

Patriarchy Overpowers Everything in Meena Kandasamy's 'When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife'

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Abstract

The present paper is a sincere effort to explore the feminist aspects in the workers of Meena Kandasamy. Though impact of patriarchy has been a favourite topic of writers for feel for the plight of women, the paper highlights that even in the modern scenario where women are well-educated, independent, and modern, the pangs of patriarchy persist. Patriarchy holds a supreme position and suppresses love, ideologies for equality, parental love etc. Through the thorough study of the life of Narrator in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife*, it has been tried in the paper to expose the multiple oppression of women under patriarchy.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Plight, Oppression, Equality

Meena Kandasamy is a new name in the wide array of writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantra Sahgal, Rama Mehta, Bharti Mukherjee, Namita Gokhle, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Benerji Devkaruni, Anjana Appachana, Manju Kapoor and many more who are exposing issues of marital relationship, marital rape, wife-beating, gender discrimination, delineation of self assertion, quest for self identity, physical abuse, female subordination, power and sexual politics etc. through their creative works.

There is a strong literary representation by Indian women writers in English who have reiterated the inexorable marginalization of the second sex, addressing the abjectness of women of all classes, their lack of identity and independence and the systematic exploitation and oppression of women in a patriarchal social system. Kamala Markandya, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Nayantra Sahgal, Anita Desai are some of the important names who heralded a new wave in Indian literature. Then come novelists like Shashi Deshpande whose focus of attention has been educated women in a male-dominated society. Shobha De, a typical twentieth century novelist discusses place and significance of sex in modern life. Thus, in current women's fiction a serious and conscious attempt is being made to depict woman in a

realistic portrayal, female characters have been conceived who think talk and act accordingly to the demands of artistic imagination without being bound by literary norm.

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I have recently read the novel *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy. Her novel appealed me and I thought that this budding writer should be studied critically and should be given due weightage. To me, Meena is an appealing writer and in a very short span of her literary career, she has carved a niche for herself. Let me give a brief introduction of Meena Kandasamy. She is a poet, fiction-writer, translator and activist. Right from the beginning of her literary career, a reader can observe the spark in her and her writings. The plight of women, discrimination against downtrodden etc. has been shown emphatically in her works. She has been editor of *The Dalit*, a bimonthly, it gives voice to the unheard and provides a platform to record atrocities, condemn oppressive hierarchies and document the forgotten heritage.

After some more work experience of editing, she pen down her thoughts, feelings, ideas in form of creative writing and in 2006, she entered the world of writers with her debut collection of poems, *Touch* (2006), the thrust area of her poems is to bring out the pangs of caste and untouchability, and her second collection, *Ms Militancy* (2010) is the reflection of her feminism. The collection is basically an explosive, feminist retelling/reclaiming of Tamil and Hindu myths. Further, she tried her hand in novel writing and her first novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) has been critically acclaimed for beautifully narrating the 1968 massacre of forty-four landless untouchable men, women and children striking for higher wages in the village of Kilvenmani, Tanjore, Tamil Nadu.

The novel under study is her second novel, a work of auto-fiction *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife* (2017) largely expresses the plight of women in an abusive marriage. Though, it traces some of her own experience within an abusive marriage, it has a universal appeal. The novel is an honest effort by the writer to voice the silence of women who are forced to endure silently all the hardships, brutality. The novel has been critically acclaimed, it received a befitting response and was selected as book of the year by The Guardian, The Observer, Daily Telegraph and Financial Times; and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018, among others.

The present paper is an attempt to explore that it is the institution patriarchy which is responsible for all hardships of the protagonist. A patriarchal social system can be defined as a system where men are in authority over women in all aspects of society. It is a system for maintaining class, gender, racial, and heterosexual privilege for male and to perpetuate inequality. It allows male to be in a dominant position and devalues girls and women. The history of women's subordination in any society reveals how patriarchal subtexts like religion,

race, caste, class and cultural codes have been operative to facilitate men. In the words of Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial social, ideological, political system in which men-by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and the language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.(57)

The power imbalance resulting from the so called biological, ethical and intellectual aspects professing gender inequality creates a crisis of subjectivity in women under the hegemony of patriarchy. To understand the impact of patriarchy even on modern girls like the narrator of the novel *When I Hit You*, it is necessary to discuss the ideas and observations of Kate Millet whose contribution is one of the important contributions in the upsurge of women's movement to universal feminist consciousness by spreading the awareness of 'patriarchal' nature of human societies. In her famous work *Sexual Politics*, she has used the word 'patriarchy' and elaborates on how the power of 'patriarchy' is maintained even in modern societies where women have education, access to financial resources and extensive civil political rights. Real cause of women's unhappiness is that they are forced to be subservient to men financially, mentally, physically, and intellectually. The literary critic Judith Kegan Gardiner argues, "It governs the relationship between men as well as between men and women in society, where women in general are subordinated to men." (147-157)

Now let me explain how patriarchy overpowers everything which is the trust area and keypoint of this paper. First of all, patriarchy overpowers the love which was the base of relationship between the protagonist and her husband. It is surprising to know that it is a case of love marriage. Both the protagonist and her husband are well educated, modern and believe in the ideology of equality. Their relationship at first is based on a shared interest in radical politics. It gets firmer with detailed discussion on Marxist, Maoist and Leninist ideology. The belief in the Marxist ideology of equality and the revolutionary thoughts of the person made the narrator to fall in love with him and she marries him. But the moment, he gets married to the narrator, it seems that the love was overpowered by the ideology of patriarchy. The lines from the novel are apt to quote here, "Let me tell you something that goes against popular wisdom. Love is not blind; it just looks in the wrong places."(Kandasamy *When I Hit You*)

The patriarchal set up didn't allow him to maintain love in their relationship. In a patriarchal system, men make all decisions in both society and in their family unit, hold all positions of power and authority, and are considered superior. Additionally, in a patriarchal society, the oppression of women is emphasized. The term oppression means to push down or restrict; therefore, women are not allowed to rise up to leadership levels or make decisions.

Women are also not allowed to demonstrate independence or suggest changes to any social order.

In essence, women also have a role in a patriarchal society, but only in a sense that is submissive and subservient to men. In this way patriarchy which is supreme kills love in their relationship and responsible for all hardships of the protagonist. Actually the protagonist in the novel is victim not in the hands of her husband but in the hands of patriarchal social set up. The gender based violence on the protagonist is systematically developed in Indian culture and society which is reinforced and powered by institution of patriarchy. It is actually the institution of patriarchy which gives a secondary place to women.

They are always considered inferior to men. The male is given priority in every field, every aspect of life under patriarchy. The culture, social set up all is governed by patriarchal norms and naturally, it is against women and their dreams. Her husband, her lover converts in a tyrant patriarch in no time and he immediately starts controlling her. The men in a patriarchal system or society desire to control all social and family situations and must make all decisions regarding finances and education. Therefore, naturally, he starts moulding her personality; he wants to make her an ideal wife as per the standard parameters of patriarchy. Soon the marriage becomes a training camp for her.

The writer is successful in exhibiting the hypocrisy of her husband who believes and promotes ideology of equality and denies the same to his wife. As the narrator says, "He can be kind, I know he can, I've seen how tender he is with the homeless boys in town, but with me, I know he will always choose to be cruel." (WHY) It seems that he even didn't know how and when he turned in to a tyrant patriarch, the moment he married the protagonist. He crossed all limits of cruelty to exercise his powers on the body and soul of the protagonist. He wanted to have a full control over the body, soul, feelings, dreams, desires of his wife and he thought there is no wrong in this, he is right. Mary Wolstonecraft is right when describing man's general attitude towards women says, "Men in general employ their reasons to justify their inherited prejudice against women, rather than to understand them." (qtd. in Singh 231)

Marriage becomes a horrible nightmare for the narrator who is representing the plight of all women in abusive marriage under patriarchy. She says, "Marriage has ruined my romanticism, by teaching me that this thing of beauty can be made crude." (Kandasamy *When I Hit You*) Her husband supported by patriarchal ideology, crosses all limits. He used to beat her brutally, forces her to have sex whenever he demands. This was marital rape which he used as a weapon to control his wife. Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class* notes, "If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped" (7). The narrator feels that she is raped by her husband. Nothing can be more disgraceful, more insulting, more painful for a woman who is raped by her own husband and called whore, bitch, slut etc. Germaine Greer discusses how the

restrictions imposed on their imitations and sexual instincts reduce women to 'Female Eunuchs'. According to her:

Right from the starting girls are subjugated by being taught supposedly female behaviour which is in reality nothing more than a male device for keeping them in check. As they grow into adulthood and adopt the stereotypical version of femininity, they become ashamed of their bodies and lose their natural self. (qtd in Pollard 204)

We can understand the trauma of the protagonist when she says, "when he takes me, I dream of how I am going to lose this part of me"(Kandasamy *When I Hit You*).It is a very bitter feeling but there is no provision to complain in this regard in a patriarchal society. Further, girls are taught not to discuss such matters. These are highly personal and they have to save their face in society. The writer knows this very well and knows how deeprooted this fear of shame is when Kandasamy writes in *When I Hit You*:

The shame of rape is the shame of the unspeakable. Women have found it easier to jump into fire, consume poison and blow themselves up as suicide bombers than tell another soul about what happened. A rape is a fight you did not win. You could not win.

Secondly it overpowers the love of parents for their daughter. It is believed that for parents nothing is more important than the happiness of their children but here in the novel, we see that the parents didn't care for the happiness, safety and even life of their daughter rather they are concerned about their name and fame in society. They are afraid of the society which doesn't support a woman in case of domestic violence rather held her responsible for all wrongs and everytime expects from women to compromise. As in a patriarchal social set up, culture is used to justify gender inequality and violence by evoking traditional cultural beliefs about how women should be treated.

The mother of narrator was more concerned about her marriage and how to make it successful. Her mother persuades her to be calm and put efforts to make her marriage work. The narrator doesn't find any support or solace from her parents rather she was directly and indirectly pressurized by her parents to keep silence, wait and watch and put extra efforts to make her husband happy. The mother was of the opinion that it happens in the initial days but everything will be settled with passage of time. Mary Ann Ferguson rightly states, "In every age women have been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object, their roles in relationship to man."

The parents of the narrator are true representatives of all parents of a daughter in a patriarchal society and the society puts so many questions regarding failure of marriage, why the daughter is living in her parents' house after marriage, what wrong is done to her etc. and every parent want to avoid such questions as they have to maintain their social images. No

parent wants to confront such questions, so parents always try to mould their daughters and advise her to avoid any kind of confrontation with her husband or in-laws. Dr Tanu Kashyap writes in her paper, “The novel takes us on a journey through structures of toxic masculinity and patriarchy, which allow such violence to be perpetuated.” (4)

Thirdly, it overpowers all ideologies which advocate equality. It overpowers a person's right to live with dignity. The protagonist suffered a lot in the hands of her husband perpetuating patriarchal norms. She was forced to disconnect all her social contacts, he didn't allow her to write, beat her mercilessly, blackmailed her emotionally and when it all became totally unbearable and a threat to her life, the protagonist made up her mind and left him. She tells us that how horrible the experience was for her:

This One True Love—which flourished for two, three years—left me wounded. I spent months scooped in bed, howling my heart out. In learning to forget him, I had to pick up what was left of me, the little fragments of individuality [...] like broken bangles, chipped glass, colourful pebbles. [...] This was a lover who had become the landscape. Everything in Kerala reminded me of him (Kandasamy *When I Hit You*)

Thus, the plight of protagonist is the representative of the plight of all women suffering under the hegemony of patriarchy irrespective of any caste, class, race. Her story has a realistic and universal appeal. Man is after all man when it comes to his relation with a woman. It can be said that through the life of the narrator of *When I Hit You* Meena Kandasamy is successful in presenting the all three phases of feminist literary traditions and feminist movement summed up by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology...is to call these stages, feminine, feminist and female. (13)

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