

Resistance through Silence: Feminist Defiance in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

First author:

Ms. Bhuvana Udhaya Kumar

Assistant Professor (Visiting)

Department of English and Foreign Languages

SRM Institute of Science & Technology,

Kattankulathur, Chennai

Email: bhuvanam@srmist.edu.in

Second Author:

Dr Sulagna Mohanty

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Foreign Languages

SRM Institute of Science & Technology,

Kattankulathur, Chennai

Email: sulagna2008@gmail.com

Abstract

Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary Indian writer, poet and activist, often focuses on caste, gender and social justice in her works. Her 2017 novel, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, is a powerful semi-autobiographical piece of art. The novel depicts the story of a woman trapped in an abusive marriage where her voice, identity and freedom are taken away. However, instead of constantly fighting back with words, she chooses when and how to speak. Her silence becomes a clever and sustainable way to survive. She expresses her resistance through writing which helps her take back her story and her power. This paper explores how silence becomes a powerful form of feminist resistance in Kandasamy's above-mentioned novel. While silence is often perceived as a sign of weakness or submission, this study reveals how the unnamed narrator utilises silence as a means to protect herself and resist her husband's control. Adopting a qualitative method, this paper closely analyses the text through a feminist lens and depicts how silence can be a form of strength, not just fear.

Keywords: Feminism, Silence, Resistance, Domestic Abuse, Subversion

Introduction

Meena Kandasamy is a contemporary Indian writer, poet and activist whose works often focus on caste, gender, and social justice. Her 2017 novel, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, is a powerful and semi-autobiographical account of a young woman trapped in an abusive marriage. Through this novel, Kandasamy gives voice to the silenced experiences of many women who suffer behind closed doors, especially within the framework of marriage. The novel explores themes of violence, control, and resistance, and most importantly, the way silence operates within these situations.

In patriarchal societies, silence is often forced upon women to keep them obedient, invisible, and voiceless. It is treated as a sign of submission or weakness. In many traditional households, women are expected to remain quiet in the face of injustice to maintain family honour (Kashyap, 2018). As feminist scholar Bell Hooks observes in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), “Silence renders us invisible. Silence erases our thoughts and feelings. Silence separates us from others” (p. 6). However, silence can also be transformed into a powerful form of survival and resistance, especially when speech can lead to further harm. This paper argues that in *When I Hit You*, the protagonist uses silence not as a sign of submission, but as a deliberate and intelligent tool of survival and feminist resistance. Her silence is not passive. It is a strategic choice to protect herself, retain her inner voice and reclaim her identity eventually through writing. By rethinking the role of silence, the novel challenges common ideas about power, control and agency within abusive relationships.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Several scholars have studied *When I Hit You* through feminist and trauma lenses. Most research focuses on the themes of domestic violence, marital rape, and the reclaiming of agency through writing. For instance, Tripathi and Bhattacharjee (2019) explore the idea of the violated body writing back as an act of feminist rebellion. Similarly, Alapati et al. (2022) examine the transition from submission to subversion in the protagonist’s life, noting how her writing becomes a path to self-liberation. These studies highlight the physical and psychological abuse the narrator suffers and how writing becomes her tool for recovery.

However, much of the existing criticism emphasises the act of writing and speaking out as feminist acts. Less attention is given to the moments when the protagonist chooses not to speak, remain silent or resist internally without immediate visible rebellion. The role of silence as a strategic and empowering choice is often overlooked or interpreted simply as helplessness. While existing research has thoroughly discussed voice, writing, trauma, and resistance in *When I Hit You*, the subtle and deliberate use of silence as a feminist strategy has not been explored in depth. This paper fills that gap by analyzing how silence is not always passive but can be an active form of survival and resistance, especially when vocal protest might lead to more harm.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

This study seeks to examine the role of silence in *When I Hit You* through three central questions. First, it explores how the patriarchal husband uses silence as a means of control and suppression. The novel reveals how the narrator’s husband deliberately silences her by cutting off her communication with the outside world, deleting her digital presence, and isolating her emotionally and physically. This question aims to understand how patriarchal power operates by enforcing silence as a tool of domination. Secondly, the study investigates how the narrator, despite being silenced, uses silence as a deliberate strategy for survival and internal resistance. Rather than reacting with words or open rebellion, she chooses silence at key moments to protect herself and maintain her mental stability. Her silence becomes a deliberate act of resilience, not merely a consequence of fear or submission. Finally, the research questions how the novel challenges the traditional feminist belief that empowerment always comes from speaking out. While the narrator eventually finds her voice through writing, the novel also values the quiet strength of enduring and resisting in silence. This raises important questions about how silence, too, can be a feminist response to violence.

when it is chosen and controlled by the woman herself. This study uses a qualitative and textual analysis approach. The study is based solely on textual evidence from the novel. It closely examines selected passages from Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* to identify how silence operates within the narrative. The analysis is supported by feminist theory, especially the works of Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, and Sudhir Kakar, to understand how silence functions both as a weapon of oppression and as a tool of resilience.

Discussion

Silence as a Tool of Patriarchy

In *When I Hit You*, silence is not merely a lack of speech. It is a weapon used by patriarchy to erase the identity and agency of women. From the beginning of her marriage, the narrator's husband gradually isolates her from all forms of communication. He forces her into silence by controlling her physical environment, her thoughts, and even her digital presence (Clara Bernadette Reshma et.al, 2021). This control is not just emotional or verbal; it is deeply technological and symbolic. As the narrator says, "He deletes the 25,600-odd emails from my Gmail inbox. All at one go. Then, to prevent me from writing to the Gmail help team and having my emails restored, he changes the password to something I do not know and cannot guess. He erases everything on my hard disk" (Kandasamy, p. 139). These acts are more than just digital erasures. They reflect a deeper effort to wipe out her existence as a person with a voice, a history, and a network of support. As T. Sridevi affirms, "Meena Kandasamy explores the topic of ideological hypocrisy in great detail, focusing on intellectual communities that claim to uphold progressive principles but nonetheless engage in patriarchal behaviors" (Sridevi, 2024). The husband's actions show how silence is enforced through domination (Kandasamy, p.139). As the narrator explains, "To stay silent is to censor all conversation. To stay silent is to erase individuality" (Kandasamy, p.161). His desire for silence is not about peace but about power. He does not allow her to speak freely, nor does he permit her to write, which is her form of self-expression. By disconnecting her from the outside world, he forces her into a state of voicelessness, where her reality is shaped entirely by his control. It resonates with the fact that "women's rights and voices are never truly heard as something to consider, even by relatives and family. In the struggle for their rights (Bernadette et al, 2021). This forced silence is not limited to the husband alone. It is also supported by the wider social structure, including the narrator's own family.

When she tries to speak up about the abuse, her parents discourage her from creating a scene. They suggest that she remain patient and silent, believing that all marriages require compromise. "Do not raise your voice. Do not talk back" (Kandasamy, p.157). Her father tells her that silence is a shield and that she should adapt to her husband's demands. This advice reflects the traditional belief that a "good" woman must endure and adjust, even in the face of violence.

As feminist theorist Sudhir Kakar notes in *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (1989), "In the ideals of the traditional culture, the 'good' woman is a pativrata, subordinating her life to the husband's welfare and needs in a way demanded of no other women in any part of the world" (Kakar, p. 66). This cultural expectation turns silence into a duty and resistance into rebellion. Through both personal experience and social conditioning, the narrator is silenced at every level. Her story shows how patriarchy uses silence not just to suppress

women but to erase their existence altogether. However, as the novel later shows, her silence is not forever. It becomes the ground from which her quiet resistance begins to grow.

Silence as a Survival Strategy

In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's silence is not always forced, it is also a conscious choice she makes to protect herself. As the abuse in her marriage intensifies, she realizes that speaking out or reacting to her husband's accusations only leads to more violence. In such a situation, silence becomes her shield. She learns that the more she speaks, the more her words are twisted and used against her. This is clearly expressed in her words: "I contemplate the right response to every provocation, I cross out lines of dialogue when I realize that silence sinks in better" (Kandasamy, p. 22). Her silence, therefore, is not a sign of weakness, but a smart and strategic decision. By refusing to engage or argue, she avoids provoking her abuser further. She begins to measure every word, and every expression, and eventually withdraws into a quiet space within herself where she can survive without drawing attention. This kind of silence is not passive. It is filled with awareness. Bell Hooks affirms that "Silence renders us invisible. Silence erases our thoughts and feelings. Silence separates us from others." (Hooks, p. 6). However, Kandasamy is not silent because she has nothing to say, but because she knows the cost of speaking in a space where her voice is not safe. At the same time, this silence is not permanent or helpless. It is a temporary form of protection, a way to endure the situation until she can regain her power. It allows her to preserve her mental strength and plan her escape from the violent marriage. In this way, Kandasamy presents silence as a thoughtful and necessary act of self-preservation. Audre Lorde proclaims that "your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, p. 40) and that is what Kandasamy begins to realise. She does not surrender. Instead, she withholds herself and maintains an inner resistance while outwardly appearing quiet.

Inner Voice and Secret Resistance

Although the narrator in *When I Hit You* is forced into silence by her abusive husband, she finds ways to preserve her inner world and resist quietly. Her thoughts, imagination, and memories become a secret space where she can remain free. Hooks asserts that "being oppressed means the absence of choices" (Hooks, p. 37) and Kandasamy makes sure that she would choose her own options. While she is cut off from the outside world and not allowed to speak, write, or even connect with others digitally, she continues to mentally resist. She reflects, remembers, imagines, and writes silently within herself. This inner voice becomes her source of strength when everything else is taken away. The narrator clearly expresses this when she says, "This marriage, oppressive and impossible as it is, does not have the power to hold me hostage forever (Kandasamy, p.190). This line is powerful because it shows that even though her husband controls her phone, email, and online identity, he cannot control her mind. Her memories, her thoughts, and her imagination remain untouched. This mental space becomes a quiet rebellion where she can still be herself.

One of the most intimate ways she resists is by writing letters in her head. She imagines conversations with people who are not real. She imagines them to be her lovers, strangers or friends as a way to express the emotions she is not allowed to speak aloud. She says, "I play wife, but the minute my husband walks out, I'm screaming yes yes yes yes yes yes in my head, and I obsess about what I need to be writing" (Kandasamy, p. 81). This act of writing helps her survive emotionally even when she is not allowed to physically write. She says, "At

this point I am not listening to him. I have no intention of responding. I am thinking of being at a point in the future when I would be writing about this moment (Kandasamy, p. 87). Through these secret acts, the narrator shows that resistance does not always have to be loud or visible. Even in the silence forced upon her, she finds quiet ways to fight back and hold on to her sense of self.

Writing as Reclaiming Voice

In *When I Hit You*, writing becomes the narrator's most powerful tool for reclaiming her voice. While silence helps her survive during the abuse, writing allows her to transform that silence into expression, but entirely on her terms. It is through writing that she finally tells her story; not under pressure, not in fear, but with full control over her narrative. Her voice, which was once silenced by force, re-emerges with strength and clarity in the form of carefully chosen words.

The narrator herself declares, "Pity seems possible; I have a compulsive need to dole it out like small change, but the writer in me is stronger than the woman in me (Kandasamy, p. 205). This quote reveals the emotional urgency behind her writing. It is not just a creative act, but a necessary act of emotional survival. In the absence of safety and support, writing becomes her way of making sense of her trauma, of turning pain into language. Through writing, she is no longer a silent victim: she becomes the author of her own experience. What is especially important in this process is that the narrator chooses when and how to speak. Unlike in her marriage, where she was constantly silenced or interrupted, the act of writing gives her full control. Here, Kandasamy believes in the words of Audre Lorde where she says, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (Lorde, p. 42). Hence, here the narrator is not being questioned or judged. She is not being watched or threatened. In her writing, she decides what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. This sense of control is a direct challenge to the power her husband once held over her. Researcher Tanu Kashyap also reaffirms: "She knows that writing can be her salvation" (Kashyap, 2018). Therefore, writing becomes more than just a form of storytelling. It is a form of healing, resistance and self-definition. It marks the turning point where silence, once used for survival, transforms into a voice with purpose. By writing her truth, the narrator does not just speak. Rather, she reclaims the power to be heard.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* offers a powerful and layered portrayal of silence not as weakness, but as a deliberate form of survival and resistance. Throughout the novel, we see how the patriarchal husband uses silence to control the narrator, cutting her off from her identity and the outside world. At the same time, we also witness how the narrator quietly resists through her thoughts, memories, and imagined writings. Her silence is a calculated response to danger, helping her protect herself in a situation where speaking might only worsen her suffering. As the story progresses, silence becomes the ground on which her voice is rebuilt. Through writing, she reclaims her story, her voice, and her power. She writes not only to survive but to heal and to assert her existence. In this way, the novel challenges traditional feminist ideas that focus only on vocal protest, showing that silence, too, can be a form of strength when chosen with intention. *When I Hit You* redefines silence in a feminist context as a space of resistance, protection and eventually transformation. The narrator's

journey reminds us that even in silence, a woman can be strong, self-aware and powerfully defiant. Her silence is not the end of her voice, but the beginning of her freedom.

Works Cited

- Alapati, Purnachandra Rao, et al. "Submission to Subversion: An Analytical Study of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 11, 2022, pp. 2397–2402.
<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1211.21>.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.
- Hooks, Bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press, 1989.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. Viking, 1989.
- Kandasamy, Meena. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Atlantic Books, 2017.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- Tripathi, Priyanka, and Partha Bhattacharjee. "When a Violated Body Strikes/Writes Back: Unveiling the Violence in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*." *The Atlantic Literary Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2019, pp. 53–59.
- Reshma, C. B., & Johnson, J. (2021). A violated body strikes/writes back: Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development*, 8(5), 261–263.
- Kashyap, T. (2018). A feminist study in Meena Kandasamy's novels *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* and *The Gypsy Goddess*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 6(3), 66–77.
- Naik, C. P. (2022). Study of feminism in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 10(4), d741–d745.