

Storytelling as Survival: Reclaiming Female Voice through Narration

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Abstract

The text *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* by Meena Kandasamy, is a fierce critique of the so-called sacred institution of marriage where women's voice and desires are silenced to satisfy patriarchal ego. Kandasamy's novel marks a shift by showcasing anger as a legitimate force of feminist emotion. The text is a documentation of domestic violence. It declares that women have all the right to speak her mind, to write her emotions, and to leave/escape the power structure which tries to suppress her voice. This novel serves as a key text in Indian women's writing that re-frames the social institution like marriage not as a destiny but as a contested space where a woman's survival is always at stake. The novel reflects the sociocultural realities in the Indian context where marriage continues to be idealized as a sacred system even if it frequently becomes a site of gender control, violence, and surveillance. Through an unflinching narrative voice, Kandasamy continues to expose the gap between social myths and its lived realities for many women. The novel's title ironically points out the inversion often imposed on women, where the victim herself is accused of provoking violence. In the text, the first-person female voice of the narrator is central. The narrator who happens to be a wife and a writer herself refuses to silence her own voice, instead she speaks from anger, pain, and self-awareness. Her writing itself becomes an act of resistance that situates it in the feminist tradition that insists 'personal is political'. The narrative choice here is not neutral and objective; it shows the subjective experience of the narrator. This subjectivity challenges traditional narrative theory and aligns with the central concept of feminist narratology which examines how stories are shaped by gender and power

structures. Feminist narratology states that narrative structures are not neutral; they are shaped by societal and patriarchal assumptions and questions whose voice dominates the story. Unlike the traditional narratology theory which emphasizes on plot and structure, feminist narratology focuses on the experiences and emotions lived by women, their memory, their trauma, and the psychological aspects that are overlooked by the conventional narratives. This paper discusses the framework of feminist narratology and examines the first-person narrative voice in Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* as a tool for resistance and power.

Key Words: narrative, feminist narratology, patriarchy, resistance, violence

Introduction

Cambridge online dictionary defines narrative as “a story or a description of a series of events” which means that narrative is a story itself that includes the account of events being told. For example, a story written by an author describing a woman's lived experience under patriarchy is a narrative. Narratology is “the study of narrative and narrative structures.” Narratology focuses on the structure and mechanics of storytelling. It analyses how the story is constructed in order to mean what it says. The term was first coined by Tzvetan Todorov a Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher in his book *Grammaire du Decameron* (1969), where he defines narratology as a “scientific study of narrative structures” (10). Influenced by structuralism, Todorov felt the need to move towards a more structured and scientific way to study the linguistic aspects of narrative as a system governed by rules and patterns. His approach towards narratives signaled a shift from the classical criticism which focused on the morals, themes, and the authorial intent of a narrative towards a new critical approach that would study the grammar of narratives. It is similar to how linguistics studies the grammar of language.

Narratology as a modern theory emerged out of two major literary movements that were Russian Formalism and French Structuralism. Russian Formalism which emerged in the early twentieth century (1916-1920) described literature in terms of form, its devices, structures, and techniques rather than its themes and morals. This theory was initiated by Russian theorist Vladimir Propp in his book *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928). In this book, Propp borrows the term

morphology from Botany which means the study of the form and structure of living organisms. Propp uses it in the context of studying the folktales. He writes,

It is possible to make an examination of the forms of the tale which will be as exact as the morphology of organic formations. If this cannot be affirmed for the tale as a whole, in its full extent, it can be affirmed in any case for the so-called fairy tales, that is, tales in the strictest sense of the word. (1928, [2010]).

Propp says that fairytales have an underlying structure just like the living organisms and hence they can be analysed in a similar scientific fashion, Narratology expanded this idea beyond folktales to novels, films, and other narrative forms.

French structuralism flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, especially through the works of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. His structuralist insights were put together by his students as *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), published after his death, where he introduces the concept of linguistic sign which according to Saussure is arbitrary and that there is no reason why a particular sound image (signifier) is related to a particular concept (signified). This fixity of sign and signified is an assumed relationship which is largely based on social conventions and shared knowledge. Saussure's ideas inspired critics to go beyond linguistics and look for structures beneath cultural phenomena. His ideas led the French structuralist to treat language as a scientific system of science. They argued that texts, myths, cultures, and narratives are governed by underlying structures that operate beneath the surface and not by individual's intention. This structuralist turn foregrounded narratology as a systematic study of narrative structure and encouraged narratologists like Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince and others who adopted this methodological model in analysing the deep structures of narratives rather than simply interpreting the themes, plots, and messages.

Manfred Jahn, in his book *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (2005), discusses Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of signifier and signified into two components of sign. Jahn says, "If we take a narrative text to be a complex sign, its signifier is the narrative discourse and the signified is the story" (15). Here narrative discourse means how the story is told, the form of presentation which includes narrative voice (first person, third person), the order of events, and the perspectives (who speaks? And who sees?).

Roland Barthes, in his book *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1966), points out that

The Russian formalists, Propp, and Lévi-Strauss have taught us to identify the following dilemma: either narrative is a random assemblage of events, in which case one can only speak of it in terms of the narrator's (the author's) art, talent, or genius—all mythical embodiments of chance; or else it shares with other narratives a common structure, open to analysis, however delicate it is to formulate. There is a world of difference between the fortuitous, in its most complex forms, and the simplest combinative or obligatory scheme: for no one can produce a narrative without referring himself to an implicit system of units and rules. (238)

According to Barthes, narratives are not random. Narratives follow rules that can be analysed, theorized, and can be compared. He mentions that even the most complex narratives are combinations of structured elements.

The loopholes in the traditional narrative theory had also been pointed out by Gerard Genette, a literary theorist associated with structuralism in his book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). He writes,

Until now the theory of narrative has been so little concerned with the problems of narrative enunciating, concentrating almost all its attention on the statement and its contents, as though it were completely secondary, for example, that the adventures of Ulysses should be recounted sometimes by Homer and sometimes by Ulysses himself. (26)

Genette is saying that the traditional narrative has mostly focused on what is said and what happens in the story of the text and it largely ignores the act of telling itself that means who is telling the story and from what position. He found this neglect surprising as the difference between a story told by a narrator inside the story and one told by an external narrator completely changes the experience of narration. He gives the example of *Odyssey*, in which the adventures of Ulysses are sometimes narrated by Ulysses himself and sometimes by an external narrator called Homer. These two situations differ largely. When Ulysses recounts his own story, it is shaped by his memory and experience whereas when it is told by Homer the narrative voice becomes more distanced and authoritative. Genette says that this difference was noticed by Plato way before when he distinguished between direct narration and

imitation. Genette proposes to study narrative text by analysing two relationships: one, between the narrative discourse and the event it recounts, that is how the story is organized and presented in a text; and two, the relationship between narrative discourse and the act that produces that discourse that means who is telling the story, from what position and under what circumstance, whether the narrator is external like Homer or an internal narrator like Ulysses (27).

Genette gives a clear distinction between story, narrative, and narrating to avoid any confusion. According to him, a story refers to the content being told, narrative (discourse) refers to the actual form the story takes, how the events are arranged, how it is described, emphasized and paced for example in a text or a film, and narrating as the act of telling itself, the context, who is telling the story, from what position, and the context of the story being told. It can be either real like an author writing or a fictional character like a narrator in a novel (27). Genette considers narrative discourse most important because, according to him, "the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis, which is itself the only instrument of examination at our disposal in the field of literary narrative, and particularly fictional narrative" (27). So, when Genette talks about the narrative discourse he is not focusing on what is happening in the story alone, or the act of writing by the author but on the textual organization of the story being told. He also organizes narrative study around three categories, "that of tense, in which the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the discourse is expressed; that of aspect, or the way in which the story is perceived by the narrator; that of mood, in other words, "the type of discourse used by the narrator." (26) These concepts laid the foundation of modern narratology.

Gerald Prince, in his book *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (1982), defines narrative as "The representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (4) and narratology "as the study of the form and functioning of narrative" (4). According to Prince, the term narratology is a relatively new term developed intensively in the 20th century but the discipline dates back to Plato and Aristotle. Plato discusses narrative in his book *The Republic* (375 BCE) through the concept of Mimesis (Imitation) and Diegesis (Narration) wherein he explains that diegesis is pure narration where the poet/author speaks his own voice and mimesis is the dramatic imitation done by the poet. Here he goes on to claim that narrative is the form of imitation of reality, which itself is the imitation of the ideal form, which

means a narrative is twice removed from the truth. Aristotle responds to Plato in his treatise *Poetics* (335 BCE) where he revalued mimesis as natural and productive and not deceptive. Aristotle explained that narrative represents truths about human actions and not mere copies.

Mieke Bal, in her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), defines

Narratology as a field of study is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events – of cultural artefacts that tell a story. Such theory helps us understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives. A theory is a systematic set of generalized statements about a particular segment of reality. That segment of reality, the corpus, about which narratology attempts to provide insight consists of narrative texts of all kinds, made for a variety of purposes and serving many different functions. (26)

Here, Bal explains another side of narratology, she points out that narratology is not only limited to literary fiction, but it applies to all cultural artefacts that tells a story. Here she generalizes narratology as a systematic framework to understand how narratives function structurally and culturally.

Influenced by structuralism, initially, narratology considered narratives universal, however with the rise of post-structuralism that questioned the fixed binaries of structuralism, narratology too evolved and has been developed into various sub-disciplines and broadened its scope to analyse various other narrative forms such as feminist narratology, cognitive narratology, post-modern narratology etc. This paper is concerned with feminist narratology which is being discussed in the next section.

Feminist Narratology

Feminist narratology is a critical approach that examines how sex and gender shapes narratives. It exposes the mainstream narrative theory that overlooks gender considering it as neutral. This concept originated in the debates on the shortcomings of the concept of narratology. Susan Snider Lanser (1986) first put forward this theory in her groundbreaking paper "Toward a Feminist Narratology" in which she charges narratology with ignoring the question of gender. She questions "Upon what body of texts, upon what understandings of the narrative and referential universe, have the insights of narratology been based?" (612) She also claims that "virtually no work in

the field of narratology has been taken into account, either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses, so that “the masculine text stands for universal text”. This means, first of all, that the narratives which have provided the foundation of narratology have been either men’s text or texts treated as men’s texts.” (612) Drawing on to the key figures such as Genette, Propp, Barthes, Todorov that laid the foundation for the modern narratology, Lanser argues that their texts are the examples of how masculine text stands for universal text.

She argues that traditional narratology, due to its formalist bias, suppresses the mimetic side of fiction and emphasizes on the semiotic aspects while feminist narrative tends to cover the lived realities that the narratives try to convey. Lanser does not entirely reject narratology, but she suggests expanding narratology which takes into account the contribution of women both as producers and interpreters of texts (612). She points out that narratology isolates the text from its social and historical context and if it considers the context it is done on the basis of certain narrative conventions and codes, and these conventions are “limited to the formalist closure” (613). She insists on “writing women's texts into the historical canon of narratology” (613) so that the theory can have a diversity of narratives. Lanser calls for a feminist narratology that reshapes the traditional narratology and gives more focus on the elements such as voice, tone and polyphony to understand how women's voice is expressed and represented in literature.

Lanser makes a point by affirming that one word which resonates with contemporary feminist is “voice”. She quotes Luce Irigaray who suggests, to find a voice (voix) is to find a way (voie) in her essay “Toward a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice”(3). According to Lanser, voice suggests something spoken by a real person but in narratology voice is technical term, where the teller is inside the story and it is different from the author and the non-narrating characters in the story, this lead her to distinguish between three narrative modes of voice, in her 1992 book *Authority of Fiction*, the three voices that form an integral part of narration according to her are authorial voice, personal voice and communal voice, where she defines authorial voice as “to identify narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential.” (15) In other words, authorial voice refers to a narrator which is outside the fiction world with public authority and reflects its own role as a narrator.

Lanser defines personal voice “to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories” (18) according to her a narrator narrating the story and is also the protagonist of that story possesses the personal voice. Communal voice, according to her “mean a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” (21). According to Lanser these three modes are not just technical storytelling methods but they are different ways through which women writers claim authority, each form creates its own fiction of authority and help establish an alternative world to present female subjectivity and redefine feminine and open different possibilities for feminist expression.

Thus, Feminist Narratology helps to expand classical narratology by demonstrating narrative structures deeply which are influenced by gendered experiences, social power and relations. Reading Kandasamy’s novel *When I Hit You: Or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* through feminist lens will help to analyse how first person narrative voice and the acts of storytelling functions as a form of resistance towards patriarchy transforming personal trauma into assertion of female agency and narrative authority.

Reading Meena Kandasamy’s Novel through Feminist Narratological Lens

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, novelist, translator, and a political activist from Chennai. She is a major Dalit woman writer from Tamil Nadu. Her writing is raw and comes out of anger towards injustice. In her fiction and poems, she portrays the real picture of Indian women in the 21st century. *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of a Writer as a Young Wife* is a 2017 work of fiction by Kandasamy. This work comes out from her personal experience with marital violence. The story follows the life of a young wife who happens to be a writer as well; she is the narrator and the protagonist of the story. The story chronicles her four-month marriage and how she suffers in the hand of her radical communist professor husband. Soon after marriage, her life turns disastrous. She faces continuous violence, surveillance by her husband. She narrates her experience in a series of flashbacks and stream of consciousness technique in first-person voice to narrate her story. The story begins with the aftermath of her escape from the traumatic marriage where the stories of her sufferings are repeatedly retold, not by her but by her mother. The narrator mocks by describing how her story is diluted and reframed by her mother to make it socially acceptable. The narrator writes,

When she tells the story of my escape, she talks of my feet. (Even when I am around. Even when my feet are actually visible to her audience. Even when my toes curl in shame. Even when the truth is that my feet had no role in my escape (3).

Her mother turned her months of abuse all about cracked heels and lice speaking only about physical details and ignoring her emotional trauma. The narrator says, "Much as I love my mother, authorship is a trait that I have come to take very seriously. She's stealing from a writer's life. How often is that sort of atrocity even allowed to happen? The number one lesson I have learnt as a writer: Don't let people remove you from your own story." (9). This assertion reclaims narrative ownership. Here Kandaswamy firmly emphasizes that storytelling is not just therapeutic, but it is political. By narrating her own experience, she challenges the cultural norms that expect a woman who is a survivor to go silent and repackage her story for societal acceptance. This assertion stands as a raw material for feminist narratological application. Feminist narratology demands attention on "the context of how stories are told, by whom, and for whom." (Mezei 1). In the novel when the narrator says "I must take some responsibility over my own life. I must write my own story." (9), this moment marks a turning point from victimhood to agency. By choosing to write her own story, she not only rejects her mother's reframed story but also asserts control over her identity as both a woman and a writer. The abused woman herself becomes the storyteller rather than an object spoken for by others. The narrator speaks in first-person, the "I" voice creates a close bond of familiarity and empathy with her readers, by directly addressing the realities of marriage, patriarchy and social expectation she transforms her personal testimony into political. This "I" voice stands for a homodiegetic narrator, Gerard Genette, in his 1972 *Discours du Recit*, defines a homodiegetic narrator as the narrator in the first-person who tells his own story. (248) A homodiegetic narrator narrates the story from his/her personal experience to create a sense of subjectivity and intimacy in the storytelling. It is also very significant here that the "I" is a crafted literary voice where the narrator draws heavily from the author's life but remains a fictional construct. This crafted literary voice empowers female authors to articulate her inner feelings, her anger, her desires, and critique the social norms without any fear. When "I" is understood as a narrative voice rather than the author herself, it legitimizes women's self-focused story taking the shape of an artistic construct, this distance created by fiction becomes a strategy that pushes back the notion of women's writing as 'too personal'. This freedom allows her to reshape her experience, to tell out the deeper emotional and political truths boldly without any risk. This "I" voice

becomes a tool of agency where she can speak her mind without reducing it to a mere autobiography. Feminist narratology too claims this, when Lanser writes "For the condition of being woman in a male-dominant society may well necessitate the double voice, whether as conscious subterfuge or as tragic dispossession of the self." (618). This means that a woman often cannot speak in a single unified voice, she uses double voice, one which is socially accepted, which is soft and silent, the other is her internal conscious voice, which is hidden. Conscious subterfuge refers to the intentional hiding of the real voice or identity behind a mask. In literary context the author knowingly uses narrative tricks to express her innermost feelings without directly exposing herself.

In the novel the wife continues to narrate her story and uses metaphor of life as a film set to explain how she survives daily life with her abusive husband by pretending to turn her suffering into a performance. She says, "It is easier to imagine this life in which I'm trapped as a film. Here, long before I ever faced a camera, I became an actress." (14) This shows that the narrator is forced into performative femininity which comes from the concept of gender performativity given by Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, where she argues that people tend to behave in a particular way to fit into the society. The idea of performativity is the act of performance where a person walks, talks and behaves to please societal expectations which is not a true expression of a person's identity. When the narrator's husband returns home, she acts out a carefully rehearsed scene waiting at the door, smiling, kissing his cheek, offering him juice, listening to him speak. This scene is repeated daily. She pretends that she is interested in his political ideas, praises him just to not make him upset. "The longer I stretch the act of the happily married couple, the more I dodge his anger. It's not a test of talent or ambition. My life depends upon it" (20). The narrator uses plainness in her clothing, appearance, and behaviour as a way to stay safe. She wears dull clothes, ties her hair tightly, and avoids wearing anything attractive. "The effect of adhering to my husband's wishes gives me the appearance of a woman who has given up." (16) Her plain look is not a sign of personal choice; it is a shield to protect herself from abuse. She wants to appear so ordinary that no one notices her. She enacts the role of a good wife which means her narrative identity is intimidated to avoid violence. Feminist narratology helps to see that narrative identity is not private but a structurally produced position. These structures can be language, gender roles, power relations in a society etc, as Lanser in *Fictions of Authority* (1992) says, "The female voice conforms in order to "con" form: "women's language" becomes a calculated response to alienation and censorship, an evasion of

material threat.” (12) By women’s language, Lanser means the silence, emotional labour, calculated response that becomes a natural mode of expression to perform conformity in order to survive.

She lives in Primrose Villa, a small house in a strange town, she feels trapped in the space of three rooms and a veranda. Feminist narratology does not see the domestic space as a mere setting but as a space of a woman’s lived oppression, where a private/ domestic space becomes a site of patriarchal power. The husband’s controls subtly start by confining her physical space as they moved to Mangalore after marriage, away from the presence of her family and friends, the local language was alien to her. The email account and Facebook account were deleted. The phone calls were being monitored. Even Yahoo messenger, which was her only source of professional link to the editors for whom she used to write essays and articles, logged off which resulted in her cutting all her professional ties. Emotional blackmail became the object of control by the husband. He threatens to harm himself with matchsticks if she denies his commands. She called this act as “an act of career suicide” (52). Although she goes through constant surveillance from her husband, the writer finds ways to escape. She secretly finds out ways through which she can send her writings to the editors. The narrator constructs her own experience through storytelling. Writing her own subjectivity becomes a site for emotional liberation. This sync in with feminist narratology as it shows how narrative form and voice are shaped by gendered experience and how narration itself becomes a site of resistance and exposes structures of patriarchal control. Meena Kandasamy brings the reader into the raw, disorienting experience of sudden violence within a relationship that once promised love and companionship. The narrator’s belief in “One-True Love” collapses. She admits the love she once believed would last forever, a love that would heal and sustain her, but her vision has been destroyed. Women are often taught that endurance and sacrifice are essential parts of love, but here the narrator critiques this cultural conditioning, showing how it traps women in abusive relationships by glorifying their suffering as part of devotion when her parents, knowing her situation, ask her to keep silent. She adheres to her parents advice by climbing “into the incredible sadness of silence” (161). She says but her inner voice speaks something different. Her inner consciousness feels,

To stay silent is to censor all conversation. To stay silent is to erase individuality. To stay silent is an act of self-flagellation because this is when

the words visit me, flooding me with their presence, kissing my lips, refusing to dislodge themselves from my tongue. (161)

This conditioning made it difficult for her to see her partner's violence for what it was—abuse, not passion or care. When the culturally demanded silence is overpowering, her narrative voice becomes a site to prevent self-erasure. When her environment becomes suffocating, the act of writing becomes her lifeline, a way she can resist the silence imposed on her. She transforms her pain into testimony by narrating her suffering, the narrator reclaims the power and control. Her writing becomes a tool of survival as well as resistance against the patriarchal heavy-handedness.

Conclusion

The evolution of Narratology from Russian Formalism and French Structuralism and its development into feminist poetics reveals that narratives are not neutral; they are shaped by experiences, and gender roles. The modern narratologist like Todorov, Genette, Prince, etc established narratology as a systematic and scientific framework to analyse narrative text and their models of universalized masculine text overlooking the role of gender in storytelling practices. Feminist narratology emerged as a necessary intervention to the classical models to expand and politicize it and put forward the question of voice, gender and subjectivity. Feminist critics like Susan S Lanser, Robyn Warhol, Rimmon- Kenan demonstrated that the position of the narrator, that is who is speaking, from where and under what cultural constraints are central to the narrative power structures.

Meena Kandasamy's text *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* reveals how narrative voice becomes a site of resistance against patriarchal control. The conscious use of first-person "I" voice by Kandasamy turns personal testimony into political. The homodiegetic voice of the narrator not only recounts the events but also reclaim authorship by challenging the silence imposed on her by exposing the hypocrisy embedded in the ideological structures of marriage. Through performative survival strategies, and persistently returning back to writing as an act of self-assertion, the novel portrays how narrative is shaped by gender experience. The protagonist disrupts the myth of the sacred institution of marriage by turning her lived trauma into narrative discourse.

This study affirms that feminist narratology provides an essential lens to study the writing of contemporary women authors and enables us to see different narrative techniques like voice, which are intertwined with social hierarchies. The novel stands as a compelling text that shows how feminist narratology acts as a bridge between theory and demonstrating lived realities by presenting it as a radical act of transformation.

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