SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue-12(December);2025**

Negotiating Gender, Caste, and Agency: An Intersectional Feminist Study of Dalit Women's Representation in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

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Article Received: 25/11/2025
Article Accepted: 29/12/2025
Published Online: 30/12/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.783

Abstract

This article argues that Meena Kandasamy's the Gypsy Goddess (2015 edition) and When I Hit You (2017) articulate two connected but formally distinct accounts of women's agency under caste-marked and patriarchal domination. The former makes the agrarian collective and the violence of landlord power central to the politics of historical narration; the latter tracks how marital confinement, digital surveillance, sexual violation, and the appropriation of language attempt to dispossess a woman of narrative authority. Bringing Dalit feminist standpoint criticism into conversation with intersectional analysis and the study of narrative form, the essay proposes "distributed agency" as a critical description of how resistance emerges in relation to labor, community, writing, and acts of testimony rather than as a purely individual triumph. Close comparative reading reveals that the texts are joined not by an identical narrative of victimhood but by their suspicion of who can speak for the injured and under what conditions testimony circulates. The argument also identifies an interpretive limit: the caste location of the unnamed narrator of When I Hit You is not adequately specified to make her an uncomplicated representative of every Dalit woman. The novels instead demand differentiated attention to caste, class, gender, ideological power, and the ethics of literary mediation.

Keywords: Dalit feminism; intersectionality; Meena Kandasamy; caste; gender; narrative agency; testimony; Indian English fiction

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Introduction

Dalit feminist literary criticism confronts a double difficulty. To discuss caste without gender risks treating Dalit political experience as implicitly masculine; to discuss violence against women without caste risks universalizing a social subject whose institutional circumstances are profoundly unequal. Kandasamy's two novels make this difficulty visible through formally dissimilar settings: the agrarian world of Kilvenmani and the intimate, ideologically saturated space of a marriage. The question is not merely what kinds of oppression the books depict but how narrative voice refuses the conversion of political injury into readily consumable literary spectacle (Kandasamy, The Gypsy Goddess; Kandasamy, When I Hit You).

The comparative claim developed here is that agency is neither absent under domination nor secured automatically by speaking. It is conditional, relational, and unevenly distributed. In the first novel, peasant organization and the struggle over the archive challenge the authority of elites to define an atrocity. In the second, the protagonist's efforts to preserve a private language and a writerly future confront a husband's efforts to monopolize interpretation. These differences make "agency" a problem of scale, genre, access, and recognition rather than a synonym for empowerment.

Research Questions and Contribution

The study asks three questions. First, how does the intersection of caste with land, labor, sexuality, and class shape what counts as injury in the selected narratives? Second, how do contrasting forms—self-reflexive collective historical fiction and first-person marital testimony—determine the possibilities of women's political and expressive action? Third, when does the recovery of voice risk appropriating the position of those whose suffering it narrates? These questions address representation and the ethics of mediation, not the measurement of real-world incidence.

Existing research has already established the relevance of Dalit feminism and intersectionality for The Gypsy Goddess. Siyamala and Aruna place patriarchal domination and hegemonic masculinity at the center of their 2025 interpretation, while Mandal examines the possibility of female–Dalit alliance across Roy and Kandasamy. Martins's 2026 comparative study, outside this article's requested 2015–25 bibliographic window, means that mere comparison of Kandasamy's two novels cannot be described as unprecedented. This paper instead distinguishes the collective authority of an anti-caste political archive from the precarious authority of individual self-narration (Siyamala and Aruna; Mandal).

Its contribution is a working distinction between representative agency, the capacity to contest who tells a public history, and protective agency, the precarious practices through

which a coerced subject maintains a future for speech. Neither type is pure autonomy; both depend on infrastructures of solidarity and material conditions of survival. The distinction permits a focused comparison without treating a fictional first-person narrator as direct sociological evidence of a whole caste community.

The literary corpus is deliberately limited to two works by a single writer. This depth-of-case strategy makes formal comparison possible, but it cannot sustain universal claims about all contemporary Indian English fiction or about Dalit women as a homogeneous category.

Method

This is a qualitative interpretive study grounded in comparative close reading. The primary units of analysis are narrative stance, temporal ordering, scenes of labor and coercion, reported speech, self-referential commentary, and recurrent images of silencing and public address. The method asks how such devices organize the reader's relationship to harm and resistance rather than assigning numerical scores to fictional events. The two works are read against recent scholarship in caste studies, feminism, and narrative ethics.

The publication window of 2015–2025 applies to the thirty-two items listed in Works Cited. The 2015 paperback edition of The Gypsy Goddess permits that novel to fall inside the requested range, notwithstanding its original 2014 publication (Atlantic Books). When I Hit You appeared in 2017. The paper does not invent quotations or page numbers: paraphrases of primary scenes are identified by short titles, because pagination changes across editions and the exact wording requires consultation of copies held by the submitting author.

The interpretive sequence has four steps. First, locate structures of power without collapsing class, caste, and gender into interchangeable categories. Second, identify whose account controls each scene. Third, distinguish symbolic defiance from materially effective escape or transformation. Fourth, compare the narrative conditions under which collective or singular acts become intelligible as resistance.

Close reading cannot verify the factual history of Kilvenmani on its own. Nor does an author's public political identity establish the caste identity of every fictional narrator. The essay uses literary claims of standpoint and testimony as objects of interpretation, not substitutes for ethnography. Historical and social scholarship offers context while retaining its independent methodological status.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality is frequently invoked as the observation that identities "overlap," but this shorthand obscures its more demanding claim: institutional practices make some forms of injury difficult to recognize precisely because political and legal categories separate race or caste from gender. A Dalit feminist application must therefore ask which institutions distribute vulnerability, whose testimony is authorized, and how reform movements themselves may erase minority women. The framework is relational rather than additive (Shanlax study; South Asian Review study).

The 2019 essay "Embracing Difference" proposes a standpoint praxis attentive to the inadequacy of both a caste-neutral women's movement and a gender-neutral account of anti-caste mobilization. Such a position rejects the demand that women choose one injury as politically primary. It equally cautions against equating standpoint with an automatically truthful voice; knowledge is constructed through political reflection and contestation rather than conferred by identity alone ("Embracing Difference").

Brueck's account of feminist vernaculars is especially instructive for Kandasamy. Her analysis of Dalit women writing across Hindi and English demonstrates that vernacularity is not simply a linguistic label; it can be an oppositional relation to masculinist and caste-stratified cultural authority. Literary English can accordingly become a medium for challenging who possesses the authority to narrate local experience, even as English-language circulation creates unequal access to readership (Brueck).

Finally, the framework understands agency as constrained action rather than a celebratory refusal of constraint. Research on Dalit cross-region brides shows that resistance may take tactical forms inside institutions that continue to subordin-ate women. That finding cannot be mechanically transferred to fiction, but it directs attention away from an emancipation-versus-victimhood binary ("Caste and Cross-region Marriages").

Agrarian Power, Collective Action, and the Kilvenmani Archive

The Gypsy Goddess reworks the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre by representing conflict over agricultural labor as a struggle over the social conditions of narration. Landlords' control over work, wages, food, and punishment is inseparable from caste hierarchy; the apparently economic dispute becomes a demonstration of how political bodies are classified as expendable. Kandasamy also makes the act of literary reconstruction visible, disrupting any effortless claim that the novelist can recover the dead without mediation (The Gypsy Goddess).

This formal self-scrutiny matters for gender. Women agricultural laborers cannot be read merely as appendages to a masculine class struggle. The reproduction of laboring

households, public vulnerability, and the lethal policing of collective action make gender part of the material history of resistance. Yet the novel's resistant collective should not be romanticized into a perfectly egalitarian feminist subject. The demands of survival and shared organizing may coexist with domestic asymmetry, and a gender-conscious interpretation must keep the distinction in view.

The massacre also poses a representational dilemma. To render suffering vividly can mobilize remembrance, yet a detailed aesthetic account can convert another person's injury into narrative possession. Kandasamy's self-conscious interruptions and generic instability therefore have a political function: the text repeatedly tests the adequacy of the conventions through which the atrocity might be told. This is not an abandonment of history but a refusal of the narrator's presumed innocence.

Mandal's discussion of cross-caste and feminist solidarities supports reading alliance as politically consequential rather than merely thematic. Geetha's account of women's fiction in Tamil modernity similarly shows why caste, household, labor, and political movements need to be read as entangled structures rather than separate backgrounds (Mandal; Geetha, "Writing and Being Modern").

Gendered Violence and the Politics of Collective Memory

Where historical atrocity appears as an extreme event, the conditions that make it possible are often ordinary: inherited authority over land, control of economic dependence, and the presumption that laboring lives count for less. The narrative links spectacular violence to daily social organization. Such a connection is essential to intersectional criticism because it prevents a massacre from appearing as a singular aberration rather than a coercive expression of established hierarchy (Kandasamy, The Gypsy Goddess).

The movement from individual victim to collective memory also carries a difficulty. If the group becomes the only ethical unit of remembrance, distinctions within it may disappear. Dalit feminist analysis must ask whether women's experiences of work, fear, grief, and political initiative are heard on their own terms or absorbed into a heroic account of class organization. One strength of Kandasamy's experimental frame is that it exposes the problems of literary substitution even while depending on narrative to make the event present.

Brueck's work on feminist vernaculars suggests that resistance can reside not only in the subject represented but also in the form that refuses a governing literary language. Seen in that light, the novel's fragmented, argumentative, and self-interrogating narrative style performs a disagreement with elite expectations of documentary transparency (Brueck).

In the context of Dalit literature, this point resonates with studies of passing and public personhood. The question of whose identity can be spoken, hidden, or translated into a legible story has material consequences. Satyanarayana and Lee's anthology demonstrates the variety of narrative responses to caste surveillance; this helps clarify why authorship in Kandasamy is a political relation, not a simple transfer of experience from victim to reader (Satyanarayana and Lee).

The Intimate Regime of Control in When I Hit You

When I Hit You transfers attention from a collective agrarian struggle to a narrator whose marriage becomes a system of ideological and physical domination. The husband's political rhetoric and intellectual prestige do not prevent abuse; they can furnish its rationalizations. Confinement, monitoring of communication, attacks on literary ambition, and sexual violence progressively narrow the narrator's conditions for self-definition. The husband attempts to control not only action but the terms in which action can be explained (Kandasamy, When I Hit You).

This distinction between coercion and interpretation is central. Domestic domination works partly through the reassignment of meaning: obedience is renamed commitment; isolation is represented as protection; violence is made compatible with professed emancipatory politics. The narrative's analytic force lies in its attention to this rhetorical laundering. Its irony and retrospective control of the story challenge the husband's monopoly over what counts as truth.

The narrator's efforts to write are neither decorative symptoms of creativity nor an instant exit strategy. Writing preserves a possible self that abusive regulation seeks to foreclose. At the same time, literary voice emerges after and through periods of profound unfreedom. A reading attentive to process therefore avoids describing the protagonist's agency as uninterrupted sovereignty. Her voice is achieved under constraints that the book refuses to minimize.

Roychowdhury's study of women negotiating rights under violence underscores why legal recognition and practical capacity are not equivalent. It is useful contextual scholarship for the interpretive problem here, but the novel cannot be cited as evidence for rates of abuse or institutional failure (Roychowdhury). Majhi's earlier literary study also attends to the conflict between patriarchal coercion and the narrator's determination to become a writer (Majhi).

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Agency as Writing: A Critical Rather than Therapeutic Resolution

Literary criticism can too easily turn the recovery of voice into a consoling conclusion. In When I Hit You, however, the possibility of narrating what occurred is not the same as restoration of what coercion has taken. The protagonist's power to shape retrospective discourse does not erase bodily harm, vulnerability, or the uncertain circumstances that make speaking possible. Narrative agency is thus a form of witness with political potential rather than proof of complete recovery (Kandasamy, When I Hit You).

The novel also scrutinizes the relationship between political vocabulary and everyday conduct. A husband can publicly claim opposition to social domination while reproducing patriarchal hierarchy at home. This discrepancy complicates movements that imagine progressive ideology as an adequate guarantor of gender justice. An intersectional reading identifies the failure not as personal hypocrisy alone but as the insulation of intimate relationships from accountable practices of equality.

But an important caution follows: the narrator's experience should not be assigned a specific caste location simply because the novelist is widely identified with anti-caste activism. Doing so would reproduce the flattening that Dalit feminist epistemology opposes. The novel is highly relevant to an analysis of the gendered contradictions of progressive politics; it offers a differently situated case from the explicit caste and labor conflict that organizes The Gypsy Goddess.

Geetha's scholarship on sexual violence and the afterlives of speech is valuable here because it emphasizes the social conditions under which words following violation acquire or lose force. In this sense, speaking is an ongoing claim on listeners and institutions, not a final individual act (Geetha, Undoing Impunity). This approach opens a more careful account of writerly autonomy without reducing the text to a universal survivor narrative.

Comparison I: Collective History and Singular Testimony

Reading the novels together makes scale visible. In The Gypsy Goddess, a narrator wrestles with the responsibility of telling a history that belongs to a threatened collective. In When I Hit You, a narrator confronts an intimate regime that seeks to deny her the entitlement to speak of her own life. The first problem is how to mediate historical injury without appropriation; the second is how to construct a speaking self in the aftermath of a forced interpretive dependence (Kandasamy, The Gypsy Goddess; Kandasamy, When I Hit You).

Both texts disclose what might be called a politics of narrative jurisdiction: who may name violence, who may determine its causes, and who gets believed. Yet the first has material structures of agrarian caste authority at its center, whereas the second foregrounds

marriage, writing, and coercive ideology. Treating the differences as analytically productive is more rigorous than claiming that caste has precisely the same narrative status in each.

The relation between public voice and embodied security is likewise asymmetrical. Peasant mobilization entails solidarity and risk, while the married narrator's protected sphere of writing is repeatedly invaded. Neither political collectivity nor private authorship is sufficient by itself. The former can efface internal hierarchy; the latter may lack the institutional support required to make testimony effective.

An intersectional feminist approach therefore should not pursue a checklist of categories mechanically mapped onto every scene. It must ask what structure is active, in what form, through which actors, and with what effects. Studies of caste and gender in contemporary social life demonstrate that respectability and freedom are relationally stratified, but the critic must still specify the separate evidentiary nature of fictional representation (Twamley and Sidharth).

Comparison II: Language, Ideology, and the Limits of Solidarity

Kandasamy's English prose is not a transparent conduit through which subaltern realities simply arrive. Her texts foreground genre, address, citation, refusal, and the often adversarial encounter between narrator and reader. In The Gypsy Goddess, the form resists the seamless historical novel; in When I Hit You, narration refuses the husband's power to install his language as the only legitimate interpretation of marital life. This shared suspicion of authorized speech links public and intimate domination without equating their material mechanisms.

The analysis of feminist vernaculars helps explain why literary innovation itself can function as a political practice. Brueck challenges the idea that linguistic and cultural forms carry stable, singular social meanings. Kandasamy exploits that instability by using English to stage contestation over locality, social difference, and the authority of inherited narratives (Brueck).

Nevertheless, literary resistance is not identical with transformation of law, wages, caste hierarchy, or domestic institutions. A critical account should insist on the distance between representational disruption and practical redistribution. The archive of Dalit narratives assembled in Concealing Caste points to how complicated the politics of recognition remains even when accounts enter the public sphere (Satyanarayana and Lee).What the novels suggest, therefore, is neither that art rescues its subjects nor that art is merely symbolic. Literary form can reveal forms of power that dominant vocabularies normalize; it can produce a space in which the authority of the storyteller is itself scrutinized.

Such work is ethically significant, but it is not a substitute for collective action, institutional accountability, or historically situated organizing.

Discussion

The findings support a three-part model of distributed agency. Material agency concerns resources and mobility: access to income, housing, safety, and collective organization. Interpretive agency concerns the capacity to resist a dominant explanation of an experience. Representative agency concerns whether a community or subject can speak in a public archive without being translated wholly into an outsider's terms. Each mode is present in different proportions across the two novels; no single mode guarantees the others. This framework also clarifies the relationship of caste to feminist analysis. Caste is not always a background identity marker. In The Gypsy Goddess, it is a structuring relation of agrarian power and vulnerability. In When I Hit You, explicitly documented marital domination provides the text's strongest evidentiary ground. Both benefit from anti-caste feminist scrutiny, but a responsible account refuses to infer an unspecified fictional caste identity.

An additional implication concerns the politics of political movements. The novels show that claims of solidarity must be evaluated at the level of institutional relationships and ordinary practices. Revolutionary vocabulary does not protect women if gendered domination remains normalized, just as histories of class struggle remain incomplete when women's particular forms of labor and injury are subsumed under a unitary collective subject (Geetha, "Writing and Being Modern"; Siyamala and Aruna).

The analysis is limited by the two-novel selection, lack of systematic reader-response evidence, and the present draft's edition-neutral paraphrase method. Further scholarship could compare works by Dalit women writing in Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, and English, or trace how translation and publishing shape differences in audience. Those extensions would require new corpora and careful treatment of the linguistic and political locations of their authors.

Conclusion

Negotiating gender, caste, and agency in contemporary Indian English fiction requires more than identifying the simultaneous presence of oppressive categories. It requires analyzing the institutions that make some injuries thinkable, the formal devices that bring them into view, and the uneven capacities of subjects to contest authoritative narratives. Read together, The Gypsy Goddess and When I Hit You offer a powerful but differentiated account of those processes.

The first novel makes collective struggle and historical representation inseparable, using formal self-consciousness to question who can narrate agrarian caste violence. The second examines the assault on a woman's authorship within marriage, where domination reaches into communication, memory, and the meaning of political commitment. Their shared contribution is not the promise that storytelling abolishes violence but the argument that narrative jurisdiction itself is a contested dimension of power.

The article proposes distributed agency as a way to preserve both the force and the limits of women's resistance. Agency may be enacted through solidarity, refusal, writing, remembrance, and critical reinterpretation, yet each form depends on material supports and exposes different vulnerabilities. An intersectional Dalit feminist reading is strongest when it is historically specific, formally attentive, and resistant to making the representative subject stand for every woman. Such a reading advances the ethical and critical study of Indian English fiction without confusing literary evidence with demographic generalization.

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