

Marital Discord in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract. The present article attempts to explore the causes of marital conflicts through the feisty voice of Meena Kandasamy in *When I Hit You : Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, where an unnamed narrator dissects toxic masculinity. The narrator faces sexual abuse, rape, mental torture, social stigma, internal conflicts in her four month's marriage. The young badgered wife has just managed to escape her tormentor. Feminists view marriage as an institution traditionally rooted in patriarchy that promotes male superiority and power over women. The power inequality between men and women make men believe that they are more in charge of their life and women seeing themselves as being controlled rather than controlling. That is why women generally have been placed at the receiving end of power dynamics in society. The power imbalances and injustices directly create disputes; sustains and escalates other conflicts and invades all other human interactions. Therefore, this autobiographical fiction through the author's art of writing about desire, abuse and trauma questions power and gender roles which are sought to be adjusted within the society through the institution of marriage.

Keywords : Marital conflicts; domestic violence; patriarchy; unequal power.

Marriage is an institution which leads to form a family and establish the basic unit of society. It provides a surrounding of love, belongingness, security to its members, which guarantees them marital peace, fulfilment and growth. But internal conflicts, voices of discontent and disapproval, gender-based violence in marriage have been existed in Indian fiction writing since past century because no human relationship is devoid of disputes and misunderstandings once in a while. It reveals the fact that as an institution marriage has undergone several changes and is still undergoing changes which aims to keep it in tune with the changing times. *When I Hit You* as a heart wrenching account showcases how a marital relationship experiences frictions because of the unequal power structures offering power to dominant gender role played by husband over subjugated wife in their strained relationship.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy, born in 1984 is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist based in Chennai. Her poetry collections and fictions focus mainly on feminism and caste annihilation. Her poetry revolves around issues of caste, sexuality, political agendas, violence, gender oppression and language. The poetry collections are *Touch* which is one of her first collections published in 2006 with a foreword by Kamala Das and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) focussing an anti-caste and feminist perspective to retell Hindu and Tamil myths. Other poetry collections are *This Poem Will Provoke You* and *Other Poems* (2015) and *We Are Not The*

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Citizens (2018). Ms. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), *When I Hit You: or the Portrait of the Writer as a young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2018) are the novels exploring the themes of gender inequality, marital conflicts, violence and political displacements.

When I Hit You shortlisted for Women's Prize for Fiction depicts the unnamed narrator who falls in love with a university Professor, a Marxist and one-time revolutionary in South India, uses communist ideas "as a cover for his own sadism" (80) and she marries him. The first few outlines of the story are narrated by the parents of the narrator. While the novel is written in first person, the narrator often uses a third person setting as a tool to detach herself from the emotional trauma depicted in the novel. She is a writer and has leftist leanings. After they get married things unravel slowly. The husband undermines her in every way. At first taking away her freedom slowly in small ways by inflicting violence and psychologically manipulating her and then in big ways. When she moves with him to an unfamiliar city, an assault on her tongue, mind and body takes place as she says :

I speak a smattering of Malayalam, in every word
I utter my native Tamil peeks through. (109)

The ideology of the narrator disturbs him because, "the problem is your feminism, your feminism that makes you an individual...I am not the problem and you know that. You are not the problem either. Your feminism is". (120-121)

The narrator's husband manipulates her into the surrendering of her email accounts, the suspension of her Facebook account and then policing her mobile phone follows. Come off Facebook (50), he says. The narrator utters in despair "In the next ten minutes, I deactivate my Facebook account. It is my lifeline to the world outside. Since moving to Mangalore, Facebook has transformed into my only remaining professional link...In my precarious situation, when he wants me to cut myself off from Facebook, I know that it is an act of career suicide."(52) Besides, her husband replies to his emails by signing both their names at the end of every message. Situation worsens when the narrator is restricted to have telephonic communication. In India, the right to internet access, also known as the right to broadband or freedom to connect, is the view that all people must be able to access the internet in order to exercise and enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and opinion and other fundamental human rights. In September 2019, Kerala High Court held that the right to have access to the internet is part of the fundamental Right to Education as well as the Right to Privacy under Article 21 of the Constitution. *When I Hit You* compels us to think that accessing internet, online privacy and other fundamental rights for all or a particular group that are higher in power hierarchy.

The novel further unveils the silence against domestic violence and marital

rape. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 was drafted after the issue of domestic violence was widely reported and brought to fore by women's group in India and across the world. The need for the Act was felt because there are no provisions in ordinary criminal law dealing with offences of this nature. Domestic violence signifies the violence that women face within their homes at the hands of their family and not outside of it. Meena Kandasamy talks about domestic violence in an interview with the publisher Juggernaut, where she affirms that the experience of domestic violence is something of a universal thing in our country, and even abroad. By not giving the protagonist a name she clarifies, "I could have called her Anjali, Bharathi, Chellamma- anything from a Tamil dictionary but that would have tied her down into being one person. The aim was to tell every woman's story...In writing violence-whether it is on a grand scale like genocide or war, or in the claustrophobic environment of a marriage – what happens to one is what happens to many – it is shared trauma. We don't need any names."(42)

The story details physical abuse which worsens over time, "He shouts and screams at me as he pins me to the floor of the living room, but I no longer hear him. He is holding my face down with his foot; his toes are digging into my cheeks, stamping on my ears. This is how he demands my silence. I see his lips from words – whore, bitch, cunt, pros-ti-tute but his voice no longer reaches me. On the floor, my hands clenching his ankles..."(212) He starts beating her when she defies him and violently rapes her "...that is the aim of his rape, all this rough sex. Not just disciplining, but a disabling. He believes that after him, I will have nothing left in me to love, to make love, to give pleasure. This is a man breaking his own wife. This is a man burning down his own house." (176)

Women are entitled to enjoy several rights, guaranteed to all from their conception, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states. These may be both in public and private spheres. Right against violence within home, rights within the family—marriage, divorce, alimony, succession and custody of children, right to sexuality, dignity, respect and privacy denote private rights. Laws play a role to be gender neutral though but in reality it fails to implement the provisions in letter and spirit. Therefore, the inevitable consequence is shown through harrowing experiences of narrator in the novel where women have always been victimized whenever marital disputes take place and have tackled the issues of patriarchy, abusive relationships, rape and gender -based oppression in marriage.

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Work Cited

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