

Surviving the Marital Violence in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract:

Violence against women is one of the major global issues of the world. The demon of violence is not only present in the outside world but also present behind the closed doors. In patriarchal society marriage instead of bonding two people, giving the prerogative to man to consider woman as his subservient and his property. Man to control her, dominate her harasses physically, mentally, sexually and verbally with no boundaries. Unable to handle the intimate partner violence today women are committing suicide. The Question arises what prevents woman from walking out of an abusive relation? Is committing suicide the only solution?

Meena Kandasamy's novel 'When I Hit You: or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife, voices about the marriage that can be oppressive, violent and abusive but becoming a traitor is not the end. This paper focuses on how the protagonist of the story is subjected to undue violence that has no visible marks — no bruises, no blood, no broken bones by the masochistic husband, why she stays along with the abusive rapist husband and what are the different strategies of survival from vile actions of Masculinity and Patriarchy

Keywords: Patriarchal society, Intimidate partner violence, Masochistic, Masculinity

“Violence is not something that advertises itself...As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending.”

Meena Kandasamy

Emancipation of women, Empowerment of women, Gender Equity and Equality and so on echo the major global challenge of today's world, for enhancing the status of women. We Indians born in the country where the traditions project women in completely different diameter. It can be evidenced by our traditions and culture in our Indian scriptures that women had a voice and space for themselves. The scriptures mentions that all are indwelt with the same eternal self, so all should be looked with same divinity and should receive the same respect. “Great saints like Swami Vivekananda have predicted that the 21st century will be the century of women. Women (and men!) can draw strength from our great Vedic traditions to ensure that women get their rightful place in society.”But in the present generation the status of women has deteriorated and the women is subjected to violence, frustration, brutality and leading to loss of oneself.

Violence in the name of rape, molestation, sexual abuse, stalking, against women is prevalent every nook and corner and above all domestic violence is like the vicious circle. Instead

the women being protected from the hazards of the outside world the violence takes place behind the closed doors. Domestic violence is not something that is faced by only uneducated and poor women. It might even happen to powerful, assertive, idealistic and educated women. The women are the potential victims irrespective of the caste, creed, education or ethnic background. It isolates women from society and from the family. Domestic violence is taken for granted and the vile actions of man are justified by blaming women. No matter how advanced the world is in, woman is still in the fist of man, being controlled, abused, crushed and oppressed. Women doesn't just experience the brutality from the strangers in the outer world, even subjected to brutality by the one's who promises to have a life long commitment.

Meena Kandasamy is a poet fiction writer, translator and activist. She has published two collections of poetry, *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy* and critically acclaimed debut, *The Gypsy Goddesses* explored caste, poverty and violence in southern India. Her second novel 'When I Hit You: or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife', brings out the plight of women that is on our doorsteps which we are aware of. Kandasamy's "When I hit you", brings out how the married woman, the protagonist of the story faces violence and abuses which perpetuates without any boundaries. The novel just does not end with the depiction of abuses and the struggles the protagonist undergoes in social isolation, it goes one step forward and voices the quest to have freedom from the marital violence and breaks out the shackles of brutality and violence. "The novel is more than just a narration of abuses. Kandasamy's visceral, precise storytelling takes us deep inside her narrator's strategies of survival" says Urvashi Bahuguna.

Kandasamy writes about her own story using an unnamed narrator. The incidents the speaker encounter is confronted by most of the women even in this technically developed era. The story is an fictionalised account of her own married life. "I believed no man could lay a hand on me. I was fierce and feminist and no-nonsense. Then, within an abusive marriage, I actually realised that your strength is also what makes you a perfect target for an abuser," says Kandasamy. The protagonist is a leftist and young woman writer who falls for a Marxist whom she meets in the course of running an online campaign against death penalty. His commitment, adventurousness, idealism, his claim that he can make a true revolutionary out of her made her feel he is one for her. His talk about the revolution seemed more intense and beautiful than any poetry. But with in no time the world of dreams turned upside down. The idealism of her husband that she is enchanted for turned into a nightmare. He wields the communist discourse to belittle and humiliate her. "Marriage becomes a Re-education camp", her husband as "Communist crusader" to set her on the right path. She becomes the prey for the whims and fancies of the abusive rapist husband. He beats, rapes, degrades, manipulates, attacks her sexual parts and at the end threatens to murder her.

"I'm no longer convinced. For every genuine revolutionary in the ranks, there is a careerist, a wife-beater, an opportunist, a manipulator, an infiltrator, a go-getter, an ass-licker, an alcoholic and a dothead." (page -89)

The patriarchal, feudal tendencies, the attitude towards women he has, unveiled the feminist in her. The violence becomes like the film score of a movie, present but not visible. The protagonist while facing the violence fights with the fear, the pain, the clash with the inner self and the battle with the voices that force to silence but does not mope. She determines to break the shackles of the undue violence and survive.

In the patriarchal society marriage is prerogative granted for man on woman. Woman is taken for granted as subservient to man and man's property. In 'When I Hit you', in the few days of marriage the husband maintains coercive control over her. The violence against the protagonist doesn't start with beating or with abusing or with rape. The pattern of behaviour might not be an intention but nature of violence. He implements various methods to corner her and take away control of her.

The setting and the ambience of Primrose villa forms a perfect dramatic background score for the vile actions. The protagonist is trapped in a clumsy, isolated house with not much neighbours and friends. The language became a barrier to communicate with public. She could only manage with words of domesticity. Her life revolves only around her husband, making her as his hostage and cutting off all the possible means to control her. She has to appease him by taming her hair as he wants and attire herself as dowdiness and welcome him when he returns from office which seems to be in a cinematic style.

"Nothing loud, nothing eye-catching, nothing beautiful. I should look like a woman whom no one wants to look at or more accurately, whom no one even sees"(16)

She cannot escape or hide or evade his presence. She becomes eager to impress him just to escape the punishment. She imagines herself an actress playing the role of dutiful wife, to make every thing around her less frightening. In order to cut her off completely from the outer world initially which was just the control turns to violence. He plays the cheap trick of masochism to cut her off from face book. He black mails her to burn himself, to wrest control of her social media, though he is aware that Facebook was lifeline for her to the outside world as a writer. His violence is self inflicted ordeal to threaten, dehumanise, humiliate, distress and corner her. He rations her phone calls and internet access and cut her communication with her friends and family to wipe out her identity and carve as he intends.

"I must learn that a Communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind closed doors. This is dialectics."(34)

Marriage became an hindrance to her progress. The protagonist's husband hates the 'petty bourgeois writers'. Kandasamy brings the comparison of the sociology of violence against women from colonial India to that of post colonial India. The husband calls writers whores as they act like the bridge as in colonial India. He ridicules her constantly for being a writer. He uses the words slut, whore, bitch to dehumanise her and the language to insult a woman in various ways. To oppress her by As a defence against the abuse and her sense of reverence towards being a writer, she thinks to use the writing to wage defiance against her husband much to his annoyance.

"Everything is writing material for you isn't it? The trouble is that you don't want a decent chance at life. You're only after a story, and you make my life a living hell."(241)

She writes poems to bury her anger in words tentatively but she realises that she is going to wield this moment, fight one day in her writing in the future.

The violence grows from psychological abuse to physical violence. Patriarchal man cannot accept the thought loosing control of woman. He implements the strategy of beating and rape to show his dominance and arouse fear in her. He gets gratification when she begs him for life. In 'When I hit you', the husband hits her with weapons he finds around house- the cord of her Mac book, the back of the broomstick, the writing pad, the hose of the washing machine.

“I am the wooden cutting board banged against the countertop. I am the clattering plates flung into cupboards. I am the unwashed glass being thrown to the floor. Shatter and shards and diamond sparkle of tiny pieces. My hips and thighs and breasts and buttocks. Irreversible crashing sounds, a fragile sight of brokenness as a petty tyrant indulges in a power-trip. Not for the first time, and not for the last.”(131)

The physical assault is provoked by any small accusation ranging from the level of salt in food to the words used in her writing which distress him.

Intimacy between the partners includes closeness emotionally sharing their happiness and sadness which transferred to a meaningful sexual relationship which bears a fruitful child. But her abusive husband forces her to have a child as his belief of sex-

“The man’s fluids from the bones. The woman’s fluids from the flesh. This is the belief of elders in my ancestral village. This is how they think life begins. I do not think they have got it wrong at all. They just do not know that when a child forms inside the womb of a sad, broken woman, its little heart will be made up of her tears.”(198)

For protagonist’s husband, the woman should not have the any sexual desires. The penetration is used as weapon against women as a sexual assault and punishment. Rape becomes his weapon to tame her, to discipline her, penalises her for the life and put in the path of good wife. It is a punishment for saying no and at times for the long- ago love story.

“This rape whose aim is to make me understand that my husband can do with my body as he pleases. This is rape as ownership. This rape contains a husband’s rage against all the men who have touched me, against all the men who may touch me, against all men who may have desired me.”(174)

His aim was not to disciplining, but to make her useless by disabling her.

“Your cunt will be ruined, he tells me. your cunt will turn you so wasted, so useless you will never be able to offer yourself to any man.”(168)

When the arguments cannot be resolved he wields another weapon to threat to murder which instills a ‘raw bleeding fear’ in her.

“I will skin your scalp. It will be slow but I will do a very thorough job of it. it will be very painful, but precision always has its element of pain.”(184)

The story is not just the brutality, the violence a woman but it is even about how to a woman can face the upstanding man with the strategies of survival.

‘Fight or flight’, when her inner voice says repeatedly to walk out from this married life, She doesn’t want to disappoint her parents, and even to be blamed for her hasty decision. So she sticks to

“The old formula again I haven’t given up fighting, not yet. The flight only comes when the fight has failed.”(61)

‘Defiance’, the distasteful air of her husband for a writer makes to attract towards writing. She writes letter to imaginary lover and deletes them by afternoon. She takes revenge by writing the word lover again and again.

“The defiance, the spite. The eagerness to rub the salt on his wounded pride to reclaim my space , my right to write.”(88)

‘Silence’, is a shield and weapon to avoid confrontation. Staying silence is a self-flagellation. She allows him sex when he wants.

‘Criticism’, Being a feminist, the protagonist doesn’t want to become a traitor and end her life. In order to be alive

“I learn to criticize myself. [...] I concede that my feminism, with its obsession about sexuality, is a middle-class project that forgets the lived realities of millions of working-class women. In the same breath I also say that I continue to think that working-class women also have sexual desires and need equal rights, and that they need feminism too.”

‘Food’, the food which she cooks for him manages to placate him. “This is something on which I can try to build, try to trick myself into make-believe of a happy marriage. it is the only component where she has upper hand. When her husband forces her to have a baby to stall pregnancy, every dish, every fruit she selects which for fear of miscarriage. She slips secret ingredients like pulp of raw green mangoes into the food she cooks.

“I turn my kitchen into a combat zone, making sure that my cooking secures my and my womb’s liberty.”(201)

She remembers past dalliances and her one serious relationship before marriage. She holds on to the memories of the person she used to be.

The protagonist neither commits suicide becoming a victim for the intimidated partner violence nor expects sympathy. Kandaswamy with poetic intensity clearly answers the question What prevents women from walking out of an abusive relationship?

The Family pressure, Parents though love their children, they will be scared of society. The father tells that ‘marriage is give and take’ and asks her to be patience and tolerance and if something goes wrong, he has pay price. Mother says ‘All change is slow. A marriage is not a magic’ with time he will come around. Prove to those who has predicted her incapability of commitment, fear and hope.

“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. That things will change for the better tomorrow. The hope that he will eventually give up violence.”(182) Yet sometimes this intensity undoes itself: “I imagine my vagina falling out of me like spare change. Not with jingling noises, but in a wet, pulpy, silent way ...” Such phrasemaking can risk undermining our empathy.(168)

Woman has the gift of patience to endure the pain and forgive the inexcusable. The protagonist just doesn’t take hasty decision and escape from her husband. When the violence goes beyond the endurance and parents teaching her to cope with the brutality as they are scared of telling the world, She understands salvation from such a marriage only lies with no one else but the woman herself.

She decides not to be portrayed as ‘hot-blooded woman’ and her story not to be a morality tale but an ending which no one objects. The house becomes the battle ground for her and she plots her escape. She makes list of his favourite topics of conversation and list which triggers the violence. She acts like a woman she can trust. She understands his violence against her can be twisted to turn upon himself.

“In creator’s handbook, this is the mandatory calm that has to be orchestrated before an impending storm.” (204)

She transfers her experience and her perceptions into art. She uses her words as a shield of weapons. Some times the words are deployed to avoid possible violence other times to provoke him.

“I slip the words between his ribs like the stiletto knife.”(211)

Her role of writer plotting against abusive marriage works out and she escape from him.

Kandasamy says in an interview on wire, “It was to allow any reader to imagine herself in the shoes of the narrator, I left my narrator unnamed, un described even. She could be any woman. The specifics, the manifestations, the exact words may vary from one abusive marriage to another – but the woman’s experience of subjugation, humiliation, obliteration and pain largely remain the same.” In the process of survival from violence the protagonist seems to lose identity and diminish, she carves herself rises herself to self-preservation and dignity.

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