

## WHEN I HIT YOU: A TREATIES ON MARITAL VIOLENCE BY MEENA KANDASAMY

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### Abstract

*Meena Kandasamy is no more a new name in the field of English Writing. Her latest novel 'When I Hit You' has been creating ripples round the globe for the bold revelation of her married life. Kandasamy has written about her own marriage using an unnamed narrator speaking in an urgent, first-person voice. The situation becomes evidently pathetic when she finds out that her husband is a psychopath. She is unable to drag herself out of the fearsome situation. She yearns to leave but is pressurized and reminded of the age old Indian taboo. Tragically, when she informs her parents, over the phone, that her husband rapes her; that he beats her, the narrator's father responds with the fervour a self-involved Indian patriarch. He urges his daughter to rethink her decision to exit the marriage as it will defame their reputation in the society. She, unfortunately, is not the only one to be trapped in the vicious cycle of marriage which expects sacrifices from a female only. Marital torture at the hand of in-laws is quite common in Indian society. The recurring physical and mental trauma that the author mentions brings shivers in the readers' heart. Her scripts provoke vicious personal attacks which, in themselves, speak to the cultural critique she puts forth. The present article examines and efforts to probe the dual role of Meena Kandasamy as a political writer and a shackled woman desperately desiring to liberate.*

**Key words-** Ripples, psychopath, trapped, taboo, disgruntlement, recurring, liberate, shackled.

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- Dr. Darkhasha Azhar

**M**eena Kandasamy, the feminist writer, is all set to voice her grievances through her write-ups. The topic that she has chosen to dwell upon requires mighty lot of courage. It's not easy to unfold the tragedy of one's own life. But she has done it and done it quite calmly. She, unfortunately, is not the only one to be trapped in the vicious cycle of marriage which expects sacrifices from a female only. Marital torture at the hand of in-laws is quite common in Indian society. The recurring physical and mental trauma that the author mentions brings shivers in the readers' heart. Her scripts provoke vicious personal attacks which, in themselves, speak to the cultural critique she puts forth. She writes, '*I am the woman at whom society cannot spit or throw stones because this me is a she who is made up only of words on a page, and the lines she speaks are those that everyone hears in their own voice*' (Meena, *When I...*, P.246). The present article simply efforts to examines and probe the dual role of Meena Kandasamy as a potential writer and a shackled woman desperately desiring to liberate- *the woman with wings, the woman who can fly*' (247). In the present scenario when Covid-19 has hit the world below the belt, it is not difficult to feel the trauma of a caged person. The long lockdown has brought us home to the experience of an isolated, abandoned and financially broken man.

Bred on Indian soil, the daring Tamil activist is forcefully compelled by the harshness of life to shame everything on print, even her reputation. She rallies through the moments of grave violence that make the readers shrink and squirm and curse the society which promotes and encourages such immoral and heinous act on a human body. The writer is not unaware; in fact, she knows quite intimately about the cultural backdrop against which caste, gender and race are positioned not only in her home but also on this land, India. She is aware of the culture that runs through a deeply rooted Tamil society and stretches across the entire nation. She is aware of the cunning fabrication of the society which provides all liberty to a male despite knowing that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ours is a society which readily questions a woman and levies charges against her for a crime which she hasn't committed and raises not an eye against the man who is a hard core torturer.

Set in South India, '*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*' is a turbulently touching experience of the female author trapped in an abusive marriage

which leaves her almost insane. The memoirist narrative is inspired by Kandasamy's own former relationship, about which she wrote for an Indian news magazine in 2012. The market for confessional essays is surely booming in the west but in India the appetite for truth is somewhat limited. Given the opportunity to look into the mirror, ironically, most people would turn it over. This is especially true when it comes to matters concerning Hindu society - gender, caste and class. Meena Kandasamy's scorching 2014 debut explores caste, poverty and violence in southern India. Her novel tells the story of a newly-wed writer experiencing rapid social isolation and extreme violence at her husband's hands. It is a voice that expresses strong desire, feels pain and projects strong courage. It screams from the camouflaging outer cover, refusing to be silenced in its search for love. Such is its effect that the reader is left with an impeccable impact and implications of it and the very idea of meek and servile Indian femininity is in tatters at last. Indeed, *'When I Hit You'* is a smart, fierce and courageous take on traditional wedlock in modern India.

The writer has written about her own marriage using an unnamed narrator speaking in an urgent, first-person voice. She writes that it was the most enduring moment of her life when she sat down to pen her emotions on a piece of paper. She admits, *'This is how the world outside sneaks up to her, this is how she feels herself transported outside' (21)*. Seduced by politics, poetry and an enduring dream of building a better world together, the unknown narrator falls in love with a university professor who is quite older to her. Moving with him to a rain-wash coastal town, she soon learns that her relationship for him is a mere contract of ownership. As she sets about reducing herself to his idealised version of an obedient wife, she is tossed in the hurricane. When she attempts to push back he tries to break her resistance with violence and rape. She writes, *'A rape is a fight you did not win. A rape is a defeat' (169)*. The narrator's situation becomes evidently pathetic when she finds out that her husband is a psychopath. She is unable to either drag herself out of the fearsome situation or commit murder. This situation hangs even after her husband threatens her with dire consequences. She yearns to leave but is pressurized and reminded of the age old Indian taboo that a broken marriage would prove a blot that the entire family will be made to bear. She tried to narrate her woes to her parents in order to receive some comforting words. Repeatedly when she told her father, over the phone, that her husband rapes her; that he beats her - with belts, electrical cables and power cords - and that he regulates her contact with the outside world, he responds carelessly and urges his daughter to rethink her decision to exit the marriage. To her shock he just says, *'If you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me' (158)*.

How does it feel when the only straw you cling on for sustenance and survival is snatched and the only cord you are linked to; snapped? All of a sudden within no time situations

became water tight for her. How does one explain the predicament in which a victim is told to accommodate her oppressor for the greater good? How does one convince that the life which a victim is compelled to live is too traumatic to sustain? Ours is a society that believes that the worst aspect of rape is the defilement of the victim which leaves no hope of marriage. In India the killing of wives is so common and frequent that it is awarded a bespoke category - dowry death and a simple, its destiny. All the tortures and sufferings are carelessly wrought upon the weak sex and nobody bothers about it. Meena Kandasamy, through this narrative has successfully striven to instil courage in Indian women to not only speak up against the sufferings but also to boldly walk out of their turbulent marriage. When questioned by Laura E Waddle in an interview with Wired India about her choice of marital violence as the theme of her novel, Meena Kandasamy responds: *'...pursuing an intellectual life, especially writing, is impossible to do when you are stuck in the middle of everyday abuse because you are battling for mere survival; and, secondly, no matter how much you run away from the experience of being female in order to inhabit other experiences, violence of this kind firmly pushes you in that distressing awareness that your life as an artist will continue to be dictated by your womanhood. So, in tracing the artistic journey of a woman writer, I chose to tell this story - of marital violence - that millions of women face and which breaks them down in countless ways'*.

The narrator is, undoubtedly, an outspoken writer that craves for romance and dissects her sexual liaisons with winningly dry humour. Shut out of her family's embrace, wiped out of the social media, she knows that the police will dismiss her complaints as the teething troubles of a newly-wed. She concludes that the only circumstance under which she will be accepted back home is if she comes as close as possible to her own shroud without actually wearing it. She writes *'Tradition never goes out of fashion. ...it wears new clothes. In the eyes of the world, a woman who runs away from death is more dignified than a woman who runs away from her man' (187)*. In the ensuing power struggle with her husband she diverts herself by typing out fake letters to former lovers and their brief existence empowers her mounting defiance and resistance. Her husband may attempt to control her body, but he will never be able to control her mind.

Her trajectory begins with a new identity- newlywed wife of a university lecturer, Marxist and one-time revolutionary in south India. The rosy-cosy bed of life, all of a sudden, transformed into a thorny pad pricking into her 24 x 7. A brutal assault on her tongue, mind and body begins when she moves with him to an unfamiliar city. The language barrier ensures that in public she can only speak words of wifely domesticity while shopping for vegetables or cleaning products. In the unknown place she is, in fact, confined to the three roomed house much against her will. Her husband strictly governs her life and polices her entire self by manipulating her into the surrender of her email



accounts and the suspension of her Face book page; he confiscates her mobile phone too. If she resists or questions, beatings and rapes follow with readily available weaponries: the hose of the washing machine, the power cord of her laptop and what not. Shame, pride and a ruthless society in which everyone, from parents to police, expects a woman to give up and shut up, ultimately force upon the realization on her that none but only she can save herself. The more she is thwarted and abused; the intense grows her desire to flee. Even as she is beaten down she reflects that every iota of moment has narrative potential. She finds details to narrate every episode. She knows that writing can be her salvation and thus '*When I Hit You*' becomes her answer to the existing problem. It becomes a mode of purging her vengeance by scripting against the man whom she had started fearing and disliking.

Kandasamy writes: '*Hope prevents me from taking my own life. Hope is the kind voice in my head that prevents me from fleeing. Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage*' (182). This poetic outburst reminds me of Emily Dickinson's '*Hope is a thing with feather*'. Indeed, in its echo of a canonical title and its shared themes, Kandasamy's novel has much in common with another recent portrait of the writer as a young wife, Gwendoline Riley's '*First Love*'. Though the abuse Riley's heroine suffers is primarily emotional, her husband's verbal attacks on her body, sanity and skills are on a par with those of the abuser in Kandasamy's book. One almost traces a replica of character that, like her unnamed Indian counterpart, is held in place by her own mother and the social expectations. Kandasamy has, in her novel, dissected a specifically Indian form of toxic masculinity. Her husband spirals into monstrosity not only by constantly berating her about her petite-bourgeoisie-prostitute-female-writer mindset thereby changing her marriage into a '*re-education camp on Communism*' (32) but also by beating her up with laptop cables and belts, pulling her by her hair and dragging her through the '*three rooms and a veranda*' (15) she is trapped in. He also makes her delete her FaceBook account by threatening to burn himself, knowing well that it is her only means to market herself as a writer from her suffocating jail. In a nutshell, he closes all the doors on her sparing not a single ray of hope for survival.

Fed up, the narrator resorts to silence. Silence as a way to deter punishment and also project indignant defiance. It also provides her introspection and an opportunity to quietly plan and plot against him, to enable an escape of her into a liberated world. When he can't take her silence anymore...he rapes her and bullies her. It's when he threatens her with dire consequences that she decides she must leave. She plots and stages her escape with silent fury, setting the context for her parents, buttering him up at first and then when the time is right, she incites him by attacking his masculinity and his dedication to The Cause of Communism. Evidently, he threatens to kill her. That's all she needed to be able to walk out: a threat to her life.

The nefarious questions don't leave her even after she runs away to Chennai, 'Why did you stay? What sort of feminist allows herself to be beaten? Was it really non-consensual sex? Why don't you go to the police?' and so on. Before we can ask 'why won't she just leave', we're punched into shutting up and letting a woman tell her own story the way she sees – for once. By now, we know Kandasamy's main cause of writing this book. She pins the readers down, brings up all the uneasy and clumsy bits of being in an abusive relationship, subtly pre-empts these questions, and then confidently slays them by reclaiming the authorial voice of her life's story. She succeeds in her aim of bringing live the torment of a wedded wife at the hands of a psychopath husband. The novel intensely and clearly debunks myths about victim blaming throughout; why and how women stay in abusive relationships, which is vulnerable to abuse, and even how abuse is underplayed and how the outside world (and language itself) refuses to intervene.

'*When I Hit You*' is a novel about the physical and psychological claustrophobia of domestic abuse and it is set in a small town in coastal India, or rather the three rooms of the house the narrator is rarely permitted to leave. It details physical abuse which worsens over time, from fantastical threats to eventual graphic rape. Violence is dealt with carefully, yet confidently. Visceral words seething with rage describe the before and after of each escalating violent act by the husband, but never the brutal blood and gore of the action itself. Silence is louder as Kandasamy skilfully weaves together a devastatingly beautiful story that the reader won't be able to shake off until the last line spills into an empty page. Alice Walker in her Essay '*In search of our Mothers Garden*' confirms that since ages our mothers have been subjected to severe domestic violence and neglect. The subjugation is so severe and intense that despite feeling choked and suffocated; these women are unable to express their grievances because there is none to pay heed. The novel '*When I Hit You*' intensely and clearly rejects myths about victim blaming, who is vulnerable to abuse, and even how abuse is underplayed and how the outside world refuses to intervene.

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