

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND ASSERTION IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S *WHEN I HIT YOU: OR, A PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER AS A YOUNG WIFE*

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Abstract:

The paper aims to analyze women isolation in gender-oppressive ideology and explore the various socio-political causes which led to the emergence of an independent woman in India. Women have always occupied a distinct position in every society. Being always looked upon with respect to the position enjoyed by men in society, there had always been an element of doubt on the nature of the real status that women enjoyed in the group. Her quest for identity, her social and political awareness was due to the scientific and technological advancement in the post-Independence India. It is her first-hand experience of the horror of marital violence and alienation. As her ambition of becoming a writer in the process, she attempts to push back a resistance she resolves to break with violence and rape. When the novel reaches its end the speaker portrays the new role of modern women in the contemporary society. It also analyses several other factors that have come to play as important agents of changing the status of women.

Key Words: Gender Oppressive ideology, quest for identity, marital violence.

The Indian women's movement started from nineteenth century social reform movement and progressed through the period of freedom struggle towards a democratic era in post-independence period. The constitutional guarantee of equal rights for women could not fully realize the feminist aspirations in India. This provided a new momentum to the Indian feminist movement. Pawar, a Dalit feminist argues: Even the dalit feminist politics by mentioning another area in which dalit women are making new forays, again as a consequence of new legislation. (Moon, 19). The contemporary women's movement is expressing itself in various forms such as women's organizations and groups and agitations and campaigns around contemporary issues. Dalit women writings, deep down are the narratives of identity formation. Contemporary dalit writings are very assertive as the new dalit writers do not rely upon society's goodwill for the uplift of their society. Alok Mukherjee observes: Dalits have preferred an identity-based approach to politics, to Marxism's class-based approach" (Limbale, 15). Women's writing is important, today more than ever before. Jain rightly says in this regard:

Literature in itself is a rich source material for interpreting the past. Women's writing focuses attention on both the manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality, and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality. Gender, like other categories such as race and class, it has become abundantly clear, is a significant category of social and political reality. (Jain, 2).

Although Dalit women suffered a lot from different levels as Illaih argues: But the position of upper caste women is different. Their distance from work in the fields or in any public space and confinement to the house isolates and stifles them, though economically their lifestyles are far richer than those of the working class/caste women. (Illaih, 82).

Meena Kandasamy's second novel *When I Hit You* (2017) after *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is story of a newly-wed writer experiencing rapid social alienation and extreme violence at her husband's hands. Just like her battered young protagonist, whose marriage unspools into a nightmare when she moves with her husband to a new city to set up a life together, it's a lesson that Kandasamy had to learn the hard way, too. Seduced by politics, poetry and an enduring dream of building a better world together, the unnamed

narrator falls in love with a university professor. She describes how in 2011, she married the man she loved she had met him during the course of her Leftist activism and he had seemed to share her ideals. But, in the four months that followed, hemmed in by a cycle of escalating physical and emotional humiliation, it was her intellectual life that offered her the gritty resolve to write her own ending.

At the very beginning of the novel she has described the burden of her marriage 'Stress. Stress can have any reaction on the body. Stress is what's making your psoriasis worse. Skin and hair. That's the first level where stress operates. When my daughter was having a bad time- yes, in that marriage- you cannot imagine what happened to her hair. What can I say? Distance yourself from the stress. Do breathing exercises. Learn to be relaxed.' (6)

In the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Primrose Villa, her husband's place, as a place of kept secrets, an enclosed space of unheard and unvoiced secrets of her marriage. To escape the after-marriage difficulties she imagines her life to be a film in which she is trapped. She confesses she became an actress in real life even before she faced cameras. Her movement is restricted within the walls of Primrose Villa which becomes her setting to act.

She portrays that how it is only one of the expectations that she must consider in her role as a perfect wife. The most important, of course, as an actress, is how she look and for the sake of her marriage or The effect of adhering to her husband's wishes gives her the appearance of a woman who has given up and all set to play the part of the good housewife. She says:

I begin by wearing my hair the way he wants it: gathered and tamed into a ponytail, oiled, sleek, with no sign of disobedience. I skip the kohl around my eyes because he believes that it is worn only by screen-sirens and seductresses. I wear a dull T-shirt and pajama-bottoms because he approves of dowdiness. Or, I wrap myself in an old cotton sari to remind me of my mother. Some days, when I am especially eager to impress and to escape punishment, I slip into the shapeless monstrosity that is: the nightie. (16).

A crucial aspect this book brings out is the way violence perpetuates in a seemingly "modern", "love" marriage... "The narrator escapes the brutality and the curfews imposed on her by writing letters to imaginary lovers. The novel is a meditation on love, marriage, violence and how someone who is a feminist gets trapped in an abusive marriage. She is being a wife playing the role of an actress playing out the role of a dutiful wife watching her husband pretend to be the hero of the everyday. She plays the role with flair. The longer she stretches the act of the happily married couple, the more she dodges his anger. It's not a test of talent alone. Her life depends upon it. She says:

Trying to recollect the first time she was hit by her husband, there are only hot glass tears and the enduring fear of how often it has come to pass. The accusations stand out because of how trivial they are- Why does this man call you 'dearest'? Why have you cleared your trash can in your email inbox? Why are there only nine telephone calls on the call log of your phone, whose number have you deleted? Why haven't you washed the sink? Why are you trying to kill me by trying to over-salt my food? Why can't you write as 'anonymous'? Why did you not immediately reject the conference invitation when you bloody know that I'm not going to let you travel alone?- sometimes, his bones of contention are so thin that they make me wonder if any accusation is only a ruse and excuse to hit me. I do not have anyone I can talk to about what is going on behind these closed doors. At the moment, I am not even sure if I want to talk to anyone about what I am going through. (69).

She invokes Elfriede Jelinek, Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton and many more on various pages thus linking her to feminist writers beyond caste, race or culture, even beyond language difference. It's one way of subverting the argument made by the novel's abuser that the Indian female writer working in English. This is not just a story of the abuse that the unnamed narrator faces at the hands of her misogynist husband, but also an account of the struggle a young writer faces in absolute isolation. The book also exemplifies her struggles where she has to remind herself that you are more useful alive than dead, over

and over again. The narrator escapes the brutality and the curfews imposed on her by writing letters to imaginary lovers. In order to escape the present hellish world of slaps, hits and torture by questions she starts writing letters to imaginary lovers to whom she discloses all her feelings and her unanswered questions. She gets the sheer pleasure of writing without his knowledge when she writes the letters even though they are temporary. She gets revenge by writing to the word lover again and again and rubbing salt on his wounded pride which reclaims her 'right to write' 'I write letters to lovers I have never seen, or heard, to lovers who do not exist, to lovers I invent on a lonely morning. (88).

She wonders how an opportunist like her husband managed to make inroads into a political party that she has always respected; how he succeeded in hoodwinking the leadership at every stage, how he came to be what he is today. For all its celebration of introspection and self-criticism, how could they not have seen him for what he is? Were they relaxed with what they saw, did they wash it all away as patriarchal, feudal tendencies that are inevitable in someone coming from a small village? She argues:

Did they not notice his attitude towards women—were they fine with it, did they try to censure him, or did they themselves share the same kind of nervousness and disdain towards feminists? Was respect and love something that the radical only reserved for women who were gun-toting rebels, women who attended and applauded at every party meeting, and women who distributed pamphlets and designed placards? How did these women survive these violent, aggressive men in their ranks? Did they walk out? Did they fight? Did they leave their sexuality behind or did they barter it to make life in the organization easier? (88).

Not only has this book taken us on a journey through structures of toxic masculinity and patriarchy, which allow such violence to be perpetuated. She describes violence in personal and poetic way:

My husband is in the kitchen. He is channeling his anger, practising his outrage. I am the wooden cutting board banged against the countertop. I am the clattering plates flung into the 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. I hold back tears. I will not become a traitor to my cause. Tomorrow, the clean-up is going to be all mine. He continues smashing things. Try harder, husband. Try harder. I am not going to be tamed by these tantrums (131).

Her husband decided to set her free he deleted the 25,600 odd e-mails from her inbox. Everything about her life as a writer is gone. There are no contacts. There is no email conversation that she can return to at a later date. There is no past. There are no drafts of poems I sent to friends. There are no love letters. There is no history of the emails my mother sent me, typing with one finger, telling me to stay warm in Shimla when she was there for a research seminar, telling her to call home often, telling her to be happy. This book takes us on a journey through structures of toxic masculinity and patriarchy, which allow such violence to be perpetuated.

'Hold your tongue. He is your husband, not your enemy.'

'Do not talk back. You can never take back what you have said.'

'Your word-wounds will never heal, they will remain long after both of you have patched up and made peace.'

'It takes two to fight. He cannot fight by himself. It will drain his energy, to fight alone.' Her father told her to stay silent is to censor all conversation. To stay silent is to erase individuality. To stay silent is an act of self-flagellation because this is when the words visit me, flooding me with their presence, kissing my lips, refusing to dislodge themselves from my tongue. (161)

These token bits of 'wisdom' are nothing new to anyone who has contested marriage and its parochial ways

of subordinating women.

Though the narrator is a feminist she gets trapped in an abusive marriage. At one point of time she is forced to climb the incredible sadness of silence. She conceals all her shame within the folds of her sari and censors her conversation by staying silent. The narrator's brutally honest account of marital rape and the way penetration is used as a weapon against women is numbing. She writes how a body that is considered polluted can be punished as a man pleases. That is philosophy of caste that is the philosophy of her rape.

This is rape that tames, the rape that puts me on the path of being a good wife. This is the rape whose aim is to inspire regret in me. This is the 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 may have touched me, against all the men who may touch me, against all the men who may have desired me. (174).

Again a big trauma prevails on author when Four months into marriage, polite enquiries about providing 'good news' have already turned into a pressing demand to produce child. Her husband is the only male heir for his grandparents on both sides, and this fact blossoms into questions on the future of this family tree. A visit to the gynecologists is the first step. But she does not want the child of a man who beats her. She does not want to carry a child and bring it into a world because she was raped within a marriage, on a bed where my 'no' held no meaning. I'm distraught. I fight to stay back at home. He throws things around the house. He leaves a ladle on the gas stove, threatens to burn himself if I do not go with him. I will him to do it; I want him to hurt. I refuse to leave the house. Calmly, he removes the red-hot ladle from the stove and pushes it into the flesh of his left calf, right above the ankle. I miss the hiss of scorching skin because I begin to scream. I disarm him. I pull him away. He is insistent that we leave immediately, that we do not miss the appointment. He doesn't even stop to attend to the dark shape of the burn. (*When I Hit You or a Portrait of the Writer as a Yong Wife*, P-195)

I do not want to bring into the world a son who will watch his mother being beaten up, I do not want to bring into the world a daughter who will be beaten up. (200)

She decides that she will not allow herself to be portrayed as the hot-blooded woman who ran away from one man into the wide open arms of another. She will not allow herself to become the good wife, the good mother, the good-for-nothing woman that marriage aims to reduce me to. She will not allow her story to become a morality tale- about loose women, about lonely writers, about melancholic poets, about creative, unstable artists, not even about a war against head lice. So she begins a plot to escape. She becomes what he wants her to be: the good housewife. She cooks food that pleases him. She allows him sex when he wants it. She wears the clothes that he wants her to. She learns Kannada, as her husband does not speak the language of love. She also begins to use language to conquer.

For the first time in her marriage, she is not afraid. She knows that her words have stripped away his manhood, they have shamed him into impotence. She knows that her words have rendered him incapable of acting on his threat, and that now, in the space between us, there is his invisible cowardice that has been called out by name. But his verbal threat to kill is enough. It's what she came for. He is scripting the ending that she wanted for them. All that she need, she carry with her in a shoulder bag. Passport. ATM card. Laptop. Her phone that he never let her use. All of this is hers. This is all she could think of taking. This is all she wanted to take. She calls home. She tells her mother about her comingness. Bruised but alive. The moon is on her back. The auto-rickshaw races into the night. She shed this miserable city like a second skin. After that she writes:

I'm not afraid of men; I have fashioned myself in the defiant image of its exact, uncompromising opposite- the woman men are afraid of. I am anti-fragile. I've been made not to break. That is one of the reasons why it becomes harder to talk about the violence. Who I am proves to be my own undoing. Is this happening to you? The disbelief.

Did you let this happen to you? The shock.
 Why did you put up with all of this? The shame.
 You knew better, didn't you? The shame, again.
 Why did you not reach out to one of us? The lack of trust.
 If only we had known (220)

She begins the process of forgetting and healing and indulges herself with her world made up of words, sentences and books. Hiding Pain through Language She makes up a beautiful world with the dimension of her language and hides her pain. She hides her scars behind her neatness in dressing. A world made up in the dimension of her language is beautiful, but it also hides pain and she beautifully explained in poetic way:

This actual body of mine, I am ashamed and embarrassed and secretive about. My scars are my secrets. My straight shoulders sometimes slump; I wish my breasts would disappear. My hair falls out in handfuls, a shame like no other for a woman, one that can barely be admitted to even the closest of friends. Every hairstyle is a style to hide. My back hurts from sitting for long hours. I am a howling, screaming mess on the days of my period. My knees wear the rough defiance of a thousand kneel-down punishments at school. My cracked heels map the idea of a woman who does not have time for herself. I shave my legs depending on whether I am going to be with a lover that week and only if that meeting holds the possibility of intimacy (239).

Being a woman now she calls herself accused of ultra-feminism in the divorce petition, the one who will not be shamed by the questions at the cross-examination. She is the woman who will be cursed by society for being passed from man to man, hand to hand to hand whom society cannot spit or throw stones because she who is made up only of words on a page, and the lines she speaks are those that everyone hears in their own voice. So she begins a plot to escape. Meena Kandasamy's style of writing is experimental and totally different from other dalit writers as her first novel *Gypsy Goddess* she tackles the plight of a community of Dalit agricultural labourers who live and work in inhuman conditions, with unending unrelenting exploitation and heartbreaking atrocities inflicted upon them by their ruthless upper-caste landlords in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. She writes:

Most people are tired of history, and also tired of history repeating itself, so I am constrained to try a new way to chart and plot my way past their boredom. Since fiction is all about reaching out to an anonymous audience, I shall try and drown my story in non-specificities for the first thousand and eight narrations. (14).

Finally, she enters the world of books; the world which welcomes her with willingness; the world created by her in words; the world where she burrows word-tunnels to bury herself. She begins her writing career by writing a postmortem analysis of her marriage for a magazine. She is astounded when she receives written statements from thousands of women all around the world saying that her pieces of writings reflect their stories, their voices and their tears. She slowly climbs up the ladder of life and wakes up to new series. She begins the process of forgetting and healing and indulges herself with her world made up of words, sentences and books. At last she writes how she is the woman who can removed from the brutality of the everyday-from its drying grasshoppers and fading flowers and starving children and drowning refugees and who still believes, broken-heartedly, in love.

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