
**Narrating the Unspeakable: Gender, Violence, and Narrative Agency in
Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You***

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) represents a significant intervention in contemporary Indian feminist literature, offering a harrowing yet formally innovative account of domestic violence within an educated, ostensibly progressive marriage. The paper explores Kandasamy and his use of narrative techniques such as autofiction, metafiction commentary, and fragmented time to express gendered violence that is traditionally unspeakable in the Indian social discourse. By approaching the text closely with the help of feminist narratology and the theory of trauma, this paper will present an argument that the formal experimentation of the novel cannot be discussed outside the political agenda: the reclaiming of narrative agency is the subject matter as well as the textual principle. The process of turning the protagonist into an eloquent survivor out of being silenced as a victim proves how writing per se can be a form of resistance to the patriarchal erasure. Placing the novel in the context of larger discussions of domestic violence, toxic masculinity, and literary production by women in postcolonial India, this paper sheds some light on the fact that Kandasamy uses personal trauma to construct an effective critique of the institutional arrangements that facilitate and sustain intimate partner violence.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, Ostensibly, Metafiction, Domestic Violence, Masculinity**Introduction**

The issue of the articulation of violence, especially gendered violence, which takes place in the supposedly intimate realm of marriage, has been long a concern of feminist authors and scholars. What is the story of describing experiences that the patriarchal society is actively engaged in silencing, downsizing, and making invisible? What would a survivor do to regain

her voice when it is the institution of marriage that was used as a silencing mechanism? The following questions are alive in the novel that rejects the comforts of the linear narrative and instead provides a formally experimental narrative of domestic abuse that replicates the disastrous confusion of the traumatic experience. The novel was written in 2017, inspired by the personal experiences of Kandasamy, who has faced marital violence, even though she has gone out of her way to avoid implying autobiographical truth and identity in her work, calling it autofiction instead of memoir. Such generic ambiguity is in itself important, and indicates the larger concern of the novel with the issues of experience and representation, silence and speech, victimhood and agency.

The novel follows the life of an unnamed narrator, a young Tamil author who gets married to a professor and a Marxist activist, only to get into a trap of marriage which is full of physical, psychological and sexual violence. The story takes place mostly in Mangalore where the husband takes his academic job and follows the story of how the identity of the protagonist, his autonomy and his creative existence are systematically destroyed. Her husband takes away her phone, spies on her communications, prohibits her to write, exposes her to cruel beatings and marital rape. But the novel is more than a list of atrocities, it is also a reflection on the process of narration itself, on what can be done with language and what cannot, on the ways in which the language can be used as an instrument of violence and of violence against violence. External intervention is unnecessary, and it is her resolve to write her way out of her imprisonment, to convert the crude matter of pain into art, that gets the protagonist to her eventual freedom. The paper will suggest that Kandasamy formal innovations, in respect to metafiction, her fragmented structure, her use of multiple registers and intertextual allusions, represents an essential political role in showing that narrative agency is the condition of survival and the force with which to reveal and challenge patriarchal violence.

Autofiction as Feminist Strategy

Among the most remarkable features in the novel is its generic quality of autofiction, a form of writing that intentionally hazy the lines between autobiography and fiction, between the experience that the author lived and the fantasy that he transformed it into. Kandasamy has publicly addressed the autobiographical roots of the novel as she has been noted to be basing her literary work on her own experiences of an abusive marriage, but she has also emphasized the fact that the text is a novel, a literary creation and not documentary evidence. This back and forth between the revelation and the concealment, the personal and the aesthetic is the key to the political project of the novel. The autofictional mode enables Kandasamy to discuss what Indian society would rather remain silent about and at the same time shield herself against the legal and social reprisals that would otherwise befall an autobiographical narrative. The veil of fiction offers an essential form of distortion in a

society where marital rape is still legal within some context and where families often coerce women to forgive abusive husbands in the name of social respectability.

The autofictional approach also allows Kandasamy to develop the connection between individual experience and wider forms of social organization in a manner which pure autobiography may not allow. The fact that the reader does not know the name of either the protagonist or her abuser hints at a fact that the story is not just personal but is also representative of the broader society and that the dynamics of power, control and violence that Kandasamy illustrates are the norm in the institution of marriage. The nameless narrator turns into everywoman who is a victim of an abusive marriage, her own sufferings enlightening a universal state of things. Simultaneously, the particularity of description, the mentioning of the Tamil culture, the Marxist political groups, the beats of academic life in a small Indian town make the narrative rooted in a familiar social reality and do not allow it to disappear in abstraction. As has been observed by scholars, autofiction is often used by postcolonial women writers as a tactic of negotiating the conflicting needs of personal testimony and social critique, and they take advantage of the plasticity of the genre to discuss something that would be unheard in dominant discourse. The novel by Kandasamy is a representation of this trend and it shows how autofiction may be used as a feminist intervention against patriarchal regimes of silence and invisibility.

The self-reflexive nature of the novel taking place in its own composition also makes it difficult to just read the novel as autobiographical confession. The narrator is haunted throughout the text by the difficulties of describing her experience, by the distance between experienced trauma and its description in words. She admits the urge to exaggerate, to melodramatise, to mould crude experience into aesthetically pleasing story, although she insists on the fundamental verisimilitude of what she is telling. These metafictional instances perform several purposes: they prefigure the artificiality of the entire narrative, they challenge the fact that trauma is easily conveyed, and they encourage the reader to think about the ethical aspects of reading violence stories. In focusing on the process of narration, Kandasamy is unwilling to experience her novel devoured as spectacle, as salacious glimpse of the sufferings of another. She instead involves the reader in the challenging task of witnessing, which requires active involvement and not passive consumption.

Mapping Patriarchal Violence

The violence depicted in the novel is not merely physical but systematic, a comprehensive assault on the protagonist's identity, autonomy, and capacity for self-expression. Kandasamy meticulously traces the mechanisms by which the husband establishes and maintains control, revealing domestic abuse as a deliberate strategy rather than a spontaneous eruption of anger. The isolation of the protagonist from her family, friends, and professional networks; the confiscation of her phone and the monitoring of her

communications; the prohibition on her writing; the economic dependence enforced by her lack of independent income; the constant surveillance and interrogation—all these tactics work together to create a prison without visible bars, a captivity enforced through psychological manipulation as much as physical force. Scholars studying toxic masculinity and domestic violence have identified this pattern of coercive control as central to abusive relationships, distinguishing it from situational violence that occurs in the context of specific conflicts. The husband in Kandasamy's novel does not abuse his wife because he loses his temper; he abuses her because control is his objective, because her subjugation is the condition of his identity as a man.

The novel is particularly astute in its depiction of the role that progressive politics can play in masking and enabling abuse. The husband presents himself as a Marxist revolutionary, committed to social justice and the liberation of the oppressed, yet within his own home he reproduces the most brutal forms of patriarchal domination. This contradiction is not incidental but structural: the husband's investment in his identity as a radical allows him to exempt his own behavior from critique, to locate oppression always elsewhere, in abstract systems rather than in his own intimate relationships. Kandasamy suggests that progressive politics, when practiced by men who have not interrogated their own complicity in patriarchy, can actually provide cover for misogyny, allowing abusers to claim exemption from the very structures of domination they ostensibly oppose. The protagonist's initial attraction to her husband was based partly on his political commitments, his apparent rejection of caste hierarchy and conservative social values. Her gradual recognition that these commitments coexist comfortably with the most violent assertion of male privilege constitutes one of the novel's most devastating insights. The personal is political, Kandasamy reminds us, but the political cannot be assumed to transform the personal automatically; men who claim to fight oppression in the public sphere may practice it assiduously in private.

The violence of the husband operates not only on the body of the protagonist but on her identity as a writer, and this dimension of the abuse is arguably the most central to the novel's concerns. From the earliest days of the marriage, the husband is threatened by his wife's literary success, her public visibility, her independent creative life. He forbids her from writing, deletes her email accounts, confiscates her manuscripts, and subjects her to humiliating interrogations about her past relationships with other writers and intellectuals. His jealousy is ostensibly sexual, focused on imagined infidelities, but its deeper source is his resentment of her autonomous subjectivity, her existence as something more than an extension of himself. By attacking her capacity for creative expression, the husband attacks the very core of her selfhood, seeking to reduce her to a mute, compliant object. The protagonist understands this clearly, describing her husband's violence as an attempt to murder her not physically but existentially, to annihilate the person she has been and might

become. This understanding fuels her determination to keep writing, even in secret, even when the risks of discovery are terrifying. Writing becomes not merely a coping mechanism or a therapeutic exercise but an act of ontological resistance, a refusal to surrender the self that her husband seeks to destroy.

Domestic Violence and the Failure of Institutions

The novel is not just an autobiographical story, but a social commentary, an indictment of the social institutions that facilitate and even promote domestic violence in India. The distance imposed on the main character is not just by the literal acts of her husband but also by the collusion of her family, society and the government, all of which strive to leave her in the marriage and say nothing about her being abused. Her parents are loving and cannot fully understand the gravity of her case and advise to wait and compromise which is representative of the long-held belief that marriage is the main goal of a woman and that, keeping it intact is more important than her life and joy. When she eventually takes the police, they treat her with suspicion and dishearten her to press charges with them, which is indicative of the systematic discrimination that causes law enforcement to believe that domestic violence is a domestic issue that does not fall under their jurisdiction. There is no protection under the legal system either as the marital rape is not completely criminalized under the Indian law and the responsibility of proving the domestic violence falls on the victim in a manner that makes the successful prosecution virtually impossible. Even the good friends and family find it hard to offer effective support and their counsel is limited by societal conventions that stigmatize divorce and point the blame at the women as the cause of failed marriages.

Kandasamy follows these institutional failures in an extremely precise and infuriated way showing how they work together to entrap women in abusive marriages. The education and professional achievements of the protagonist do not protect her; on the contrary, his husband beating is partly driven by his envy of her success and the fact that an educated woman is expected to be able to cope with her marriage is one of the factors that contribute to the shame and self-blame burden weighing down on her. The novel, therefore, poses a challenge to the belief that domestic violence is mainly one of poverty and lack of education and that educated and middle-class women are somehow immune to it. Domestic violence has been reported to cut across classes in India and other countries, and the novel by Kandasamy gives a very vivid literary portrayal of this fact, making the reader face the unpleasant reality that domestic violence thrives in enlightened and illiterate societies, in well-educated and in the most conservative families. The Marxist politics of the husband, instead of immunizing him against misogyny, offer an elaborate language of excuse to his abuse, wherein he can make his wife resistance to individualism as a bourgeois, and her aspiration to be creative as a betrayal of the revolutionary commitment.

The critique of the novel is also wider in the sense that the institution of marriage is a tool through which women are put under the authority of men as outlined by Kandasamy. The protagonist muses about the ritual of the wedding that she once thought of as romantic and now as a meaningless pronouncement of male possession, on the legal and societal suppositions that change a woman into something who no longer belongs to herself when she becomes a wife, on the way a wife is supposed to give up her own wishes and ambitions in order to serve her husband. In the description of marriage by Kandasamy it is not a union of equals but a hierarchical system where women are susceptible to exploitation and abuse through their structural location. This does not imply that every marriage is abusive, naturally, but it implies that the institution offers the conditions of possibility of abuse, the legal and cultural context under which violent men may exercise their authority with relative impunity. The ultimate breakout of the protagonist out of marriage is, therefore, not just an individual success but a political one, a rejecting of being a collaborator any more with the institutional frameworks that allowed her victimization.

Conclusion

After the above discourse, it can be said that Meena Kandasamy is an important addition to the literature of feminism today, presenting a formally innovative and politically astute description of domestic violence that does not invite the false comforts of easy story closure. The novel has shown that narrative form cannot be disaggregated or separated into political content, that metafictional self-reflexivity, fragmentation and its intertextual density all render the telling of a story just as significant as what is told. The narrative agency of the protagonist, the desire to escape bondage by writing, to turn pain into art, to become a speaking subject against her oppressors, is the thematic and structural focus of the text. She discloses her own narrative to nullify her husband, who tries to make her identity disappear and challenges the social constructs that would make her experience unrecognizable. The novel therefore performs what it talks about, demonstrating through its actuality that narrative agency is possible even in the most violent types of patriarchal authority. The success of the work created by Kandasamy is that the work not only documents in a rage of personal testament, but also constitutes a kind of social critique and also reflects upon the potential and constraints of the literature itself. By putting words to the unspeakable, she has expanded the scope of the feminist fiction, not only in its ability to deliver a scathing critique on the institutions that facilitate gendered violence but also in its ability to demonstrate the strength of survivors.

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