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Society, Family, and Patriarchal Norms: A Feminist Reading of Meena Kandasamy's*When I Hit You; Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

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Abstract: Society plays a crucial role in shaping individuals by prescribing norms and etiquettes that regulate behaviour within a given community. These expectations, however, are gendered—conditioning women and men into unequal social roles designed to preserve patriarchal order. As bell hooks observes, "patriarchy is a political-socio system that insists that males are inherently dominating… and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak" (38). Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) explores how patriarchy operates through both family and society to silence women, even those who are educated and self-aware. The novel critiques not only the intimate violence of a husband but also the complicity of social institutions that normalize women's suffering. This paper investigates how Kandasamy exposes the ideological and emotional mechanisms through which patriarchal norms are internalized and perpetuated, arguing that her narrative dismantles the sanctity of the family and the myth of marital stability, foregrounding speech, writing, and self-expression as acts of feminist resistance and survival.

Keywords: Conjugal Life, Domestic Violence, Female Subjectivity, Family, Society Resistance

Introduction

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy (born October 12, 1984) is an Indian poet, fiction writer, and translator, widely regarded as one of the most powerful voices in contemporary Indian English literature. She is the celebrated author of *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), and is recognized as the first Indian woman to write Dalit poetry in English. Kandasamy's literary oeuvre revolves around themes of caste annihilation, feminism, and linguistic identity, and she uses writing as a form of political resistance. For her, writing is not merely an act of creativity but an act of activism; as she asserts, "Don't let people remove you from your own story" (9). Through her poetry and prose, Kandasamy critiques the social institutions complicit in perpetuating women's oppression by imposing patriarchal norms and silencing female subjectivity. The present paper examines her novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017), exploring how it exposes the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideology operating within familial, social, and cultural structures.The novel, which draws on autobiographical elements, dissects the multiple structures—society, family, and ideology—that conspire to discipline women into silence. Kandasamy's narrator, an educated and politically conscious woman, becomes the target of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband, a self-proclaimed Marxist intellectual. Yet, the violence she experiences transcends individual cruelty; it reflects the deeply entrenched logic of patriarchal bargains, where a woman's endurance becomes synonymous with virtue. As bell hooks reminds us, patriarchy is "a political-socio system that insists that males

are inherently dominating" (38), and this ideology is preserved through familial honour, reproductive control, and the silencing of dissent. Kandasamy's work unmasks the complicity of these institutions—showing how family and society, rather than offering refuge, often enforce submission in the name of respectability. Through a blend of lyricism and rage, *When I Hit You* transforms personal trauma into collective resistance. The present paper examines how Kandasamy exposes the ways in which society and family perpetuate patriarchal norms, and how her narrator's refusal to conform becomes an act of political defiance and feminist self-reclamation.

Society, Family, and Patriarchal Norms

If the body is the first battlefield upon which patriarchy enacts its violence, the family and the social order become the extended terrains where this violence is normalized, rationalized, and sustained. What begins as an intimate violation of the woman's body gradually expands into a network of expectations, silences, and coercions that are sanctioned by kinship structures, caste endogamy, and patriarchal ideology. As Ambedkar reminds us in *Annihilation of Caste*, "the subjugation of women is the key to the preservation of caste" — marriage, reproduction, and domestic obedience become the mechanisms by which caste is perpetuated (14). In Kandasamy's narrative, the husband's abuse is not simply an individual act of cruelty but is reinforced by parental advice, cultural traditions, and the collective weight of "Bharatiya Nari" ideals that confine women to silence and endurance. As Tara Khandelwal observes, "The term Bhartiya Nari is a hyped package of societal expectations and norms that have historically constrained women within rigid gender roles, emphasizing qualities such as modesty, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Thus, to understand the narrator's suffering, one must move beyond the body to examine how family, society, and ideological structures act together to regulate her life and deny her agency.

The narrator's father's conversation, though occasionally supportive of his daughter, often stems from the fear of losing honour rather than concern for her well-being. At one moment, he erupts in anger against his son-in-law: "Is that what he actually said? Rascal. Is this what his Communism has come to? You should cut off his balls and send them back to where he came from" (158). Yet, almost immediately, he retracts into patriarchal anxiety:

"This is not a time to be selfish. If you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me. They will say his daughter ran away in less than six months. It will reflect on your upbringing. This is not what I intended for my daughter. You have no idea what a father goes through. A father of a daughter—that is a special kind of punishment. We pay the price. Please. Think about us this once" (159).

This vacillation between anger at the abusive husband and fear of social ridicule illustrates how deeply family honour is tied to a daughter's subordination within marriage. Scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) have explained this as the logic of *"patriarchal bargains"*—where families negotiate women's suffering in exchange for preserving reputation and belonging within the community.(278) The narrator, who has read widely in feminist literature, perceives her predicament through comparative historical examples. Reflecting on the fate of Helen, Louis Althusser's wife, she remarks: "Althusser learnt to masturbate only in his twenties; intellectually overdeveloped, sexually underdeveloped. But then Althusser wasn't a laughing matter anymore, because one day I discovered that he had strangled his wife to death" (189). She interprets this as an act of "suicide by proxy"—a chilling metaphor for how women's refusal or silence can be overwritten by male intellectual or cultural authority. Her fear of "becoming Helen" (190) signals her refusal to allow her husband to distort or erase her narrative. By invoking Althusser, she aligns her story with feminist critiques such as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), which exposed the complicity of intellectual and cultural figures in perpetuating misogyny, reminding us that education or ideology does not absolve patriarchy (Millett 45).

The narrator's resistance takes shape most visibly in her refusal to bear a child. In a deeply symbolic reflection, she writes: "In Tamil, there is a beautiful word for the womb. Karuvarai. The room of the foetus. Karuvarai. It is what the inner sanctum of a temple is called, where a god or a goddess resides. It is a place of peace. To keep it empty is what I have decided to do. My husband has other ideas" (197). In equating the womb with the temple sanctum, the narrator reclaims reproductive agency from patriarchal control. Shulamith Firestone's*The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) is resonant here, where reproduction is analysed as a primary site of women's oppression. The narrator's refusal is thus not just personal defiance but an ideological act against enforced motherhood.(Firestone 192)

Her account also critiques how society valorises women only through motherhood: "Having a baby is only a matter of discussion between the doctor and the husband. The woman does not ask me if I want a baby, if I am ready for a baby, if I am happy with my husband, if I have any problems that I might want to discuss" (197). This erasure of women's consent within reproductive decision-making echoes Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), which distinguished between motherhood as experience and as patriarchal institution.(Rich 23). Violence becomes the enforcement mechanism of patriarchy. For instance, when she refuses to gulp down two litres of water at once due to nausea, her husband slaps her in public: "Behave yourself. You have no responsibility. You have no intention of being either a wife or a mother…You want to keep your size zero frame. You are a zero yourself. You do not want my children. You will be out of business as a whore if you become a mother" (200). Such humiliations mark how everyday bodily acts become sites of discipline. Foucault's concept of *biopower*—where power operates through regulating bodies and reproduction—is apt here. (Foucault 140).

Recognising the futility of argument, the narrator concludes that to engage in constant confrontation is to "lose." Hence, she chooses to leave rather than perpetuate a lifetime of defensive struggle, but not before exposing his hypocrisy: "In his rule book—sown by patriarchy, watered by feudalism, manured by a selective interpretation of Communism—a woman should not moan. That is how history steals her voice" (154). Patriarchal domination here intersects with ideological misuse, showing how even revolutionary discourses can reproduce gender hierarchies.

Her testimony of physical abuse captures the grotesque violence disguised as exorcism: "He wants to drive out the demons that he thinks have possessed me. In the absence of bunches of fresh neem leaves to strike me with—bitter, serrated, mid-night-green—he uses makeshift substitutes: my Mac's power cord, his leather belt, twisted electrical cables" (154). The husband positions himself as saviour, while in reality he is punisher. Scholars like Judith Butler have emphasised that violence not only disciplines the body but also produces a silenced subjectivity, which is evident in the narrator's eventual withdrawal into silence as survival strategy.

This silencing extends beyond the conjugal space into her natal family. Her parents, instead of enabling escape, reinforce patriarchal endurance: "I know you; you are my daughter, you do not like to lose a fight. The marriage is a give and take. Listen to him. He only means well. Do not raise your voice. Do not talk back… Silence is a shield and it is also a weapon. Learn how to use it" (157). Such counsel reflects Gayatri Spivak's (1988) argument about how women are asked to "learn to be silent" in order to preserve family and social structures.Spivak posits that women who are oppressed by patriarchy possibly cannot speak (qtd. in Loomba 234).

Even the mother, internalising phallocentric ideas, accuses her daughter of promiscuity when she asserts independence: "So you want to be like all these writers you read about and those writers whom you call your friends—single and sleeping around with anyone they please" (159). This demonstrates how women themselves are conditioned to police female rebellion, sustaining patriarchal norms across generations.

The society, conditioned by phallocentric norms, finds it difficult to accept the rebellious nature of women.The narrator's own mother, reflecting the internalization of patriarchal values,accuses her daughter of

promiscuity when she asserts independence:"So you want to be like all these writers you read about and those writers whom you call your friends — single and sleeping around with anyone they please." (159).This demonstrates how women themselves are conditioned to police female rebellion, sustaining patriarchal norms across generationsillustrating what Deniz Kandiyoticalls "the patriarchal bargain," where women themselves become custodians of the very system that subjugates them, disciplining their daughters into conformity.

Her father further presses the argument for children as a stabilising force: "These problems will cease to exist when you have children. Do not talk too much…Do not drag these problems home to us, do not let these wounds fester. Learn to obey" (159)The researcher astutely questions this advice, pointing out that if abuse occurs within the first week of marriage, childbirth only deepens women's entrapment. If a woman separates before bearing a child, she has greater scope for autonomy; once a child is involved,the pendulum of responsibility often compels her to remain in abusive marriages, a phenomenon common in many Indian households—where women remain in abusive marriages to preserve familial "stability."In reality, as Adrienne Rich observes in *Of Woman Born*, motherhood in patriarchal structures is often weaponized to bind women further to oppressive domestic roles.Her father's suggestion to have children, too, demonstrates how caste patriarchy functions through the honour–shame code. Within such a framework, motherhood is not about the woman's desire but about securing lineage, stability, and social legitimacy. As Uma Chakravarti opines that the control of women's sexuality and reproduction has always been central to maintaining caste boundaries.

The narrator's mother's advice that she should remain in the marriage also stems from a fear of social stigma — *what if she fails again with another man?* This resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's argument that woman is often reduced to "the Other," whose value lies in preserving family honour rather than her own selfhood. Throughout history, women have been silenced in the name of chastity and respectability, as if they alone bear the responsibility of upholding cultural purity.Marriage is constructed as an indissoluble institution where women are chastised not for being abused but for resisting abuse. Uma Chakravarti's work on *Brahmanical patriarchy* is relevant here, highlighting how control over women's sexuality and speech maintains caste and gender order (579).

This silencing is further reinforced when the narrator's father advises obedience: *"Hold your tongue. He is your husband, not your enemy. Do not talk back. You can never take back what you have said."* (160). His words reflect what Gayatri Spivak calls the impossibility of the subaltern woman's speech — her voice is muted under the weight of patriarchal and cultural imperatives. Even parental "support" becomes conditional, governed not by her well-being but by the preservation of familial honor and social respectability.

This tension between women's agency and the burden of family honor is not unique to Kandasamy's narrator. Dalit women's autobiographies consistently underscore this bind. In Bama's *Karukku*, silence is imposed on women to safeguard community respectability, even when they are humiliated or violated. Similarly, Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* illustrates how mothers transmit patriarchal injunctions to daughters in the name of "tradition" and "duty," even when it perpetuates violence. Like Kandasamy's narrator, these voices reveal that women are doubly oppressed: first by men, and second by the weight of caste and family honor that demands their complicity in silence.Thus, when Kandasamy's narrator recalls how her parents repeatedly asked her to endure for "her own good" (60), she exposes the hypocrisy of the honor–shame system. What is presented as protection—silence, endurance, motherhood—is in fact a mechanism to keep women submissive.As Veena Das argues in *Critical Events* (1995), that women's bodies often become the terrain where community honor and shame are inscribed, particularly in South Asian contexts.

The narrative widens its lens to society's complicity. Relatives interrogate her father, prompting him to lament: "that girl N-E-V-E-R listened to me." Ultimately, he asks her to leave home, which she interprets later—through a scene in *Cinema Paradiso*—as an "act of love": "Go away. Don't come back" (237). Yet, the irony

remains that parental "love" is expressed through abandonment. This recalls Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of how family honour often takes precedence over women's safety, especially in postcolonial societies (Mohanty 74).

Her reflections on childhood experiences further expose how "your own good" was invoked as justification for abuse and control: "Your own good was the mantra of my mother… 'Your own good' was what justified my teenage neighbour putting his fingers inside my eight-year-old vagina… When I hear 'your own good' I am reduced to being a child again. I do not argue any more. I go silent" (60). The continuity of this rhetoric from childhood into marriage reveals how patriarchal conditioning naturalises women's suffering as benevolent discipline.

The narrator's precarious condition as an educated but isolated woman is exemplified in her list of constraints when married to an English lecturer: "You end up somewhere in the middle of the teaching semester? … your husband has forced you off social media? … your husband monitors and replies to all messages addressed to you? … you have the wifely responsibility of producing children first?" (66). She herself remarks: "These are not the regrets of an unemployed person. These are the complaints of an imprisoned wife" (66). Such testimony resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that marriage converts woman into the "Other," defined entirely in relation to man (Beauvoir 283).

She further reflects on cultural beliefs about conception: "The man's fluids form the bones. The woman's fluids form the flesh… when a child forms inside the womb of a sad, broken woman, its little heart will be made up of her tears" (198).This poignant metaphor disrupts biological determinismthat reproduction is a purely biological or sacred duty. Instead, she reframes the womb as a site marked by emotion, trauma, and resistance. This resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that women are historically reduced to their reproductive function, treated as "wombs" rather than full human beings. Similarly, Shulamith Firestone, who preferred ectogenesis, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, sees reproduction as the very mechanism through which women's subjugation is perpetuated, since control over childbirth has been monopolized by men and patriarchal institutions.Women cannot be free until released from the tyranny of reproduction, wrote Shulamith Firestone in 1970(qtd. in MacKay 2020)

After escaping the marriage, the narrator describes her life as one of surveillance and social trial: "For four months and eight days I had been off every radar, no phone, no email, not even the curated happiness of Facebook" (217). On returning, she is attacked not only by relatives but also by public opinion: "The worst attacks blame me. What kind of feminist was she? Why did she endure it for four months? … If she was indeed abused, why does she not go to the police? … If she is a feminist, why does she let her rapist and abuser walk away scot-free?" (223). This reflects what feminist legal scholars call *"secondary victimisation"*—where women, instead of being supported, are interrogated, doubted, and vilified (Laing).

Although she ultimately reclaims autonomy, she recognises the scars of her experience: "My scars are my secrets" (239). Yet, in naming those scars, she transforms them into testimony, refusing erasure. As Judith Herman argues in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), survival narratives that articulate violence are themselves acts of resistance. (175)By placing *When I Hit You* alongside Dalit women's narratives, it becomes clear that caste patriarchy weaponizes honor and shame to discipline women (Chakravarti 2003). Even when women identify abuse, the burden of family and caste silences them. Kandasamy's narrator, however, breaks this cycle—rejecting coerced motherhood and refusing silence. Her act of narrating becomes a radical rewriting of honor itself, echoing feminist insights that speech and resistance are political acts.

Conclusion

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy dismantles the myth of marriage as sanctuary and redefines it as a site of ideological warfare. The novel demonstrates how patriarchal authority operates not merely through the husband's violence but through the insidious reinforcement of social, familial, and cultural expectations. Every act of silencing—whether by the husband, the parents, or the collective gaze of society—reveals how women are conditioned to internalize subordination as duty. Yet, Kandasamy's narrator transforms her suffering into speech, reclaiming authorship over her life and narrative. Her refusal to bear children, her rejection of silence, and her choice to write become radical acts that subvert patriarchal control over the female body and voice. In articulating her trauma, she converts pain into protest, embodying what Judith Herman calls "the restoration of the voice" as a central act of healing (175). Ultimately, Kandasamy asserts that resistance begins not in grand revolutions but in the intimate act of speaking one's truth against structures that demand silence. Her work stands as a testament to the power of feminist writing to challenge the moral, cultural, and ideological foundations of patriarchy that continue to govern women's lives in contemporary Indian society.

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