the hands of her husband as she cannot rebel against him and teach him a lesson.

The narrator lets her unnamed husband control her body bit by bit silently. When she cannot bear the torture and pain, she articulates her voice against her counterpart. Pallavi Prasad in her review, "Meena Kandasamy Shatters the Silence Around Marital Abuse", comments: "Violence is dealt with carefully yet confidently in the book. Visceral words seething with rage describe the before and after of each escalating violent act by the husband, but never the brutal blood and gore of the action itself. Silence is louder, in this case, as Kandasamy skillfully weaves together a devastatingly beautiful book you won't be able to shake off once the last line spills into an empty page" (Prasad, 2017, p.2). The narrator has the clarity that she no longer wants to be labelled as a torn wife as she claims that she deserves more than all women.

It is observed that when a husband tries to reduce a wife using all his tricks, the latter never loses or shrinks her identity. She rises from the ashes by choice and redefines her self-respect like a full moon. The narrator describes her husband's cruel nature through beautiful poetic gestures. Sushumna Kannan in her book review points out that resorting to writing is a means of healing in the opinion of psychologists because it deviates human beings from pain. However, most ill-treated women in India are unable to consult a psychologist. In this precarious situation, Kandasamy shows those ill-treated women an alternative way by adopting writing as a profession where they can share their trauma of unease, pain and hurt in abusive relationships in the form of text with the external world (Kannan, 2020, p.2). She resorts to poetry as it gives psychological consolation to her endless pain.

The narrator gradually starts raising her voice against her husband's physical abuse because it is emotionally tormenting her. 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, p.1). In order to get away from the torture, she takes up the profession as a writer who explains every personal experience of her abusive marriage as a means of consolation in her life. Indeed, many people wonder how educated, independent, and intelligent girls tolerate this sort of humiliation. It is a challenge to answer the question, but the partial answer is that humans are all creatures of love. In the event of preserving love in their life, they become captive to the shackles of marriage. A woman generally needs love from her surroundings like nature, parents and husband. But the narrator fails to reap fully, when her life becomes a misery at the hands of her husband.

VI. CONCLUSION

The narrative style of Meena Kandasamy delicately depicts the patriarchal values in the institution of wedlock. Unfortunately, women are blamed for not being submissive to the orders of their spouses, which has become a norm in familial life. The writer explains different ways of abusing a woman prevalent in the contemporary society, where a woman becomes an instrument of subjugation in the institution of marriage. In this situation, the twenty-first century woman is anxious to express herself, for pouring out her heart and soul in authentic notes to be heard and appreciated, not to be ignored and scorned at. She begins to be assertive and to express her emotions boldly to subvert the male hegemony, though she lives in the realm designed by man. She always longs to rejuvenate her abilities to enjoy much

societal autonomy. To sum up, the balance between emotion and action is required in marital life, which can be derived through persuasive techniques.

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