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Gender Inequality, Self Identity Crisis And Marital Violence In Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait Of The Writer As a Young Wife.

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Abstract

Marriage is a socio-cultural and legally contracted phenomenon that makes a sacrosanct union of two persons with all mutual rights and responsibilities. Everyone wishes to have a perfect partner in life through marriage. But most of the time this dream does not become fulfilled. Yet in this case it's women who are the victims mostly, sacrifice more to build a healthy home and family in Indian culture. Meena Kandasamy's 'When I Hit You' or 'A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife' is one of the few works of significance dedicated to the subject of marital sexual violence. It is an incredible personal account, written from the first person point of view wherein the unnamed narrator is a woman in isolation after getting married. She falls in love with a college lecturer and marries him. She undergoes many different violent challenges under her husband that eventually leads her to take a strong decision to walk out from her abusive marriage. The author explores various ways of dealing with issues of violence and how a society normalizes abusiveness a woman faces at the hands of her husband. This illustrates how gender-oppressive ideology and behavior can be perpetuated, irrespective of one's education, class, political warning. It warns people how a seemingly successful marriage could be violent, oppressive and abusive without anyone around being aware of its brutality. This research paper will analyse how the narrator and the millions of women like her in India encounter and undergo the gender inequality, self-identity crisis and marital violence with reference of the text 'When I Hit You' by Meena Kandasamy.

Keywords: Communism, epiphany, existentialism, feminism, gender inequality, marital violence.

Introduction

We all know sex is a biological and gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. And the inequality of sexes does not have a biological basis or origin, it originates in the cultural constructions of gender difference. Gendering is a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with authority. The socialization of woman renders her a woman with certain apparently 'inherent' qualities—weakness, feeble-mindedness, patience, sacrifice and so on. Though this disparity is a global issue, it is found hugely in many parts of India. This causes many evil attitudes borne like misogyny, man-hater etc. Patriarchal world believes that women are really inferior to men. A girl child is considered a burden, a curse. So the girl child born is received with dismay whereas baby boy born is celebrated with great pomp and ardour. Actually this discrimination starts from even before the girl child is born. As per census 2011 in India the child sex ratio is at the lowest it has ever been with just 914 girls for every 1000 boys. Even every religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian and others) scriptures marginalize women. For instance, the Mahabharata, a religious text, in book 13, section

40,claims “ There is no creature more sinful than women.”So women are always taught to be submissive, subordinated ,and silent.They become a passive role maker in society.It is the male dominated world who would decide everything regarding women’s lives. Despite that they have to face violence, violation, physically and psychologically tortures, humiliations,depressions, rapes and even death.Though today women have brought a revolution in developments and skills in every renowned spheres of the world.

In Indian society we can find some causes of gender discrimination and unstable identity.The root causes of gender inequality are patriarchal system and dowry custom deeply rooted in the society.Our various religious dogmas have made this system a legal and valid one.As Manu, the Hindu law giver says, “Women are supposed tyo be in the custody of their father when they are children,they must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of their son in old age or as widows.In any circumstances she should not be allowed to assert herself independently.”Infact, in every stage of lives their identities are changed.

Meena Kandasamy (b.1984) is a very brave poet,fiction writer,feminist,activist and translator.Among her important works Touch(2006) and Ms. Militancy(2010) are two collections of poetry and other three important novels like The Gypsy Goddess(2010),When I Hit You:Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife(2017),shortlisted for the Women’s Prize for fiction 2018 and Exquisite Cadavers(2019).This young and rebellious poet in her poetry collections focuses a very strong common thing on caste oppression ,women empowerment and psychological pressures of women and she plans to grant the women an identity.The novel ‘When I Hit You’ is about a young wife who is an unnamed narrator. She falls in love with a man who was a college lecturer and marries him. In her marital world she first encounters with her space and identity in crisis. The narrator moves with her husband from Chennai to Mangalor, a new town, where she is not allowed to speak in her own mother tongue. She is confined for two months in the space of three rooms and a varanda with a limited access. No friends, no family networks is there.She learns Kannada in which she is not comfort. She says, “In this language I am nothing except a housewife.”(p.93)

After marriage the narrator is involved in a marital game of chess where she plays the role of a king who is under constant threat by her husband who plays the role of drama queen. Again she makes herself a character of a film in which she plays the role of an actress as to show her role as a good Indian wife as her husband wants to direct same as a film director does with his heroine. She has to do the ways her husband wants her to do or to make; like what to wear,what to talk,or how to walk etc. In this process her self-entity is lost “like a house after robbery” and made herself ‘Other’.

The unnamed protagonist of the novel meets the man in the course of running an online campaign against the death penalty. This man who became her husband later.He was a college lecturer, a communist or a Naxalite guerrilla(Maoist)or an underground revolutionary. She was so fascinated with his ideology that she wants to give up her middle-class lifestyle she belonged to as it affects the people or it supports for capitalism. But after her marriage she soon realized “Marriage became a Re-education camp. He transformed into a teacher and I became the wife-student learning from this communist crusader.”(p.32) Actually she was misled by the individual ideology of her misogynist husband,not by the true communism.As in the communist world “a communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind closed doors.”She becomes the victim of a bad marriage.In this regard in an interview to THE WIRE,May 30,2017 Meena Kandasamy says: “I do not think there are Leftist organizations who encourage their cadre to beat up women and abuse them and violate them.The tragedy is that even the most progressive ideology—here communism -- can be twisted and selectively quoted and misutilised by opportunist bigots to abuse women. Clearly, patriarchy works either way—the aim being to control women to its end.I personally think that violence and misogyny within progressive Left spaces is very vicious and very heart breaking.I think that more than anyone else, the Leftists must not shield rapists and wife-beaters within their party ranks,that they must fight misogyny tooth and nail,and this is the only way in which we can take on oppressive structures like caste or racism or capitalism.So no,never will I dream of absolving any misogynist—Marxism is opposed to the oppression of one class of people by another class—which includes the oppression of women by men,among other things.....”

In modern era it is an individual's fundamental right to use social media ; to promote his/her work and art through it; to get news to keep updated or to become a netizen positively. But the narrator is always dominated or her individual rights and space are snatched by her husband. She completely feels isolation at the new place. Here facebook or mass-media was her only lifeline to contact the world outside. But her husband through blackmail by burning himself, forces her to deactivate facebook account. Her husband gives reason: "It's narcissism. It's exhibitionism. It's a waste of time. I've said this to you a thousand times. It's merely you voluntarily feeding information straight to the CIA, to the RAW, to the IB, to everyone who is hounding my life. Every fucking thing is being monitored. Your life may be a peepshow, but I'm a revolutionary. I cannot let you endanger me."(p.50) On the other hand, the narrator's message for her readers and followers in a telegram form "When I am forced to leave Facebook, my final message is not: Trouble in Second Week of Marriage: Husband-Moron Insistent I stay Isolated. Mr Control Freak Blackmailed Me Into Deactivating Account Written At Risk! SOS!"(p.53). This one was written hurriedly only to save the soul of a writer from the eternal damnation. The man actually wants to keep her in his panopticon and to keep his supremacy ever over her. So he takes her email password and replies her emails without her consent. In this sense The narrator says: "I feel nauseous .I feel robbed of my identity. I'm no longer myself if another person can so easily claim to be me, pretend to be me , and assume any life while we live under the same roof."(p.55)

In Hindu mythology, The Ramayana, an epic by Valmiki, gender inequality and cruel social practices of the times are found where a wife (Sita) had to give an ordeal on proving her chastity before the society by walking on fire as she was separated from her husband (Rama) for a period. But in Kandasamy's novel 'When I Hit You' the narrator's reality is not like that. Rather in her life "the test takes place before the opportunity to cheat arises as a pre-emptive, preventive measure"(p.49) through her husband's emotional blackmail. Generally in patriarchal society women are mostly to be victimized and have to sacrifice almost all their wishes from their lives. Though both men and women have equal contributions to build up the society or to progress the civilization. In spite of that why is gender discrimination existed ? As our society is traditionally male dominated, men are considered usually as innocent, whereas women as guilty from all around. So in the novel when the narrator phones her mother of what happens to herself, in her mother's words: "Do not give him any ground for suspicion. Let us see how far he goes .Suspicion is in the nature of men ;it is in the nature of love.....If he wants your world to revolve around him, make that happenThe more you try to stake your claim to privacy, the more he will assume that you are hiding things from him and forging a secret life for yourself."(p.56) The narrator's husband takes away all her freedom and space ,shatters all her dreams of being a writer, always wants to keep her like an Indian traditional perfect wife under his foot. Her parents think what her husband is doing is good for her.

"Kya mein itna kamzor ho gaya hoon,ki mera aurat ko ab kam karne nikalne parega?"(Am I so enfeebled that my woman has to now step out to work?). That's the mindset of the patriarchy society. This society opine men would go outside for job and women would maintain only the household chores. Women have no authority to wander or to do anything according to their will without men permission. Their lives are dependent on men. They are always suppressed and submissive under social norms. Yet women can have some independence if they get economical support or a job. They will find their own position. A job will give them a community, an independent identity. They can fly freely in the sky as they wish. But the male dominated world never let them to do this. Their heads are bowed down and their hands and legs are bound tightly rather than men with the chains of crucial norms of patriarchal world.

The narrator's husband, a communist in name, is a psychologically disordered person. He feels insecure of simple day to day activities of his wife. According to the narrator, in true sense he didn't hate the capitalists like Ambani or Adani, rather disliked heavily the petit-bourgeois woman writers like her. When she realizes her career to be a writer is in danger, to keep her creativity in writing or to avoid her loneliness or to escape the brutality and the curfews imposed on her, she poignantly writes letters to the imaginary lovers and erases them all a few hours later. Kandasamy writes: "Marriage has ruined my romanticism, by teaching me that this thing of beauty can be made crude. Bitch. Whore. Slut. And yet, for every insult that has been flung in face, language retains its charm. English makes me a lover, a beloved, a poet. Tamil makes me a word huntress, it makes me a love goddess."(p.92)

The marital life of the narrator is full of discrepancy and violence. Physically to beat her the man uses many weapons like the cord of MacBook, the back of the broomstick, the writing pad, brown leather belt, the drain nose of the washing machine etc. He tortures her too in many ways like railing at her, slapping her, throwing her laptop across the small kitchen, forcing her to delete a manuscript of a non-fiction book in-progress as the word 'lover' is mentioned somewhere in the pages. Her husband thinks if she carries her past into their present life, "there is no hope or space for the future to flourish." (p.87) He also applies communism as weapon. He considers the use of lipsticks and handbag is against communist ideology. "Under communism, a petit-bourgeois woman like you will have to give up her petit bourgeois privileges." To use lipstick is the sign of prostitution. Besides lipsticks, handbag, and birth celebration that feed the capitalism.

Scientifically it's true that physically woman is not so strong as man. But psychologically is woman weaker than man? Is it unjust that love transforms into marriage? Is anything fairly asked or raised voice means to kill love or against love? Is it very fair for a woman to be submissive and silent in all cases whether unjust? Such kinds of questions come into mind when the concept 'bachelorhood' is reflected in the character of the narrator's politician husband who comments that her feminism ruins their love. The man tremendously dislikes feminism or the women empowerment. He states: "I am not the problem.....You are not the problem either. Your feminism is." "Your feminism that makes you an individual, the feminism that refuses to recognize that we are a couple, the feminism that makes you build a barricade all round yourself, the feminism that sows the seeds of distrust in your mind about me....." "Your feminism will drive away all the men who come your way. No man stands a chance." (p.120&121)

Kandasamy mentions, "Love is not blind; it just looks in the wrong places." (p.122) Women, children, family are always the strength, supporting and inspirations for our living. But some men think they are weak for having women and children with them. ".....the loss of semen equaled the loss of energy.....To ejaculate was to emasculate." (p.124) A woman by a man's side means he is not masculine enough, not enough to lead the people. This is completely an unethical concept. Truly Kandasamy mentions few so called bachelor politicians like Gandhiji, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Narendra Modi (the present prime minister of India) who followed or follows such misconception of losing masculinity throughout their whole life. The narrator's husband also is one of them, who adheres this misconception to be a bachelor politician before marriage.

In the novel the unnamed narrator becomes the victim of violence by her husband in many ways. Though she married him by falling in love with him as a perfect guy. But her husband's sick mentality gradually comes out. She makes herself strong and states "Try harder, husband. Try harder. I am not going to be tamed by these tantrums." (p.131) She becomes the object of oppression and the man continuously tries to tame her by abusing, torturing, beating and raping in marriage. "When I am in bed with my husband, I have learnt to be still and silent" (p.94) even while doing sex too. Thus she loses the self and becomes the woman of Indian cinema in which it is shown that "sex itself will elicit no noise and no other movement from the woman." (p.95) To stop her sexual moaning or to make her silent forcibly he uses branches of fresh neem leaves, Mac's power cord, leather belt, electrical cables and he beats her badly with them as he seems a demon within her to be killed. So before she manages to escape, she chillingly records her ordeal: ".....When he hits me, the terror flows from the instinct that this will go further, that it does not end easily....." (p.155)

In patriarchal society the parents are really scared of the stigma of their divorced daughter. They don't care for the safety or the peace of her. What their daughter actually wants that's not matter. They think of what if the daughter comes back, how they will show their faces in the society and what the society will tell them. However, Meena's unnamed protagonist tries to share her abusive marriage life to her parents. But they turn to take convincing her to stay with husband. She is instructed not to raise her voice, not to talk back and rather to use silence as a shield. Her father also advises her to be tolerant, patient and not to talk too much with her husband and says: "Marriage is a give and take, Listen to him." (p.157) "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.....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." (p.158&159) On the other side

her mother says, “The first year is the worst year” in marriage and “All change is slow. A marriage is not magic.”(p.158)

To keep her parents words or to save her marriage or to adhere the social norms, the narrator remains silent. But this silence becomes the worst to her, is broken by more violence as the man takes in hand another weapon---rape. The marital rape by her husband that occurs continuously as a part of an abusive relationship, is more dangerous than a rape by a stranger at one time event. When the narrator begs him to stop, he shouts at her. “Why do you talk to me now? why? how did you find all your words all of a sudden? so, this is the miracle cure to your silence, is it? if you wanted to be fucked like a bitch, you could have asked me..... Now keep your mouth shut and don't wake the neighbours. you are a whore..... Stop crying, there is no nothing to cry about. I should be crying for marrying a whore..... This is why I don't treat you like a wife How many men took you from behind? How many? Fucking cheap whore. Next time you taunt me with your silence, I will tear your fucking cunt apart” (p.163&164)

Marital sex is not a crime. But marital rape is a crime as it is an act of sexual intercourse not as one time event but as repeated occurrence with one's spouse in a non-consensual way. It is considered a form of domestic violence and sexual abuseness. Despite that Indian law remains silent against marital rape which feeds the patriarchy society. With marriage a man gets a legal licence to control his wife's body and soul. She becomes his possession and he uses her as he pleases. This misogynistic viewpoint is dangerous. In the novel ‘When I Hit You’ the protagonist learns to normalize the rape as it becomes the regular occurrence to her. She states, “I never understood rape until it happened to me. It was a concept---of savagery, of violence, of violation, of disrespect.”(p.167) Now her body itself learns how to surrender to her husband. She used to behave as if she is dead while she is forcefully exploited while sex. Kandasamy writes: “The shame of rape is the shame of the unspeakable..... A rape is a fight you did not win. you could not win.”(p.169) Sex, actually rape, becomes the weapon of the protagonist's husband to tame her. So “whenever he takes me against my will, he taunts me for enjoying it. In his ironclad logic: I am a whore, so I can be raped; I let myself be raped, so I am a whore.”(p.174) It was her husband who forcefully goes on doing rough sex with her to disable the identity of the writer--“Not just a disciplining, but a disabling. He believes that after him, I will have nothing left in me to love, to make love, to give pleasure..... This is a man breaking his own wife. This is a man burning down his own house.”(p.176)

Kandasamy's protagonist in ‘When I Hit You’ becomes a victim of an abusive marriage. For long four months she spends a hellish life with her husband as he heinously treats her mentally and physically. In this period she uses her words fiercely, sometimes to play along with the abusive husband in order to avoid possible violence, other times to provoke him. Her words are her only weapon. “I slip words between his ribs like a stiletto knife.”(p.211) It is words that build her world invincible and allow her escape the harsh world; words that give birth to another woman, gave her wings to fly at her will and smuggled her out of the oppressive situation. With the help of words she conjured a brave self to face her own reality. Kandasamy writes: “In the eyes of the world, a woman who runs away from death is more dignified than a woman who runs away from her man. She does not face society's stone-throwing when she becomes away free.”(p.209)

In an interview Kandasamy says: “violence is not something that advertises itself. As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending.”(p.197) For a woman it is very difficult to confess and share the abusive experience of her married life. It is the negative socio-cultural norms that often lead to higher mental stress and physical violence in women mostly in all sphere of the country. Like the narrator a very few are fortunate to come out of such abusive situation. Kandasamy writes: “Sometimes the shame is not the beatings, not the rape. The shame is being asked to stand to judgement.”(p.219) Even with regarding a baby plantation, the narrator's life becomes more complicated. Her husband thinks she makes a ‘systematic conspiracy’ not to get herself pregnant. It is the male who decides whether he would take a child. Here the female opinion doesn't matter. Alike the narrator's husband did not ask whether she wants to produce a child, rather he threatens to burn himself if she does not go with him to gynaecologist. Compulsively she has to follow him. Here kandasamy notes down: “I do not want his baby. I cannot bring a baby into a world in which I have no love. 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.”(p.200)

“If you want to love the world ,you should love yourself first and if you want to exist in the world,you have to struggle for existence”,I believe .When one falls in chaos of life,one should realize one’s worth and need to understand the quote. Kandasamy is an existentialist too.Through the discourse of her unnamed narrator in “When I Hit You” she skillfully reflects existentialism.The narrator is heavy strong in spirit from the initial point of marital relationship to the end.She is fully conscious of herself.She feels alienation when she lands to a new place Mangalor.During this abusive relationship she is badly oppressed and raped by her man.Despite that she never forgets her existence and expectation of becoming a writer.In this period she stealthily goes on writing over female sexuality and imaginative love letters.Every moment she seeks for her self-identity. The narrator realizes the motive of her existence and to live with a life-weapon which helped her too to fight back.Kandasamy writes,“Hope prevents me from taking my own life.”(p.182)It is when the narrator’s husband threatens to kill her, that realization dawns on her that she is “more useful alive than dead”and she does not want to do anything that would endanger her life. She immediately takes the decision to leave out from this relationship to save her life.Finally she escapes and thanks only herself.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy’s “ When I Hit You” or “A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife” reminds us of James Joyce’s novel “ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” in which Stephen Dedalus employed ‘Epiphany’ and found words to create his identity and his art. But to Kandasamy, this ironical epiphanic moment in an abusive conjugal life is really weird. Her novel is not just a story of the abuse that the unnamed protagonist faces at the hands of her husband ,but also an account of the struggle a young writer faces in absolute isolation. However, the protagonist is able to walk out from the abusive marriage, gaining her self identity as an independent woman who showed to the world that this kind of women do exist and need to exist and proved that husbands are not for financial assistance. The novel really holds up a mirror to society from ground level.In an interview to THE WIRE on May 30,2017,when the author was asked why she chose that dominating subject,she replied: “In tracing the artistic journey of a woman writer,I chose to tell this story – of marital violence—that millions of women face and which breaks them down in countless ways.”

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