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**Literary Theories**

**Patriarchy, Domestic Violence and Female Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary Indian literature has increasingly focused on the experiences of women living under patriarchal structures. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) is a powerful autobiographical novel that explores domestic violence, emotional abuse, marital oppression, and female resistance. Through the story of an unnamed young woman trapped in an abusive marriage, Kandasamy exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchy controls women's bodies, voices, and identities. The novel presents violence not only as physical abuse but also as psychological manipulation and social domination. This paper examines the representation of domestic violence, patriarchal power, and the protagonist's struggle for selfhood. It argues that writing becomes a means of survival and resistance against oppression. The study highlights how Kandasamy challenges traditional notions of marriage and advocates for female autonomy and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Feminism, Resistance, Identity, Marriage, Women's Writing, Meena Kandasamy.



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## Introduction

Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly become a powerful medium for exposing social inequalities, gender discrimination, and domestic violence. Among the prominent voices in this field, Meena Kandasamy stands out for her bold and uncompromising representation of caste, patriarchy, and women's resistance. Her autobiographical novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) is a significant contribution to feminist literature, portraying the psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse experienced by an educated woman within an abusive marriage. Drawing upon her own experiences, Kandasamy presents a deeply personal narrative that simultaneously reflects the realities of countless women living under patriarchal oppression.

The novel explores the complex dynamics of power, control, and violence that shape marital relationships in a patriarchal society. Instead of portraying domestic violence as an isolated incident, Kandasamy reveals it as a systematic mechanism through which patriarchal authority seeks to silence women's identities, freedom, and creative expression. The unnamed protagonist's struggle to preserve her individuality and identity as a writer becomes the central conflict of the narrative. Writing emerges as an act of resistance, allowing her to reclaim her voice against oppression.

*When I Hit You* also examines how emotional manipulation, surveillance, isolation, and psychological abuse function alongside physical violence to maintain male dominance. The novel challenges traditional cultural beliefs that encourage women to remain silent and endure abuse for the sake of marriage and family honour. Through its fragmented narrative structure and confessional style, the text highlights the long-lasting psychological consequences of intimate partner violence while questioning the social institutions that normalize women's suffering.

From a feminist perspective, the novel critiques patriarchal power structures and advocates women's autonomy, agency, and freedom. It also intersects with issues of language, identity, sexuality, and class, making it an important text for interdisciplinary literary studies. Scholars have examined the novel through various theoretical lenses, including feminist theory, trauma theory, autobiographical studies, and intersectionality. However, there remains considerable scope for exploring how patriarchal violence operates through both physical domination and linguistic control while positioning writing as a transformative act of survival and resistance.

Therefore, this research paper analyses *When I Hit You* through the framework of feminist literary criticism, focusing on the representation of domestic violence, patriarchal control, female identity, and the empowering role of writing. The study aims to demonstrate how Meena Kandasamy transforms personal trauma into political resistance, making the novel a compelling critique of gender-based oppression in contemporary Indian society. This study adopts an analytical and descriptive approach. It involves a close reading of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Feminist literary theory serves as the primary theoretical framework for analysing the text. Secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and scholarly studies on feminism, patriarchy, and domestic violence are also consulted to support the analysis.

### **A Brief Outline of the Story *When I hit You***

*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* by Meena Kandasamy is a powerful feminist novel that portrays the experiences of a young woman trapped in an abusive marriage. The unnamed narrator, a writer and academic, marries a man who initially appears intellectual and progressive but gradually becomes controlling and violent. He tries to erase her individuality by restricting her freedom, monitoring her actions, and suppressing her creative identity. The novel exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal power and shows how domestic violence operates through emotional, psychological, and physical abuse. Through writing and self-realization, the narrator resists oppression, escapes the abusive relationship, and reclaims her identity. The novel presents storytelling as an act of survival, empowerment, and resistance against patriarchy.

### **Discussion**

#### **Patriarchy and Marital Oppression**

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy presents marriage as a powerful institution through which patriarchal authority is exercised and maintained. The protagonist enters marriage with hopes of companionship and intellectual equality; however, she soon discovers that the institution functions as a mechanism of domination. Her husband assumes complete authority over her movements, communication, thoughts, and personal choices. Through his behaviour, Kandasamy demonstrates how patriarchy extends beyond public institutions into the private sphere of the family. Kate Millett argues that patriarchy functions through social structures that grant men power over women and normalize female subordination (Millett 25). The protagonist's marriage exemplifies this unequal power relationship.

The husband systematically isolates the protagonist from her friends, family members, and professional networks. He demands unquestioning obedience and justifies his actions through ideological and political rhetoric. The narrator observes that her husband sought not merely to control her actions but also to reshape her consciousness according to his expectations. She remarks, “He wanted me to think exactly as he thought, speak exactly as he spoke, and live exactly as he wanted me to live” (Kandasamy 78). Such control reflects Sylvia Walby's understanding of patriarchy as a system of social relations in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby 20).

The novel further exposes how patriarchal power disguises itself as concern, protection, or marital responsibility. The husband constantly monitors the protagonist's activities and claims that his restrictions are necessary for her own good. However, these actions reveal an underlying desire to establish ownership over her body and identity. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the “Other” becomes particularly relevant here, as the protagonist is denied subjectivity and treated as an extension of her husband's authority (Beauvoir 6). Consequently, marriage becomes a site of confinement where personal freedom is sacrificed in favour of male dominance.

### **Domestic Violence and Psychological Abuse**

A significant contribution of *When I Hit You* lies in its portrayal of domestic violence as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. Kandasamy challenges the narrow perception that domestic violence consists solely of physical assault. Instead, the novel illustrates how psychological abuse often precedes and accompanies physical violence, creating long-lasting emotional trauma.

The protagonist experiences continual verbal humiliation and intimidation. Her husband belittles her intelligence, questions her abilities, and manipulates her emotions to maintain control. These tactics gradually erode her self-confidence and sense of reality. Reflecting on her condition, the narrator states, “The violence was not always visible on my skin; sometimes it lived inside my mind” (Kandasamy 112). This observation emphasizes the invisible yet devastating effects of emotional abuse.

The husband also employs surveillance as a tool of domination. He monitors her emails, social media interactions, and personal communications, effectively depriving her of privacy. Such behaviour demonstrates how power operates through constant observation and regulation. bell hooks argues that patriarchal violence seeks to establish fear and dependency, ensuring women's compliance through psychological control rather than physical force alone (hooks 118). The protagonist's experience illustrates this dynamic vividly.

Moreover, the novel portrays sexual violence within marriage, exposing the problematic assumption that marriage automatically grants consent. The protagonist's bodily autonomy is repeatedly violated, highlighting how patriarchal societies often deny women agency over their own bodies. By addressing marital rape and coercion, Kandasamy confronts issues that remain marginalized within many cultural and legal discourses. Through these representations, the novel broadens contemporary understandings of domestic violence and reveals its deeply structural nature.

### **Silencing of Women's Voices**

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is its exploration of linguistic and intellectual control. The protagonist is a writer whose creative expression becomes a threat to her husband's authority. Recognizing the empowering potential of language, he attempts to silence her through surveillance, censorship, and intimidation. His efforts reveal a broader patriarchal anxiety regarding women's voices and intellectual independence.

The husband repeatedly discourages her from writing and seeks to restrict her access to communication platforms. He understands that writing enables her to articulate experiences that challenge his dominance. As the narrator explains, "Words were the only things that still belonged to me" (Kandasamy 145). This statement highlights the profound relationship between language and identity.

Writing becomes the last remaining space in which she can exercise agency and preserve her individuality.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests that identity is constructed through repeated acts and discourses (Butler 191). By controlling the protagonist's speech and writing, the husband attempts to reshape her identity according to patriarchal expectations. His actions demonstrate that domination is not merely physical but also linguistic. The suppression of language becomes a strategy for suppressing selfhood.

However, the protagonist refuses complete silence. Through narration and memory, she reconstructs her experiences and reclaims authority over her own story. The act of writing transforms personal suffering into political testimony. In this sense, the novel itself becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal erasure. Kandasamy suggests that storytelling can challenge dominant narratives and create spaces for marginalized voices to be heard.

### **Resistance and Female Empowerment**

Despite enduring prolonged abuse, the protagonist gradually develops strategies of resistance that enable her to reclaim autonomy. Kandasamy deliberately avoids portraying resistance as a sudden or heroic act. Instead, she presents it as a gradual process involving self-awareness, critical reflection, and emotional resilience. This nuanced portrayal reflects the realities faced by many survivors of domestic violence.

Initially, the protagonist internalizes many of the oppressive messages imposed by her husband. However, moments of self-reflection allow her to recognize the mechanisms of control operating within her marriage. Her continued commitment to writing becomes an important form of resistance. Every attempt to record her experiences challenges the husband's efforts to erase her identity. The narrator acknowledges the empowering nature of this process when she declares, "I wrote because writing was the only way I could remain alive" (Kandasamy 173).

The protagonist's eventual departure from the abusive relationship signifies not only physical escape but also psychological liberation. Her journey reflects bell hooks' assertion that feminism seeks to end sexist oppression and create conditions for women's self-determination (hooks 1). By reclaiming her voice and independence, she rejects the patriarchal structures that sought to define her existence.

Kandasamy's representation of resistance is particularly significant because it emphasizes everyday acts of defiance rather than extraordinary heroism. The protagonist's survival itself becomes a political act. Through her story, the novel affirms women's capacity to resist oppression and reconstruct their identities despite experiences of trauma and violence.

## **Feminist Significance of the Novel**

When I Hit You occupies an important position within contemporary feminist literature because it exposes the intimate realities of gender-based violence while simultaneously challenging social norms that sustain it. The novel demonstrates that domestic violence is not merely a private issue but a political problem rooted in patriarchal structures. By transforming personal experience into public discourse, Kandasamy exemplifies the feminist principle that “the personal is political.” The novel also challenges conventional representations of marriage as a space of security, fulfilment, and emotional support. Instead, Kandasamy reveals how marriage can become a site of surveillance, coercion, and violence when shaped by patriarchal values. Such representations encourage readers to question cultural assumptions regarding family, gender roles, and female sacrifice.

Furthermore, the text contributes to feminist discussions on trauma, memory, and narrative. The fragmented structure of the novel mirrors the psychological effects of abuse and demonstrates how trauma disrupts linear storytelling. By narrating her experiences, the protagonist transforms trauma into testimony, creating possibilities for healing and empowerment. Most importantly, the novel foregrounds the transformative power of women's writing. Through storytelling, the protagonist reclaims agency over her life and challenges systems of domination. The text therefore functions not only as a narrative of suffering but also as a powerful declaration of survival, resistance, and feminist empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is a powerful exploration of domestic violence, patriarchal oppression, and female resistance. The novel presents the disturbing reality of an abusive marriage through the experiences of an unnamed woman narrator who is a writer and academic. Her marriage, which initially appears to be a relationship based on intellectual companionship, gradually becomes a space of control, fear, and domination. Kandasamy reveals how abuse does not exist only in the form of physical violence but also operates through emotional manipulation, psychological pressure, surveillance, isolation, and the suppression of a woman's individuality. The novel critically examines the ways in which patriarchy functions within personal relationships. The husband, despite presenting himself as politically aware and progressive, reproduces oppressive structures by attempting to control the narrator's choices, thoughts, friendships, and creative expression.

Through this contradiction, Kandasamy exposes the gap between public ideals of equality and private practices of domination. The narrative highlights how domestic spaces can become sites where power struggles and gender inequalities are deeply embedded.

At the same time, *When I Hit You* is not merely a story of suffering; it is a story of survival, resilience, and resistance. The protagonist gradually recognizes her own strength and uses writing as a means to reclaim her voice and identity. Her act of narration becomes a form of rebellion against the forces that attempt to silence her. Kandasamy emphasizes that self-expression, independence, and the ability to tell one's own story are essential forms of freedom. The novel therefore becomes an important contribution to contemporary feminist literature, challenging traditional ideas about marriage, womanhood, and power. By portraying the psychological impact of abuse and the journey towards liberation, Kandasamy encourages critical conversations about gender justice, equality, and women's rights. It ultimately celebrates the courage of women who resist oppression and reclaim control over their own lives.

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