

Power of a Battered Woman in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You or A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife

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Abstract

Domestic violence is one of the most indiscernible acts that explain social and economic hierarchy in society that runs parallel with domestic rape. It is the violent activity of the male against women that endorses male domination and supremacy that is linked with the powerful versus powerless. Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You or A Portrait of the writer as a Young Wife records the survival story of a young woman writer from the cruel hands of her male chauvinistic husband. This paper tries to analyse the resistance and power of a battered woman from an oppressive marriage relationship and her success in becoming a writer.

Keywords: Suppression, Communism, Feminism, Domestic rape, Assertion.

Introduction:

A woman is always defined in respect to man. She is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a relative position. In patriarchal society, the standard of womanhood is set by men for men. Far from being regarded as an individual in her own right, the traditional role assigned to her is that of dutiful wife and mother. Marriage and the ideal family life are reinforced as a moral and social institution. In Indian society a woman is an appendage, a slave to her male master. She is not an individual in her own right but a medium through which man aspires for self-affirmation and self-realization. A woman rarely leads an independent life. She exists in a bipolar world: on the one hand, she is subordinated to the male oriented

world of her husband and on the other, committed to the assertion of her womanhood, her female ego. Her identity is seen only as an attachment of her husband. She lives a life as oppressed, exploited, victimised in the name of social and cultural restraints. The system of patriarchy hardly has given an individual identity to the Indian woman leaving apart recognition of her talent and entity. She is expected to maintain tolerance, and patience in the name of tradition.

Cutting across the boundaries, class and culture, violence against women is present in almost all countries. Brutality and violence against women in many societies are taken as a sign of acceptance due to the cultural phenomenon. This makes women in society to become more dependent and inferior to their male counterparts. The pain and trauma are mutilated further by the awareness that such abuse and insults are meted out to her by someone whom she trusts and believes for love, and affection and to whom she has dedicated herself with the hope to receive the most cosy, gentle warmth and solidarity. But the andro-centric society provides her with a subaltern position by insulting and abusing her both mentally and physically. Further to her utter dismay, the abuse and violence inflicted upon her is not by a stranger on the street, such trauma, pain are meted out by the most loving partner who took the woes of love and promise of protection.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy, is a poet, novelist, translator, and woman activist. Most of her works are centred on feminism and cast annihilation. She edited *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly English magazine. She has translated E.V.Periyar's feminist tract *Penn Yean Adimai Aanaal?* (Why Were Women Enslaved), and translated the speeches of Thol.Thirumavalavan, and Tamil Elam writers like Kasi Anandam, Cheran, and JIS Jayapal. She co-authored the first English biography of Ayyankali, a Keralite Dalit leader. Meena Kandasamy has also debuted as an actress in a Malayalam film *Oraalppokkam*. She has published two collections of poetry namely *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Her poetry collection *Touch* carries untouchability and cast annihilation as major theme, with a foreword by Kamala Das and her second poetry collection *Ms. Militancy* shows an explosive feminist perspective of retelling Hindu and Tamil myths. *Mascara* and *My lover* speaks of Rape and won her the first prize in all India Poetry competition.

Her novels include *The Gipsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You or A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). Her fiction carries very powerful themes. In *The Gipsy Goddess* she narrates the real incident of Kilvenmani which explores the gruesome murder of 44 Dalit labourers along with their families

locked in a hut and were burnt alive in a remote village of southern Tamil Nadu in 1968.

Her second novel *When I Hit You* is a personal narrative about spousal abuse, domestic and sexual violence. The story revolves around the horrifying and gripping portrayal of the narrator's isolation and abuse at the hands of her husband. Living in a society in which a woman is expected to remain silent and compliant, she comes to realise that she must rescue herself. The concept of modern marriage stands very powerfully analysed in the novel. As the title suggests it is also a story of a young woman becoming a writer by breaking her bonds of marriage and proving that this kind of women do exist and need to exist. The novel narrated in first person voice graphically illustrates the power and tough journey of a young battered woman writer towards assertiveness. The novel begins with the unnamed narrator's mother lamenting on the pitiable condition of her daughter who had come back by breaking her bonds from her abusive husband. The author introduces herself to narrate her story.

The number one lesson I learnt as a writer; Don't let people remove you from your own story. Be ruthless, even if it is your own mother....I must take some responsibility over my own life. I must write my story.

(WIHY 9)

In *When I Hit You* Meena Kandasamy has honestly voiced out the personal experience. It is not only the story of her unnamed narrator but it is the voice of millions of oppressed women in the world who face all sorts of insults, abuse and whose voice are strangled resulting in forced silence.

The unnamed narrator after her breakup with a politician in Kerala, returns to Chennai. To divert herself and to forget her past she becomes a freelancer almost to all the magazines and her writings put her in to the limelight of the literary world through which she acquires many friends and followers in social media. By chance she meets a college professor. She finds him charismatic for his revolutionary communist intellectual. Her parents find him as a perfect marriage material and get him married to their only daughter.

The couple move to a small town in Mangalore where the narrator finds out the other fake side of her husband. In a very short while she sees her Marxist comrade husband turning out to be a male chauvinist and detests the idea of his wife being a writer. He begins inflicting pain upon himself. He burns his skin by match sticks till she approves to delete her Facebook account, then again, her email password and lastly all her phone contacts. He makes it clear that she comes out of all her

social media so that she doesn't get a chance to know anything about the outside world.

Here, he burns himself, causing no harm whatsoever to the damsel-in-distress.... He lights a match, brings it to his bare left elbow, extinguishes it against his skin I smile nervously.... Then another match is lit (49)

Meena Kandasamy points out the intention of the abuser. By self-flagellation he brings terror in her mind and gains control over her mind and isolates her from the outer world. 'His aim is to make me suffer for his pain: I do not want to suffer two-fold by inflicting this bizarre punishment on myself.' (51)

After gaining complete control over her, his abusive activity of violence grows by beating her with laptop charger, leather belt, drain hose of washing machine.

The cord of my Mac-Book 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 edge found my knuckles. His brown leather belt...the drain hose of the watching machine (70)

Verbal Abuse:

He finds pleasure by delineating her as petit-bourgeoise, feminist writer and prostitute. Her marriage becomes a re-educating camp for her husband set her on the right path. 'He

transformed into a teacher, and I became the wife-student learning from this Communist crusader' (32) He answers her mails and soon she finds out that all her 26000 emails been deleted and she has left with nothing, her online freedom is totally curtailed. 'I feel nauseous. I feel robbed of my identity. I'm no longer myself if another person can so easily assume my life while we live under the same roof.' (55)

The more he tries to suppress her the stronger her will grows to become a writer. The unnamed narrator finds solace in writing letters to the imaginary lovers just to keep her writing skill in progress She finds such letters help her to improve her imagination, creativity and her art of expression. She quietly deletes all the letters before her husband returns home. The minute he leaves the house she is propelled forward to write a story.

'Can I write this novel? Will the fear in my state of mind eat into my writing? Will I be betrayed by these words I choose? I find myself incapable of writing even a single word. I The women in the book I'm supposed to be writing are so strong I'm nothing like them. My life shames me before my prose. (81)

To her, becoming a writer gives her self-respect and she finds the job title dignified. But to her husband, a

woman that too his inferior wife becoming writer simply means 'defiance'. Her efforts to write poems are mocked. Whenever she starts writing a poem he is deeply disturbed. He opposes pointing out that her poems will become the source of their future troubles. On the contrary, his lectures on materialism disappears when he writes his opening lines When I Hit You, Comrade Lenin weeps. Daily accusations elevate resulting in harsh verbal abuse. He feels happy by suggesting her to declassing jobs. The narrator is constantly put into threat. Her mind goes into colossal darkness. He calls it as insect infested mind:

When it is not depression, when it is not this restless insect flying around in my brain and eating away all the softer parts that programme me to be an obedient wife, he blames it on the demons that have possessed me (151)

The narrator finds that there is no escape for her when his verbal abuse becomes physical abuse. He does not miss any small chance to beat her. Very trivial matters become big faults that end up in violence. More than pain the trauma caused by him makes her shudder.

When he hits me, the most frightening part is not the pain and the possible scarring and the perverted sense of shame...when he hits me the terror follows from the instinct that this will go further, that this does not end

easily that today is my arms he is punching tomorrow it will be my hair.... when he hits me the terror flows from the fear that today he uses his bare hands but tomorrow he could wield a heavy -buckled belt.....he could break open my head against a wall (155)

Unable to tolerate and cannot take any more violence, the narrator seeks the help of her parents. But to her utter dismay they only try to convince her to stay back and advise her to adjust by keeping silence and observing obedience to her husband. This results in the narrator lapsing into silence. Whatever he says and whenever there is a chance for fight, she remains silent. As a writer she finds silence erasing her individuality. 'My silence settles on us like incessant rain.... My silence becomes an invincible shield. He attempts to penetrate its surface with every convincible tactic to provoke me into conversation but he fails. He is left listening to his own words.... He reads this as rejection. (162)

Domestic Rape:

The narrator's induced silence is taken as an insult and the domestic violence of beating advances to the most brutality of rape. Being educated the unnamed narrator can not escape from this barbaric activity. Rape is the worst form of humiliation. It gives men the power to brutalize women and

signifies intrusion of one's self honour and self- dignity

Rape is considered a weapon of domination and coercion both physically and psychologically. It is considered the most obvious and visible degrading form of oppression. It is also a patriarchal construct that dominates women and takes away the basic individual autonomy of the raped and battered women:

I never understood rape until it happened to me. It was a concept- of savagery, of violence, of violation, of disrespect.... Sex, actually rape becomes his weapon to tame me...The shame of rape is the shame of the unspeakable. Women have found it easier to jump into fire consume poison blow themselves up as suicide bombers than tell another soul about what happened. A rape is a fight you did not win. you could not win.... A rape is also punishment, sometimes, the punishment for saying no (167-170)

According to him the violence and rape is necessary and justified in order to correct her. For his inhuman act is declaration to discipline and tame her to put her in the right path of an obedient, good wife. The rape is to make her understand that he can do anything with her body and to prove his ownership on her. Abusing her ravenously and ferociously the Maoist professor threatens her shaving her skin from the scalp and leaving her to

death. Before she dies would inform her parents about her condition.

He instils a raw bleeding fear in me in the belief that I will be too afraid to act... I will skin your scalp. It will be slow It will be very painful...this punishment is not only for you. You will not die I will call your father to come and collect you (184)

The narrator becomes too hysterical due to the fear of death. She hears her own voice repeating you are more useful than dead. Meena Kandasamy's inference on Althusser strangled his wife to death and he would rationalize it his theory as suicide-by proxy shows Kandasamy's profound interest towards creativity.

During their visit to a gynaecologist through a far relative of her husband reveals her the truth of her husband's first broken marriage. The narrator gets a trump card. When already a woman has boldly walked out of him, why can't she? The first question arises in her mind It is when and how to put her plan into practice. She calls her parents and informs that her life is at threat and is afraid that he would kill her. Their response to take her back gives her much strength.

Women do not merely face the abuse from the abuser, it is the society and the structure that are more daunting and become a silent abuser. 'In the eyes of the world, a women who runs away from death is more dignified

than a woman who runs away from her man'.(209)

Power of the battered woman:

She behaves too good to him to gain his confidence. She talks to him pleasantly 'like the ceremonial bathing and garlanding of the sacrificial goat, a token display of affection before the axe falls' (204) Her husband starts believing her to have totally changed. He admits his vulnerable story of his dear friend and his own guilt of running away by not saving him in a gorilla attack. The narrator takes this opportunity to defy him. She incites him attacking his masculinity and mocks at his false dedication to the cause of communism.

Revolutionary? Don't pretend you are a revolutionary. Don't tell me how brave you are. A brave man doesn't run. A brave man doesn't rape and hits his wife. You my husband, are not a brave man (212)

Meena Kandasamy clearly shows the power of the battered woman. She shows complete resistance towards violence and humiliation that follows. In order to escape from the dangerous situation, she has to induce her abuser to increase the intensity of violence. While he beats and thrashes her the narrator's mind tries to record all the events happening on her. This records the power of the battered woman.

Conclusion:

Meena Kandasamy has very carefully structured her novel. The innocent, aspirant young writer slowly gets in to the web of bad marriage that clips her wings and makes her to lose her identity. Then escalates to undergo mental and physical abuse resulting in domestic rape. At one point, as a woman, she become confused and numb for a while but Meena Kandasamy lets both the identities in their own ways. One as a young woman suffering endlessly and more than suffering her fear of death increases. At the same time as a writer, she clearly plans and structures the very activity of her sadist husband to have his own way so that she can enrich his sadism in her future narration as a writer.

Meena Kandasamy's use of language is rhythmical. She skilfully weaves her past with her present situation gracefully. Her rich layers of memories about her past politician lover and her collegemates and the current situation in the hands of her sadist husband show her character maturation. Though she vehemently attacks her hypocritic communist husband through her writing she peels him off to his real colour. As a wife her suffering and traumatic pain are explained as a tumultuous ocean, as a feminist writer she maintains cool calm and composed while elaborating the violence.

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