

Language, Culture, and Patriarchy: Analysing Marriage and Gender Roles in *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy

Oshien.S¹, Dr. Sandhya Shankar²

¹*II M.A. English, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur,
Chennai-603 103*

²*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Languages, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur, Chennai-603 103*

Abstract- This paper examines the relationship between language, culture, and patriarchy in Meena Kandasamy's "When I Hit You", highlighting the ongoing suppression of the protagonist's identity as both a woman and a writer. The novel critiques how marriage is culturally constructed, depicting it as an institution that enforces rigid gender roles and marginalises women. From a linguistic standpoint, the analysis shows how language acts as a tool of oppression, silencing the protagonist and diminishing her individuality. Furthermore, it discusses the importance of writing in her pursuit of self-expression, demonstrating how her creative efforts serve as acts of rebellion and means to reclaim her identity within a patriarchal society. Ultimately, this research contends that Kandasamy's portrayal of the protagonist's emotional and psychological journey reveals the profound impacts of patriarchal oppression, illustrating how cultural and marital norms often erase women's identities. By emphasising the protagonist's resistance and eventual reclamation of voice, this paper highlights the broader significance of "When I Hit You" in confronting societal norms that silence and subjugate women.

Key words: suppression, identity, self-expression, patriarchy, resistance

INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy's novel "When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife," tells the harrowing story of an unnamed protagonist who experiences severe domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, a university professor. Initially enchanted by his political ideals and charm, she quickly finds herself trapped in a relationship that systematically erases her identity as both a woman and a writer.

The narrative explores how cultural norms surrounding marriage enforce rigid gender roles,

leading to her social isolation and emotional degradation. Her husband employs language as a tool of control, silencing her voice and undermining her self-expression by manipulating her access to communication platforms like email and social media. As he escalates his physical and psychological abuse, she loses her autonomy and is forced into a submissive role that aligns with societal expectations of a dutiful wife.

Despite the oppressive circumstances, the protagonist's journey reveals her struggle for self-identity through writing. Her creative expression becomes an act of resistance against her husband's dominance, allowing her to reclaim her voice and challenge the patriarchal structures that seek to suppress her. Ultimately, Kandasamy's work serves as a poignant critique of the societal norms that perpetuate violence against women, illustrating the profound impact of patriarchy on women's identities and their quest for agency.

The objective of this research paper is to examine how Meena Kandasamy's portrayal of marriage in "When I Hit You" reflects the suppression of female identity within a patriarchal society. The study focuses on the protagonist's struggle as both a woman and a writer, illustrating how societal norms and cultural expectations systematically erase her individuality and autonomy. By analysing the dynamics of her abusive marriage, the paper aims to uncover the broader implications of Kandasamy's narrative in highlighting the intersection of gender, language, and power, ultimately advocating for a deeper understanding of women's experiences in contemporary society.

THESIS STATEMENT

The central argument of this paper is that “When I Hit You” critiques the complex interplay of language, culture, and patriarchy. Through the experiences of the female protagonist, the novel illustrates how her identity is systematically erased within the confines of marriage. Additionally, it highlights her abuser's efforts to silence her as a writer, further diminishing her sense of self. Kandasamy's narrative reveals the profound impact of societal norms on women's identities. By examining these dynamics, the paper underscores how patriarchal structures perpetuate oppression. Ultimately, it advocates for greater awareness of the challenges faced by women in similar contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

II. THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF MARRIAGE IN “WHEN I HIT YOU”

In Meena Kandasamy's “When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife”, marriage is portrayed as a deeply ingrained cultural institution that reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations, often resulting in the oppression of women. The protagonist begins her marriage with hope, initially drawn to her husband's political ideals and charisma. However, this illusion quickly fades as she becomes trapped in a relationship that demands her complete submission. Kandasamy effectively illustrates this shift through the protagonist's gradual erosion of identity and autonomy, as her husband employs emotional manipulation and physical violence to exert control over her. The narrator insightfully observes that “*love is not blind; it just looks in the wrong places,*” highlighting how societal expectations can distort perceptions of love and partnership. This portrayal reveals that even contemporary marriages, often idealized as partnerships based on affection, can harbour oppressive dynamics rooted in cultural norms. The novel critiques the societal and cultural pressures that compel women to tolerate abusive relationships under the guise of traditional marital values. The protagonist's parents exemplify this mindset, advising her to adapt and remain silent in the face of her husband's cruelty. They perpetuate the belief that suffering is an inherent aspect of marriage, suggesting that “*the first year of marriage is always hard.*” This

viewpoint normalizes violence within domestic spaces and illustrates how deeply rooted cultural narratives can silence women's voices. Kandasamy's depiction of the protagonist's struggle serves as a powerful reminder that women are often expected to endure their husbands' shortcomings while sacrificing their well-being. The protagonist's realization that she cannot triumph over her husband's brutality leads her to seek alternative means of self-expression, such as writing letters to imaginary lovers, which becomes an act of defiance against her oppressive situation.

Ultimately, Kandasamy highlights the internal conflict faced by women conditioned to accept their roles within marriage despite the violence they experience. The protagonist wrestles with feelings of guilt and shame, intensified by societal norms that discourage dissent. She poses a compelling question: “*What makes a woman stay in a marriage that she should have left the day before it even happened?*” This inquiry encapsulates the struggle against cultural expectations that dictate a woman's position within marriage. The narrative reveals how family and society tacitly support gendered violence embedded in marital relationships, often framing it as a necessary sacrifice for familial harmony. Through her impactful storytelling, Kandasamy critiques the institution of marriage while advocating for women's autonomy and self-expression as vital components of any healthy relationship. By illuminating these dynamics, this paper serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for societal change to dismantle patriarchal norms that perpetuate violence against women within the sanctity of marriage.

III. THE LINGUISTIC SUPPRESSION OF FEMALE

“Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, and to humble.” - Yehuda Berg

Language emerges as a potent tool of control used by the protagonist's abuser to undermine her identity and agency. Throughout the novel, the husband employs derogatory language and verbal abuse to assert his dominance and belittle his wife. For example, he dismisses her writing by labelling it as “*the work of a poet prostitute or whore,*” which not only devalues her creative expression but also reinforces a patriarchal narrative that equates a woman's worth with her submission to men. This manipulation of language serves to silence her, creating an environment where

her thoughts and feelings are consistently invalidated. The protagonist poignantly notes that "to stay silent is to erase individuality," emphasizing the profound effects that verbal control has on her sense of self.

Instances of verbal abuse in the novel are rampant, showcasing how language is wielded to uphold the patriarchal ideology of the "silent woman." The husband's insults and belittling remarks instill fear and compliance in the protagonist. He restricts her interactions with others, insisting she avoids social media and maintains a low profile, effectively isolating her from potential support systems. This isolation is further exacerbated by societal expectations that reinforce the notion that women should be passive and submissive. The protagonist's parents also contribute to this dynamic; when she confides in them about her struggles, they respond with admonitions to endure for the sake of family honour, stating, "*If you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me.*" Such comments reflect how cultural norms perpetuate the silencing of women's voices, compelling them to accept their circumstances and deepen their subjugation.

The protagonist's ability for self-expression—both verbally and as a writer—is systematically stifled by her husband's actions and the cultural norms that underpin them. As she endures emotional and physical abuse, she finds herself increasingly unable to articulate her thoughts and feelings. Her husband's demands for silence lead her to internalize her pain, resulting in a gradual loss of voice. She powerfully expresses this struggle: "*I never understood rape until it happened to me... he is not the masked assaulter... he is the husband for whom I have to make coffee the following morning,*" illustrating how domestic violence erases her identity as both a woman and a writer. Although writing becomes an avenue for resistance, even this is curtailed as her husband seeks to control every aspect of her life. He limits her access to writing platforms and public expression, effectively stripping her of her autonomy.

Kandasamy's narrative compellingly illustrates how language serves as a means of erasure within the context of domestic violence. The protagonist's identity as a woman and writer is systematically dismantled through the progressive silencing of her voice. As she navigates this oppressive environment, she reflects on the consequences of enforced silence: "*To stay silent is an act of self-flagellation.*" This

realization highlights the psychological toll that linguistic suppression takes on her sense of self-worth. Ultimately, "When I Hit You" presents a poignant exploration of how language can be weaponized within intimate relationships to enforce patriarchal control, resulting in the erasure of women's identities and voices. Kandasamy's work challenges readers to confront these dynamics and advocate for women's rights to speak out against oppression in all its forms.

IV. THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND WRITING: THE WOMAN WRITER'S STRUGGLE

The intersection of gender and writing poignantly depicts the protagonist's struggles as a woman writer in a patriarchal society. The novel highlights the challenges she faces in asserting her identity and voice amidst oppressive cultural norms.

One of the most striking quotes that encapsulates her struggle is when she asserts, "*I must take some responsibility over my own life. I must write my story.*" This declaration signifies her recognition of the need to reclaim her narrative, despite the constraints imposed by her husband and society. It reflects her determination to assert agency through writing, even as she deals with the violence and control exerted over her.

The protagonist's identity as a writer becomes a significant avenue for patriarchal oppression, as her husband actively seeks to suppress her intellectual and creative endeavors. Initially, the protagonist is passionate about her writing, viewing it as a means of self-expression and empowerment. However, her husband's disdain for her work is evident when he belittles her efforts, asserting that "*a wife's place is in the home, not in literature.*" This statement encapsulates the broader societal belief that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities over personal ambitions. His attempts to control her writing manifest in various forms, including restricting her access to writing materials and demanding that she focus solely on household duties. As a result, the protagonist finds herself grappling with the conflict between her aspirations as a writer and the oppressive expectations imposed by her husband.

The cultural pressures surrounding female writers are palpably felt throughout the novel, reflecting societal expectations that shape their roles. Women are often discouraged from pursuing their literary ambitions or expressing their voices in a space dominated by male

authority. The protagonist experiences this firsthand when she faces criticism not only from her husband but also from family members who echo traditional sentiments about women's roles. Her mother advises her to “*adjust*” to her marriage instead of pursuing her writing career, reinforcing the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to conform to societal norms. Kandasamy poignantly illustrates how these cultural expectations create an environment where women's voices are marginalized, leaving them feeling voiceless and powerless in their own narratives. The unnamed narrator also confronts the societal expectations that discourage women from pursuing their literary ambitions. She acknowledges the weight of these pressures when she reflects on how language can both empower and imprison:

“Your language makes you, your language holds you prisoner to a particular way of looking at the world.”

This insight reveals how societal norms shape women's experiences and limit their access to self-expression.

Despite these oppressive forces, the protagonist's writing emerges as an act of resistance against the patriarchal structures attempting to erase her identity. Writing becomes a sanctuary for her thoughts and emotions, allowing her to reclaim agency in a life marked by violence and control. She reflects on this power when she states, “*Every moment of my life has narrative potential*,” suggesting that even in suffering, there exists an opportunity for self-assertion through storytelling. This tension between the desire to write and the violence that seeks to silence her is palpable throughout the narrative. The act of writing transforms into both a coping mechanism and a form of rebellion; it allows her to articulate her pain while simultaneously challenging the oppressive forces around her.

The conflict between the protagonist's literary ambitions and her role in marriage intensifies as she navigates the complexities of her relationship. Her husband views her writing not only as a threat to his authority but also as an affront to his masculinity. He perceives any expression of independence as an act of defiance, leading him to escalate his abusive behaviour in an attempt to reassert control. The protagonist poignantly observes that “*marriage has ruined my romanticism*,” illustrating how the institution has

stifled not only her creative expression but also her sense of self-worth. Kandasamy deftly captures this struggle through moments of introspection where the protagonist grapples with the dichotomy of being both a devoted wife and an aspiring writer.

Women are often discouraged from pursuing their literary ambitions, as societal norms dictate that their primary focus should be on family and home. The protagonist grapples with these expectations as she attempts to navigate her identity as both a writer and a wife. Her husband's contempt for her writing reflects broader societal attitudes that prioritize male narratives while marginalizing female voices. This is particularly poignant when she reflects on how women writers are often seen as “unfit” for serious literary pursuits, echoing the sentiment that their contributions are less valuable than those of their male counterparts. Kandasamy effectively critiques this cultural bias by illustrating the struggles female writers face in asserting their identities within a literary landscape dominated by patriarchal values.

This section serves as a powerful exploration of how gender intersects with writing and identity. Kandasamy highlights the struggles faced by female writers who navigate societal expectations while striving for self-expression in a patriarchal landscape. The protagonist's journey underscores the importance of reclaiming one's voice amidst oppression; through writing, she begins to carve out a space for herself that defies traditional gender roles. Kandasamy's narrative not only sheds light on the challenges faced by women writers but also emphasizes the transformative power of language and storytelling as tools for resistance against systemic oppression. In doing so, she advocates for women's rights to assert their identities and narratives in spaces historically dominated by male voices, ultimately championing the need for change within both literature and society at large.

V. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY ON FEMALE IDENTITY

In Meena Kandasamy's “When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife”, the psychological and emotional impact of patriarchy on female identity is profoundly explored through the protagonist's experiences. The internalization of oppressive cultural norms surrounding marriage and patriarchy leads to a significant erosion of her self-

worth and identity. Initially, the protagonist enters her marriage with aspirations and a sense of agency, viewing her writing as a vital part of her identity. However, as her husband exerts control over her life, she begins to internalize the belief that her worth is tied to her compliance and subservience. This internalization is poignantly captured when she reflects, *“I learn to criticize myself for who I am,”* indicating how deeply ingrained patriarchal values can warp a woman's self-perception and lead to self-blame. The novel also delves into the psychological manipulation that the protagonist faces, particularly through gaslighting. Her husband employs tactics that distort her perception of reality, making her question her thoughts and feelings. For instance, he isolates her from friends and family, insisting that she sever ties with anyone who might offer support. This isolation not only strips her of external validation but also creates an environment where she feels increasingly disoriented and powerless. The protagonist articulates this experience when she states, *“When he hits me, I inch closer to death,”* highlighting how the psychological terror she endures is as damaging as the physical violence. This manipulation contributes to a profound sense of disempowerment, as she struggles to maintain a coherent sense of self amidst the chaos inflicted by her husband.

As the protagonist grapples with these challenges, her perception of herself—as both a woman and a writer—becomes increasingly distorted by the relentless psychological abuse she endures. The constant belittlement from her husband leads her to view herself through a lens of inadequacy and shame. She wrestles with guilt for wanting to pursue her writing career, feeling that any ambition outside of domestic duties is an act of rebellion against the traditional roles expected of her. This internal conflict is poignantly expressed when she laments, *“I never understood rape until it happened to me,”* revealing that the violence she experiences extends beyond physical harm; it encompasses an assault on her very identity. This crisis of self-perception illustrates how deeply patriarchal norms can infiltrate a woman's psyche, leading to a fractured sense of self.

The protagonist's journey reflects a broader crisis of female identity, caught between societal expectations and personal desires for self-expression and autonomy. Her struggle embodies the tension between conforming to traditional gender roles and asserting

her individuality as a writer. Kandasamy captures this conflict through moments of introspection where the protagonist grapples with the dichotomy of being both a devoted wife and an aspiring author. She acknowledges that *“every word I write is an act of defiance,”* yet recognizes that each act of rebellion risks inciting further violence from her husband. This duality underscores the precarious balance women must navigate in reclaiming their identities while facing the threat of patriarchal backlash.

Ultimately, *“When I Hit You”* serves as a poignant exploration of the psychological and emotional ramifications of patriarchy on female identity. Kandasamy's narrative highlights how internalized oppression can lead to diminished self-worth and a fragmented sense of identity. The novel advocates for women's rights to reclaim their voices and identities amidst oppressive cultural norms that seek to silence them. Through the protagonist's experiences, Kandasamy calls attention to the urgent need for societal change to dismantle systemic forces that perpetuate gender-based violence and psychological manipulation, emphasizing the importance of recognizing women's struggles for autonomy in their personal narratives.

VI. RESISTANCE AND RECLAMATION OF IDENTITY

In Meena Kandasamy's *“When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife”*, the protagonist's journey of resistance and reclamation of identity unfolds through small acts of defiance against her husband's oppressive control. These acts may seem minor in isolation, but they accumulate to form a significant challenge to the patriarchal norms that seek to silence her. For instance, despite her husband's attempts to belittle her writing, she continues to express herself through poetry and prose, asserting, *“Every word I write is an act of defiance.”* This statement encapsulates her realization that even in a constrained environment, her words hold power and can serve as a form of rebellion against the forces that seek to erase her identity.

The role of writing becomes central to the protagonist's reclamation of identity. Writing is not merely a creative outlet for her; it transforms into a means of asserting control over her narrative. As she navigates the complexities of her abusive marriage, she reflects on how language serves as both a refuge and a weapon.

Kandasamy writes, “*English makes me a lover, a beloved, a poet. Tamil makes me a word huntress, it makes me a love goddess.*” This duality illustrates how writing allows her to reclaim aspects of her identity that have been suppressed by her husband’s control. Through the act of writing, she confronts the pain inflicted upon her and begins to carve out a space for herself that defies traditional gender roles.

Moreover, the protagonist's resistance reflects broader themes of social change and the potential for women to reclaim their voices within a patriarchal culture. As she begins to assert herself through writing, she embodies the struggles faced by many women who grapple with societal expectations while yearning for autonomy. Kandasamy poignantly captures this sentiment when the protagonist states, “*I’m the woman with wings, the woman who can fly and fuck at will.*” This declaration signifies not only her desire for freedom but also her rejection of societal constructs that confine women to submissive roles. By embracing her identity as a writer and an individual, she challenges the patriarchal structures that seek to control her.

The protagonist's journey ultimately serves as an empowering narrative that resonates with many women who face similar struggles in their lives. Kandasamy's portrayal of resistance is not just about personal defiance; it is also about collective empowerment. The protagonist recognizes that by reclaiming her voice through writing, she contributes to a larger movement against patriarchal oppression. She reflects on this interconnectedness when she observes, “*As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending.*” This acknowledgment underscores the importance of amplifying women's voices in challenging societal norms and fostering change.

The protagonist’s journey serves as an inspiring reminder that even in the face of overwhelming adversity, reclaiming one’s voice and identity is not only possible but essential for personal liberation and broader social change. Through this narrative, Kandasamy advocates for women's rights to assert their identities and challenge oppressive structures, ultimately calling for a collective awakening against systemic violence and discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Meena Kandasamy's “When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife” intricately explores the intersection of language, culture, and patriarchy in suppressing the protagonist's identity as both a woman and a writer. The novel illustrates how oppressive cultural norms dictate the dynamics of marriage, leading to the internalisation of patriarchal values that diminish the protagonist's sense of self-worth. Through her husband’s verbal abuse and manipulation, she experiences gaslighting that distorts her perception of reality, ultimately contributing to her loss of identity. Writing becomes a vital means for her to reclaim her voice and assert her individuality, yet it is fraught with danger as she navigates the threats posed by her husband's control.

Kandasamy's work offers a critical commentary on the cultural forces that shape marriage and gender roles, particularly highlighting how language serves as a tool for erasure. The protagonist's struggle against the silencing tactics employed by her husband reflects a broader societal issue where women's voices are marginalized and their identities are often subsumed under patriarchal expectations. By showcasing the protagonist's journey toward self-assertion through writing, Kandasamy emphasizes the importance of reclaiming one's narrative in the face of systemic oppression.

The implications of this critique extend beyond the confines of the novel, resonating with contemporary discussions on gender and culture. The protagonist’s experiences mirror wider societal issues related to the suppression of women’s voices and identities, revealing how deeply entrenched cultural norms can perpetuate violence and control. Kandasamy’s narrative serves as a call to action, urging readers to recognize and challenge the patriarchal structures that continue to silence women. By illuminating these dynamics, “When I Hit You” not only advocates for individual empowerment but also encourages collective resistance against oppressive cultural practices. Ultimately, Kandasamy’s work highlights the urgent need for societal change that acknowledges and uplifts women's experiences, fostering an environment where all voices can be heard and valued.

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