



# Exploring the Themes of Psychological Subjugation, Humiliation and Manipulation in Meena Kandasamy's novel "*When I Hit You, Or, The Portrait of the Writer As a young Wife*"

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## Abstract:

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian writer in English who produces works in context of women suppression, primarily focusing on Dalit feminism, caste annihilation and linguistic challenges in Indian society. She is a poet, translator and novelist who deals with women of affluent society and lower class women who suffer mental subjugation done by patriarchal men and societal dominance that was inherent through generations. Her work *When I hit you, or a portrait of the writer as a young wife* is one such work wherein she deals with an educated woman who tolerates her abusive marriage hoping to change one day. Her husband, who claims to be a devoted communist leader and revolutionist in society, barely cares for her and expects her to be a perfect housewife. He subjects her to mental torture, humiliates and manipulates in all ways in which she terribly endures his behavior. Meena Kandasamy's way of portraying the tormentation of narrator clearly showcases the mental turmoil that every woman undergoes in Indian household under inevitable circumstances and relatability that she discloses of every woman is part of this world where she is constantly put down to needs of men both emotionally and physically. In this work the subject of psychological submission makes the narrator dazed due to repeated squashing of her ideas, identity and honor in the name of marriage and how she finally breaks the shackles of mental enslavement by her husband. This paper explores the themes of psychological subjugation, humiliation and manipulation which resulted from conditional upbringing of women who think mental suppression is typical and shattering of conventional and disparaging attitudes of men is considered justifiable.

**Key words:** Feminism, Subjugation, Humiliation, Suppression, Patriarchy

## Introduction:

The modern woman in India is known to be par excellence in all fields when compared to men. She stands out to be self-sufficient and fiercely ambitious who enjoys freedom and much liberty in society. Regardless of what community she hails from, the fundamental nature of women remains the same. This becomes a reason for society to show disparity on gender basis and in fact giving dire opportunities for men to exploit mentally vulnerable women. Though the world is changing and this changing world saw women successfully

establishing a separate identity for themselves, the deep rooted patriarchy was still prevalent. In a way, modern women started to accept the changing world including patriarchy and gained separate places in both domestic and professional world.

Meena Kandasamy, widely known for her unapologetic behavior against patriarchy, puts her views on feminist perspective in her novel *"When I hit you, or, a portrait of a writer as a young wife"*. She represents all women in India by not giving the narrator a name by unanimously studying the problems of women. The protagonist is a 21st century woman who is educated yet striving to protest against her husband's violations of her rights, an aspiring writer fascinated by poetry, *"My fingers, when captured in words, are poetry and song, music and dance, they trace little butterflies in the air"* (Kandasamy, 2018, pg. 234). She finds solace in writing poetry while her husband is vehemently against that, however this contradictory nature is one reason the narrator claims to be a permanent injunction against her poetry. Psychologically speaking, women tend to put their feelings in words which imparts a sense of consolation. The narrator, unable to openly express her mental turmoil to anyone, finds poetry facile *"I find poetry easier. I try to bury my anger in words"* (Kandasamy, pg. 79). Her husband, being a college lecturer and interested in communism, ventures out to solve problems of society ignoring his wife at home and blames her by repeatedly telling that the problem is her feminism and not his abusive conduct. He argues that feminism is something that makes her an individual and it fails to recognize that they were a couple by building a barricade all around and sowing seeds of distrust in her mind. The aloneness she experiences every afternoon because of stillness and silence around her suggests her of suicide and most unbearable time of life as a wife as they sprawl out and fill her with dread. This silence has no beneficial effects of soothing her mind. The anguish is only made worse by her silence. She is alleged to be living in her mind at one point in her book, where she is cohabiting with her ex-lovers. (Majhi, 2018)

The protagonist's partner humiliates her by controlling the way of her dressing and clothes and when she complains to her mother she substantiates by telling that men are insecure about their wife's beauty and want to hide but take their crippled minds to town and glare at every girl. The narrator quotes from Helene Cixous *'Hyperdream'* where she mentions that the life of a woman and her contemplation of pain is merely a skin problem but here in her life, skin is the problem and she gets constantly humiliated by her dark skin. Nevertheless, the problem is mainly perceived to be present in her head as she absolves herself to this attitude of chaining herself to this fate and feeling guilt. As the story progresses, the mental humiliation progresses into physical abuse and the level of tormentation increases and she is forced to endure physical torture instead of just verbal abuse. It peaks to a stage where the narrator gets used to the bodily degradation and mental exploitation as usual. *"I do not think any of his beatings or belt lashings will cause me to feel any guilt. With me, at this moment, I feel only the relish of rebellion, the comfort of long forgotten words that now make me feel safe, feel loved"* (Kandasamy, pg. 94). Therefore, the writer completely interprets the emotional explanation of what really happens and moves in the thought of the character depicting deep psychological concerns. In spite of deep wounds on her heart with persistent blackmailing and violence inflicted on her, the narrator describes the beautiful relationships between men and women. Although her husband corners her by repeated accusations who never hesitates to raise his hand, the narrator eventually feels cornered and loses her ability to shout or argue against her husband. She feels depressed *"Depression is the label that he applies to my state of mind, my sense of life"* (Kandasamy, pg. 144). And her way of life seems depressed in every aspect and her husband manipulates her in such a way that she cannot even recognize the disease as depression, instead blames on the restless insect flying around in her brain, eating away parts of brain responsible to be an obedient wife. Ultimately the narrator goes to an extent to change the effects of his conditioning and not to enter into the complicated domain of rights theory, being well aware of the dominating attitude of her husband.

In a society, where respect lies in sending off a daughter married and never hearing complaints from her, is considered honorable for parents, the same parents of the narrator when her daughter disclosed violence against her by her husband, remain mum and convinces her to stay and put up with abuse just to protect their upbringing. This goes on for months, patience soon vanishes and only incredible sadness of silence prevails.

Silence is one of the thematic concerns in the novel wherein the narrator stays silent, erasing off of her individuality and not disclosing herself unless there are necessities of domestic existence. This wards off unnecessary interactions and he sees it as a sign of victory for the narrator. Winning over her silence taunts him so much that he violates her bodily rights and disrespects deeply. "A rape is a fight you did not win, you could not win. A rape is a defeat" (Kandasamy, pg. 162). This shows her submission to brutal behavior and normalizing his actions, eventually rape becomes regular occurrence and silence becomes habitual penalizing her life. The contemplating behavior of the narrator is constantly present in her mind whether to stay in this abusive marriage or not, however her hope prevents taking her own life, fleeing away from him, waiting for better tomorrow and certainly hoping that he would give up violence one day is what keeps her chained to this marriage. The narrator was emotionally controlled every day because he acts like a victim while she is the battered woman in the process, where she can go nowhere for help.

As the novel progresses towards the end, the narrator musters up her courage to leave her husband by emotionally getting connected and learning his viewpoints, plot points and essentially playing the role of opposite, which she later uses against him. The writer in her takes charge of the situation and prepares her way to freedom. She walks out of her marriage who assaults and threatens her to kill and certainly considers her to be lucky enough to walk away.

**Conclusion :** This article navigates through the emotions of a mishandled woman under the themes of mental subjugation, humiliation in the name rights of man and manipulation under pretext of society. The central character is being explored thoroughly and how she underwent diverse punishments both physically and mentally, experiencing every fear, unbearable silence and oppressive and almost impossible marriage. Meena Kandasamy portrays the life of a writer woman as a wife and daughter in a domestic scenario only to give us the predicament of what a common woman goes through in her life. In a nutshell, this paper showcases the patriarchal mindsets of the stereotypes.

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