

Unveiling Pain And Resistance: Violence, Trauma, And Abuse In Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract

Physical violence, a pervasive manifestation of patriarchal oppression, often leaves scars far deeper than the physical body, extending into the emotional and psychological realm. Trauma arising from such violence disrupts an individual's sense of self and ability to navigate life, often normalizing suffering to the point where victims perceive it as bearable. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* explores the normalization of violence and its devastating impact on women within a patriarchal society. Through the protagonist's harrowing journey, Kandasamy unveils the cycles of domestic abuse, exposing how systemic misogyny perpetuates control and subjugation. The novel portrays how patriarchal structures not only silence women but also condition them to endure suffering in the name of familial honor and societal expectations. By detailing the protagonist's struggles and resilience, the text reveals her transformation from a victim of domestic violence to an empowered feminist writer, using writing as a tool for resistance and healing. This paper investigates the intersections of gender, power and systemic violence, situating the novel within feminist and ecological frameworks. It critically examines the parallels between the exploitation of women and nature, both viewed as entities to dominate and suppress. The study also highlights the enduring misogynistic practices in modern Indian society, where patriarchal norms stifle women's agency and silence their voices. Ultimately, it underscores how Kandasamy's narrative challenges patriarchal structures and the normalization of abuse, offering a poignant critique of societal complicity. The novel emerges not only as a feminist manifesto but also as a testament to the transformative power of resistance, resilience and the act of reclaiming one's voice.

Keywords: Oppression, Marriage, Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, Pain, Trauma, Resistance, Feminism.

Physical violence, a stark embodiment of patriarchal dominance, emerges as a pivotal theme in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. The novel unflinchingly delineates the harrowing impact of physical abuse, depicting it as both an instrument of subjugation and a mechanism of control wielded by the abuser to maintain dominance over the protagonist. Through visceral portrayals of brutal beatings, acts of physical intimidation, and the use of commonplace objects as weapons, Kandasamy lays bare the insidious normalization of violence within the framework of marriage. The relentless abuse endured by the protagonist is emblematic of the entrenched misogyny that pervades both societal and marital institutions. These powerful depictions do more than narrate individual suffering; they expose the structural complicity of societal norms in perpetuating cycles of violence. By illuminating the physical realities of such abuse, Kandasamy critiques the broader systemic oppression that traps women within the confines of patriarchy. The narrative does not merely present these atrocities as isolated incidents but as manifestations of deeply rooted gendered inequalities, offering a profound and urgent commentary on the enduring nexus between violence and control in patriarchal societies. Marriage, traditionally perceived as a partnership, often becomes a vehicle for patriarchal control, where women are expected to uphold familial honor by prioritizing the needs of their husband and his family. This deeply ingrained expectation underscores a persistent cultural and societal imbalance that continues to undermine women's agency and status. Entrenched within the forces of patriarchy, power structures, class hierarchies, and systemic inequalities, women in India face formidable barriers to independence and self-expression. Despite their dedication and aspirations, their personal choices are often overshadowed by societal norms that reinforce gender-based subjugation. Pain and Trauma theory provides a critical lens to analyze this reality, highlighting how such systemic

oppression inflicts not only physical suffering but also profound psychological and emotional harm. This recurring trauma erodes women's sense of self-worth and perpetuates a cycle of suppression, ultimately sustaining the unequal power dynamics that hinder their progress and autonomy in Indian society. Meena Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* poignantly captures the persistent gender disparity in modern society. Despite being a 21st-century woman with a vocal and independent spirit, the protagonist is systematically silenced and forced to endure abuse, reflecting the harsh realities faced by countless women. Their contributions, often invaluable, remain unacknowledged, and instead of receiving appreciation, women are frequently subjected to various forms of oppression and violence. This systemic subjugation aligns with the metaphorical "law of the jungle," where the powerful thrive by dominating the weaker and silenced. Patriarchal systems mirror this hierarchy, with men asserting control over both women and nature to fulfill their desires and maintain supremacy. The exploitation is sustained through suppression, as the voices of women and the natural world are deliberately ignored. Such patterns reinforce a deeply entrenched hierarchy, ensuring that those in power remain at the top, perpetuating discrimination and inequality. Kandasamy's work becomes a critical lens through which to examine these dynamics, emphasizing the urgent need to dismantle these oppressive structures for a more equitable society. In an essay titled "Violence, Power and Pleasure: a revisionist reading of Foucault from the victim perspective", Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell explore the grounds for violence in society. "They infer that the root cause for grounds of violence is a capitalist society as it produces desires without end" (2009). Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* exposes the entrenched gender bias in society, particularly within the institution of marriage, where husbands are often granted unchecked sexual dominance. A husband's entitlement to his wife's body is portrayed as absolute, reducing her sexuality to an object of his control. Her own desires, needs or consent are rendered irrelevant if they conflict with his intentions. The novel offers a searingly honest portrayal of marital rape, shedding light on how the act of forced penetration becomes a weapon to assert authority and maintain patriarchal dominance over women. Kandasamy's raw, unflinching depiction underscores how patriarchal systems perpetuate this violence, normalizing it within marital settings. By weaving these themes into the protagonist's journey, the novel provides a powerful critique of societal complicity and highlights the resilience required to reclaim one's identity amidst systemic oppression. Canadian researchers Lorene Clark and Debra Lewis believe that when women are viewed as private property, their sexual and reproductive capacities become the sole qualities that give them value (1977). The question posed in *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* - "When a woman understands it is an abusive relationship, why does she keep living it?" reveals the societal complexities that bind women to toxic relationships. One of the most distressing aspects highlighted in the novel is society's apathy toward such atrocities, often coupled with unsolicited advice for women to endure and "make the relationship work." The novel holds a mirror to societal complicity, particularly through the protagonist's conversations with her parents. Her mother, embodying the internalized values of a patriarchal system, advises her to endure the abuse, saying, "Marriage is not a magic," and urging patience and silence, suggesting these are the solutions to problems that are supposedly "not uncommon in the first year of marriages." This reflects a broader societal mindset that normalizes suffering and demands silent endurance, making a "spectacle" of the victim. Similarly, her father perpetuates patriarchal values with his advice: "Do not talk back. Yes, I know. It is difficult. But remember, only if you respond he is going to talk back and things escalate. Silence is a shield and it is also a weapon. Learn how to use it. Why else do we say, 'Silence is peace'?" (Kandasamy 2017: 95). His words encapsulate the harmful glorification of silence as a means to maintain peace, ignoring the damaging consequences for the woman involved. The novel critiques how the fear of societal judgment - such as "what the society would say" or the stigma associated with divorce - further entraps women in abusive marriages. From birth, women are conditioned to silently serve, suppress their voices, and prioritize the preservation of family honor over their well-being. Even when they attempt to articulate their pain, as the protagonist does, their voices are dismissed or silenced, perpetuating cycles of abuse. These ingrained values of submission,

upheld as prerequisites for a "successful" marriage, are deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies. Through its unflinching portrayal of these dynamics, the novel exposes how toxic masculinity and patriarchal structures have insidiously infiltrated societal norms and individual consciousness, making resistance all the more challenging yet vital.

As is pointed: it is not only those women who deny their rape that do not get social support but it is the society which "takes away their right to feel angry about it" (Pitts and Schwartz 1993, 396). In the novel, protagonist's father though shows concern about his daughter and calls his son-in-law a 'bastard' for abusing his daughter but simultaneously tells her to stay silent to make things right.

According to Brigitte Schwab, 'Every man is seen as a potential perpetrator of violence against women.' (Schwab, 2017) This novel is an example to the stark reality that people tend to forget at times. It reminds us, that irrespective of class, caste and education, the gender-oppressive ideology and behavior can still exist. Also, it warns us and the society that a seemingly 'happy and successful' marriage does not necessarily be. Without anyone being aware of its brutality it could be violent, oppressive and abusive. The protagonist herself being a feminist gets trapped in an abusive, almost obnoxious marriage and moreover, she tries and make sense of her partner's violence. This is clearly reflected when she says: "He can be kind, I know he can, I've seen how tender he is with the homeless boys in town, but with me I know he will always choose to be cruel" (Kandasamy 2017). The problem does not end here. Women are taught to rationalize all things, including the abuse and brutalities. As suggested by Schwartz and DeKeseredy: "Right now, there is an important battle being waged over the nature of women's behavior and its role in woman abuse" (Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1993, 249). Whereas men, their minds are nurtured to put all the blame on women for this gender is weak, silent and has no power. Feminism is the solution to the problem but, in India, it is considered to be the problem because it challenges the position of men. Even the narrator's husband believes so, he didn't even wait to consider his abusive behavior rather calls 'her feminism the root cause of all problems'. He says "this is the kind of feminism that ruins love." (Kandasamy 2017, 73)

The discourse on feminism has gained significant traction globally, yet its practical implementation often lags behind the theoretical ideals it champions. In the Indian context, women frequently find themselves deprived of the autonomy to make fundamental choices about their lives, particularly in matters concerning their conjugal rights. The protagonist's husband despises her for being a feminist and does not hesitate to demean her by calling her a whore. An educated, independent writer and feminist endures such verbal assaults, but why? Because she fears that if she speaks out, her family's reputation will be tarnished in the eyes of society. In a patriarchal framework, a girl child is often regarded as a burden, while a baby boy is celebrated with great pomp and splendor. Sons are perceived as the carriers of lineage and the providers for their parents in old age. This deeply ingrained bias raises the question: how is this fair to women? Her husband's abuse is relentless - beating her mercilessly, worse than an animal. Despite inflicting such immense physical and emotional pain, he insists that she should bear his child. Yet, the protagonist makes a courageous decision to reject motherhood in such a hostile and oppressive environment. She recognizes the burden it would place on her and the potential suffering for a child raised in an atmosphere of violence and control. As she poignantly reflects, "This marriage, oppressive and impossible as it is, does not have the power to hold me, hostage, forever. But, if I were to be burdened with a child, I do not know how I could walk away" (Kandasamy). Her decision to prioritize her freedom and well-being underscores her resistance to patriarchal expectations and her determination to break free from the cycle of abuse. The novel portrays the journey of a woman writer who finds salvation in writing, even amidst isolation. Writing becomes her lifeline, a means to process pain and trauma, and a shield against the violence inflicted upon her. Her words are both fierce and subtle, serving dual purposes -provoking resistance and playing along with her abusive husband to avoid escalating violence. Echoing the idiom "words are mightier than the sword," the narrator uses her writing as a weapon of survival, saying, "I slip words between his ribs like a stiletto knife" (Kandasamy, 2017). Writing becomes the protagonist's primary tool for survival and resistance. Through storytelling, she reclaims her voice, confronts her trauma, and challenges the patriarchal structures that seek to silence her. She asserts, "I write to make sense of the chaos around me, to carve out a space for my voice in a world that seeks to silence me" (227). This aligns with James W. Pennebaker's assertion in *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* that "expressive writing can lead to improved mental health and

emotional well-being” (123). For Kandasamy’s protagonist, writing is not merely a creative act but a transformative one, allowing her to process her pain and inspire others. In addition to being a means of survival, writing becomes an act of rebellion and empowerment for the protagonist. Through her words, she resists the erasure of her identity and reclaims the narrative of her life, asserting her agency in the face of systemic oppression. Her act of writing is not merely a coping mechanism but a form of activism, challenging the patriarchal norms that have sought to confine her. By transforming her pain into art, she demonstrates the resilience and power of reclaiming one’s voice, providing inspiration to women facing similar struggles.

The novel captivates readers with its raw and evocative prose, as seen in lines like, “Hope prevents me from taking my own life. Hope is the kind voice in my head that prevents me from fleeing. Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 111). These words encapsulate the complex interplay of despair and resilience in the protagonist’s life. Writing about themes like desire, abuse, and trauma is a deeply challenging act, and Kandasamy’s work becomes a meditation on the art of articulating the unspeakable. The narrator asks, “How could I open up to strangers who buy the fiction performed for their benefit?” This question simultaneously becomes her answer, motivating her to write and share her truth. Pain and Trauma theory enriches the understanding of this narrative, emphasizing how the protagonist’s repeated exposure to violence fractures her sense of self, yet her act of writing becomes a form of agency and resistance. Kandasamy’s inclusion of epigraphs from feminist writers such as Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, and Elfriede Jelinek highlights her solidarity with women across boundaries of caste, race, culture, and language. Their shared experiences of suffering and resilience underscore the universal struggle against patriarchal oppression. As Vrinda Nabar (1995:50) aptly observes, “To be casted as woman in India is to live out this triple-layered existence,” where identity is perpetually defined by the expectations of others. This systemic dehumanization is further contextualized by Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life” (1997, p. 69). Vidyut Bhagwat elaborates on Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy, stating, “The woman is the other against which man defines himself as a subject. In expressing men’s otherness, women are denied their own individuality” (2004, p. 63). These ideas resonate deeply with the protagonist’s struggles, as her identity is erased and reduced to her husband’s perceptions and desires. Kandasamy’s work also draws parallels to Shashi Deshpande’s short story ‘A Wall Is Safer’. In this narrative, the protagonist Hema resigns herself to isolation within the confines of her home, finding a perverse sense of safety in the four walls. Yet, like the narrator in Kandasamy’s novel, Hema is reduced to invisibility, recognized only for her husband’s convenience. She reflects on her isolation, saying, “Unnatural, forced smiles flicker across their faces as they talk to me, staying on even when there is no need. They turn away from me with almost audible sighs of relief ...” (Deshpande, 1993, p. 116). Both women endure the emotional toll of confinement, their voices stifled by the structures of patriarchy, until they begin to recognize the depth of their suppression. As Proshant Chakroborty notes in his commentary on *When I Hit You*, the novel is a powerful manifesto that profoundly impacts the reader’s consciousness and imagination. He asserts that the novel not only illuminates the unimaginable pain inflicted on women but also serves as an inspiration for them to confront trauma and support others in similar circumstances. Through Kandasamy’s vivid storytelling, the narrative underscores the devastating effects of patriarchal control while also offering a path of resistance through words, solidarity, and self-expression. In both *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy and Shashi Deshpande’s *A Wall Is Safer*, the protagonists grapple with self-abnegation as a response to systemic abuse and societal expectations. Kandasamy’s narrator justifies her husband’s goodness by noting his kind behavior toward others, convincing herself he might truly be compassionate, while Deshpande’s protagonist, Hema, relinquishes her professional identity as a lawyer, stating, “Oh I am alright as I am. After all, I’m a good housewife now” (Deshpande, 1993: 119). These moments highlight the internalized oppression and resignation faced by women as they navigate patriarchal structures. Violence and trauma, leave indelible scars on survivors, often forcing them to re-experience their abuse mentally and physically. This cyclical suffering undermines emotional regulation, damages relationships, and erodes a sense of safety. Kandasamy’s protagonist reflects this deeply in her fragmented memories of a painful childhood, failed university romance, political disillusionment, and

violent marriage. Her anguish is articulated in lines such as: “Here, I am the actress, the self-anointed director, the cinematographer and screenplay writer... The story changes every day, every hour, every single time, I sit and chart it out. The actors do not change, I cannot escape the set but with every shift in my perspective, a different story is born” (Kandasamy, 2017: 27). This cyclical narration underscores how trauma transforms survivors into architects of their own fragmented realities, constantly reshaping their pain into narratives for survival. The absence of the protagonist’s name in *When I Hit You* is symbolic of the universality of her plight, as Kandasamy refrains from reducing her story to an individual experience. This deliberate choice emphasizes that the abuse and subjugation described in the novel are not isolated but reflective of the broader realities faced by women worldwide. The novel critiques patriarchal control not only through its narrative but also through the protagonist’s protest against modern misogyny, embodied in the symbolic discourse of clothing. The narrator observes the contrast between male and female clothing: “Always [feel] the joy of watching a lover’s awkwardness when he hurriedly removes his shirt ... and our clothes made for the hands of our friends, the zip that runs along the length of the dress, the bra hook, the sari pleats at the back” (Kandasamy, 2017: 101). She notes that men’s clothing signifies power and invulnerability, while women’s clothing, designed to be easily removed, reflects their perpetual vulnerability. Her resistance is clear in her declaration: “From me, you will only hear about clothes as things that we want to shed” (Kandasamy, 2017: 101), asserting her agency and challenging the patriarchal expectation that confines women’s identities. The protagonist also critiques male hypocrisy, revealing the misogyny entrenched in social and political systems. She states: “For every genuine revolutionary in the ranks, there is a careerist, a wife-beater, an opportunist, a manipulator ... even as the imposters make merry” (Kandasamy, 2017: 89-90). The word “parrot” becomes a potent symbol, likening the husband to an animal that mimics appearances and voices, masking his true nature. This comparison underscores his lack of ethical and moral integrity, revealing his manipulation as a calculated strategy to assert dominance over his wife. The husband’s decision to marry a woman of a lower caste and with literary interests, despite being a professor of literature himself, reveals the entrenched vulnerabilities of patriarchal masculinity. His actions are a calculated effort to affirm his power by exploiting caste and gender hierarchies. Through this narrative, Kandasamy critiques how misogyny in India terrorizes not only women from marginalized castes, perceived as powerless, but also higher-caste women, who are seen as threats to male dominance. The novel poignantly exposes the pervasive and multifaceted nature of patriarchal oppression, linking individual trauma to broader systemic inequalities. The narrative of *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy is structured around the cyclical nature of abuse, offering a profound critique of the mechanisms of power and control in an abusive relationship. The stages of the cycle—Tension-building, Acute Battering, and Manipulation—are vividly depicted. In the tension-building phase, the abuser systematically imposes economic and social isolation on the protagonist, creating an environment of constant fear and unease. This phase is marked by subtle manipulation, which escalates into the acute battering phase, a devastating turning point that exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchal power structures. The manipulation phase perpetuates the cycle as the abuser alternates between violence and false displays of affection, drawing the protagonist back into the toxic relationship and underscoring the psychological complexity of such abuse. As Steven Tracy notes in *Patriarchy and Domestic Violence*, “Domestic violence against women is rooted in and is the logical conclusion of basic patriarchal assumptions about women’s subordinate status” (577). This perspective is exemplified in Kandasamy’s protagonist, whose experiences highlight the lingering effects of trauma. The isolation imposed by her abuser severs her connections with family and friends, leaving her trapped in a cycle of despair. She reflects, “I can’t reach out to anyone; the fear of their judgment weighs heavily on me” (167). Such trauma creates barriers to connection, distorting perceptions of love and intimacy. Her anguish is evident in the poignant line: “How can love be tender when it carries the weight of a fist?” (149), encapsulating the pervasive nature of violence in her life. The novel also explores the dislocating effects of abuse, as seen in the protagonist’s forced relocation to Mangalore, where she feels uprooted and alienated. Deprived of her social network, Facebook becomes her only connection to the outside world and a platform for her writing. However, even this solace is stripped away when her husband demands that she deactivate her account, an act she describes as “career

suicide" (52). Her husband's hostility toward her writing is evident when he derogatorily calls her "a petit bourgeois woman writer" (80). His surveillance and control extend to confiscating her email passwords and restricting her communication with others, further isolating her. His disdain for women writing in English manifests in the misogynistic claim: "The whore in those times was the link, the bridge, between the colonizer and the colonized. Today, the link is the writer who writes in English, this bridge—she is the whore" (74). Kandasamy also lays bare the tools of physical violence and intimidation wielded by her husband. She recounts: "The cord of my MacBook which left thin, red welts on my arms. The back of the broomstick that pounded me across the length of my back. The writing pad whose edges found my knuckles. His brown leather belt. Broken ceramic plates after a brief journey as flying saucers. The drain hose of the washing machine" (70). This catalogue of abuse is a testament to the physical and emotional torment she endures, compounded by her realization: "I did not know that this was the exemplary life awaiting a newly married woman" (70). Through her narrative, Kandasamy critiques the institution of marriage, particularly its dehumanizing effects on women. She explores marital rape with unflinching honesty, contrasting theoretical knowledge with lived experience: "The man who rapes me is not a stranger who runs away ... He is the husband for whom I have to make coffee the following morning" (168). This chilling depiction underscores the normalization of violence within marital relationships and its devastating impact on women. The protagonist's journey from victimhood to empowerment is a powerful testament to resilience. Rejecting the archetype of the "angel in the house," she urges women to refuse subjugation and leave abusive relationships. She declares: "I am rough, gruff, tough. The one who has written these mad and angry and outrageous poems about life and love and sex. I am not afraid of men... I am anti-fragile. I've been made not to break" (219). By transforming her pain into art, she creates an inspiring narrative of defiance. As she asserts, "I am the woman who is willing to display her scars and put them within exhibition frames" (248), her story becomes a rallying cry for women to reclaim their agency and confront systemic oppression. This novel does more than highlight oppression—it challenges the reader to reimagine power, resistance, and the unyielding strength of women navigating patriarchal societies.

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