

Kandasamy Hears *the Laugh of the Medusa*: Identifying Écriture Féminine in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract

The expression of feminine sexuality, the stories of pain and trauma have been hidden systematically through euphemisms in world literature. But the post-structural theory of Écriture Féminine, coined by the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, challenged the above ideas in her 1975 essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. This essay urges a break from patriarchal language through fluid, bodily forms of writing that express female experience and challenge phallogocentric structures. In the modern era, several authors have utilised the corporeal language which resonates with the theory of Écriture féminine. One such prominent piece of work in feminist literature, especially in the field of Indian Writing in English, is the semi-autobiographical novel *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy. The themes of domestic violence, marital rape, and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), which are explored in this novel, have been researched widely. But this paper examines Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You* through the lens of Cixous' concept of écriture féminine. This study explores how Kandasamy uses corporeal language to narrate her experience of domestic violence, thereby writing from the body in a manner central to Cixous' theory. It also explores the novel's disruption of traditional narrative forms and its blending of various languages as strategies that challenge patriarchal literary conventions and how contemporary Indian literature engages with and extends Western Feminist literary theory.

Keywords: Écriture feminine, Corporeal language, Female sexuality, Domestic violence, Patriarchy, Empowerment.

Introduction:

It is complex to equate Western Feminism with Feminism in India due to the country's complex social fabric, different cultural practices, and historical backdrop. Despite the complexity, some similarities between feminism in India and Western Feminism raise

important questions about the universality of feminist theories and their applicability across cultural contexts.

The theory of *Écriture Féminine* which translates to "Women's Writing" in English, is a poststructuralist theory that emerged in the 1970s, postulated by the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous. Cixous, along with other French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, developed this concept as a way to challenge the phallogocentric nature of language and writing. The theory posits that women should write from their bodies, embracing a style that is fluid, nonlinear, and disruptive to traditional masculine discourse. "Censor the body, and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (Cixous 880). Cixous laments the fact that historically women have been oppressed and left unrecognised. She contends that censoring women's work is similar to censoring the feminine. According to Cixous, writing releases women from guilt and allows them to regain their limited resources and joys, and that they are better able to comprehend other people, especially other women, because of their potential for non-destructive love. "What women should do, then, is to use the semiotic to express their sexuality, their bodies, their experiences within the framework of the symbolic" (Peksen 6).

This study identifies the utility of the theory in the work of Meena Kandasamy, who is an Indian poet, writer, translator, and activist. She is known for her bold exploration of caste, gender, and linguistic identity in her works. Her novel, *When I Hit You*, subtitled *Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, is a semi-autobiographical novel that delves into the harrowing experience of an educated woman who undergoes domestic violence and marital rape. In the novel, the protagonist is the unnamed narrator. When asked about this, Kandasamy says, "It was to allow any reader to imagine herself in the shoes of the narrator, I left my narrator unnamed, undescribed even. She could be any woman." (Ahmad) This reveals the author's intent to represent the voices of the modern Indian women who endure domestic abuse.

The unnamed protagonist is a young writer, who is controlled through domestic violence. She experiences a profound loss of identity as her abusive husband systematically breaks down her sense of self. This erosion begins subtly, with the husband criticizing her writing and her past, and gradually escalates to more overt control. The narrator describes how she begins to see herself through her husband's eyes, internalizing his criticisms and losing touch with her own perceptions and desires. He constantly questions her loyalty, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and manipulation. He often questions her in a sarcastic manner about the other relationships she had in the past.

Forced sexual activity within a relationship is indeed a severe and traumatic form of abuse that extends far beyond the physical act itself. It represents a profound violation of personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and trust, often leaving deep psychological scars that

can persist long after the abusive relationship has ended. In abusive relationships, the victim's body frequently becomes a battleground for control. What was intended to be an ordinary activity of the human body (going to the bathroom) was interpreted by the husband as some implicit efforts to prevent pregnancy, revealing his paranoia and obsession with taking control over her reproductive decisions. The fact that he physically assaulted her and insisted on her lying down afterwards having sex with him, was to reduce her to a machine that gives birth, deprives her independence, and makes the process of intimacy a place of power and terror. (Kandasamy 135)

Because of cultural, religious, and societal conventions that have historically considered open discussions of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, to be forbidden or sinful, authors have struggled for ages, and they frequently used metaphors and euphemisms to get over social taboos and censorship. This method has its roots in ancient literature and is still used in modern works. For instance, euphemism is used in a variety of Western literary works, from Victorian novels to Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare uses flowery analogies to hint at sexuality in *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, "Lovers can see to do their amorous rites. By their own beauties, or, if love be blind. It best agrees with night." (Act III, Scene II) is a subliminal allusion to coitus.

Even in more modern works, authors often employ indirect language when discussing sexuality. It is against this backdrop of literary tradition that Kandasamy's work emerges as particularly revolutionary. "It should be considered an impulse, an energizing myth which impels today's woman writer to create with a confidence and authority unimagined by her foremothers" (Ordóñez 56). Her rejection of euphemism in favor of direct, explicit language represents a significant departure from centuries of literary convention. By doing so, she not only challenges societal norms but also opens up new possibilities for the authentic representation of feminine sexuality in literature. Meena Kandasamy's approach to discuss feminine sexuality and the female body, which this paper calls as "Exposed Writing," stands in stark contrast to the euphemistic traditions that have long dominated literature. This technique is characterized by its unflinching directness, raw honesty, and refusal to shy away from explicit descriptions of the female body and sexual experiences.

The visceral, often shocking nature of Kandasamy's writing serves a disruptive function similar to Cixous' concept of challenging established literary and societal norms. Kandasamy eschews metaphor and euphemism in favor of direct, often graphic language when describing bodily functions, sexual acts, and physical sensations. In the novel, she writes with pain in a raw manner about how her husband threatens her with marital rape. Sex, actually rape, becomes his weapon to tame me. Your cunt will be ruined, he tells me. Your cunt will turn so wasted, you will never be able to offer yourself to any man. It'll be as wide as a begging bowl (Kandasamy 114).

Kandasamy's "exposed writing" technique can be seen as an attempt to create a new language for expressing feminine experiences, echoing Cixous' arguments about the limitations of traditional discourse. Kandasamy's writing is characterized by its unapologetic tone when discussing topics traditionally considered taboo. She presents feminine sexuality and bodily experiences as natural and worthy of open discussion, rather than something to be hidden or ashamed of. Rather than relying on vague allusions, Kandasamy provides detailed, sometimes clinical descriptions of the female body. "I imagine my vagina falling out of me like spare change. Not with jingling noises, but in a wet, pulpy, silent way, carrying the purple of dying roses." (Kandasamy 114)

Kandasamy's explicit descriptions of the female body and its functions align with Cixous's call for women to write their bodies into existence by often reclaiming words and phrases traditionally used to shame or objectify women, repurposing them as tools of empowerment. "In the same sanitized dictionary of this agglutinative tongue, the clitoris is, among other names, a compound word-yonilingam the vagina penis." (Kandasamy 116) By providing detailed, unfiltered accounts of female experiences, Kandasamy's work offers a counter-narrative to the often sanitized or male-centric portrayals of feminine sexuality in literature. This representation is particularly significant in the context of Indian literature, where discussions of female sexuality have often been even more restricted than in Western contexts.

By encouraging open discussion of female bodies and their functions, Kandasamy's work can be seen as empowering readers to embrace and understand their own bodies. Through her bodily descriptions, Kandasamy often provides pointed social commentary on issues of gender, power, and societal expectations.

If women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men. (Jones 252)

Body rhythms, such as genital movements, breathing patterns, heartbeat rates, and physical impacts, are frequently reflected in the author's phrases. Cixous' idea of allowing the body to communicate via language is well embodied in this form of writing. Kandasamy's treatment of bodily memory aligns with Cixous' emphasis on the body as a site of knowledge. Cixous' emphasis on the body as a site of knowledge and resistance finds particular resonance in Kandasamy's descriptions of the stereotyped treatment of a woman in Indian society. She says,

I am the woman being propped up for the world's inspection. Here is my instruction manual: Poke me in the eye. Pinch me in the waist... Ask me to open my legs wide. Ask me to relax and breathe deeply. Shine a torch inside. Examine me: with your gloved fingers, with your speculum. Make notes. Laugh about me at lunch. (Kandasamy 164)

These lines reflect Cixous' idea. Hélène Cixous demands the use of evocative and flowing imagery to encourage women to write not only what their bodies desire but also what their bodies can imagine. She refers to this outcome as self-generating, rebellious text. The insurrectionary dough symbolizes a living, rising energy: writing by women which defines itself, feeds itself and lives in sensuous proliferation colors, leaves, rivers, sea. Cixous deplores how patriarchic discourse attempts to dominate, possess, and undermine female creative energy, ducting it into structures stipulated by the male. Ultimately, the text praises the *écriture féminine* as flowing, infinite, and unfixed by patriarchy. (Cixous 889)

She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. (Cixous 881)

Besides, Kandasamy makes a direct reference to Cixous, suggesting that it is not a mere passing nod by an academic; rather, it demonstrates that she immerses herself in *écriture féminine*. She hints at a close connection to the theoretical framework through which she narrates when she writes herself, that she would like to address Cixous as Hélène in her fantasy thesis (Kandasamy 71). This relationship is manifested in her work, describing the central concepts of *écriture féminine*.

Similar to *écriture féminine*, the writing of Kandasamy cannot be easily defined; it amalgamates genres and styles and dwells upon feminine sexuality. There are a number of impacts of this strategy. To begin with, it breaks the taboos in society and compels readers to deal openly with the aspect of female sexuality. Second, it introduces more real images of the lives of women without the literary patriarchal standards. Third, it opposes societal norms that suppress or embarrass women with their bodies and sex. Her writing as an exposition is beyond shock value; it recapitulates narrative command over the female body in a society where such command has consistently been withheld. In such a way, she asks readers to wonder why such openness is transgressive and consequently gives an understanding of how arbitrary most taboos involving the female body and sexuality are.

This paper evaluates the ways in which Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* connects modern Indian feminist discourse and Western feminism through the prism of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Among the substantial conclusions is that women experience similar oppressions and resistance, particularly related to the body. *When I Hit You* reveals the way the female body might become the place of repression and resistance in various cultural situations. The experience of sexual domination as well as domestic abuse and subsequent liberation by writing by the narrator falls under the framework of Cixous, despite the narrator being set in a particular Indian cultural context.

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