

# **‘When I hit you, Comrade Lenin weeps’: Domestic Abuse and Trauma 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 attempts to critically analyse the intersections of trauma and domestic abuse in Meena Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. The novel is based on the life of a newly-married young writer whose life turns upside down as her husband starts to manipulate, abuse and socially isolate her. It highlights major misconceptions relating to family and modern love marriages. Even in the 21st century, it is still precarious to be a woman in a male dominated society. Women are often abused physically, psychologically and emotionally. The situation becomes even worse when the perpetrator is one’s own family member or an intimate partner thus making the process of escape and recovery difficult. The paper examines how modern female slavery functions in urban spaces as depicted in the novel. Second, it analyses the debilitating aspects of psychological trauma as a result of domestic violence and the prejudicial attitudes of those responding to it. Third, the paper discusses the question of identity, as a woman and a writer, problematized by constant attack on the individual freedom.

**Keywords:** Domestic Violence; Gender; Identity; Psychological Abuse; Trauma.

Violence and abuse that occurs within a domestic setting such as family, marriage, live in relationships or cohabitation can be defined as domestic violence. It is not limited to just physical abuse but can include sexual abuse, psychological abuse or economic abuse. Physical abuse comes in the forms of thrashings, injury and pain so as to create intimidation and fear in the victim. It includes beatings, hair pulling, slapping, choking,

burning and others that results in physical injury. Sexual abuse comes in the form of rape or any kind of sexual coercion in which the other person is unwilling to participate. Emotional or mental abuse is usually in the form of manipulation or as humiliation and shaming – publicly or privately. When one's access to economic resources is controlled or is forcibly rendered dependent on the abuser, it results in economic abuse. All such kinds of behaviour, thus practiced to achieve power and control over the victim amounts to the violence within the domestic sphere. Moreover, it can affect people from all walks of life, literate to illiterate, rich or poor, rural or urban, men or women. In an inherently patriarchal society, however, it is the women who are mostly the victims of domestic violence. Heise states that: "Violence against women is an extremely complex phenomenon, deeply rooted in gender based power relations, sexuality, self-identity, and social institutions. Any strategy to eliminate gender violence must therefore confront the cultural and social structure that perpetuate it" (24). In order to look at the structure of violence against women, it becomes necessary to look at the existing social structure and cultural beliefs.

The way domestic violence is viewed differs from person to person, and from culture to culture. But it usually happens because of the imbalance in the status quo of husband and wife where they are not considered as equals. The husband is always considered to be above in the hierarchy in a socio-patriarchal construct. In such male dominated society, the wife must submit herself to the husband. According to *Violence against Women in Families and Relationships*, "Globally, wife-beating is seen as justified in some circumstances by a majority of the population in various countries, most commonly in situations of actual or suspected infidelity by wives or their "disobedience" toward a husband or partner" (Flood et al. 184). In a similar light, the narrator's husband does not see his treatment towards his wife as abusive. Rather, he views it as justified by the behaviours of his wife, which he defines as not being communist enough to be called a comrade.

Domestic abuse not only causes physical injury but it can have far reaching consequences on the psychological as well as emotional well-being of the victim, often disintegrating into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The term 'trauma' can be used in parallel to the experiences of domestic violence. It becomes pervasive when victims have to deal with the abuse on a daily basis. Kandasamy's novel can be read as a trauma novel. The technique employed in the novel itself is of a trauma narrative. Along with depicting the varied forms of domestic abuse, the novel vividly exhibits symptoms of trauma in the victim. In the novel, perpetual

abuse of the protagonist leads to her psychological traumatization. The literal meaning of trauma is physical wound or injury. According to medical and psychiatric literature, especially in the psychoanalytical theory developed in Sigmund Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", trauma suggest the infliction of wounds not upon the body but of the mind (Caruth 3). Trauma of the body might be easier to heal but trauma of the mind can take a toll on the entire being of the victim.

Traumatic suffering may or not be a private affair depending on circumstances but it should not be seen solely as a personal experience because the traumatic event(s) materializes within a cultural and historical context. It is this context of the cultural and historical that configures and attaches significance to the individuals and communities affected by the traumatic event(s) (LaCapra 6). Experiences of trauma and its consequences are in relation to this framework and victims/witnesses react accordingly to their personal and socio-cultural backgrounds. As a result, structural predicaments and inequalities that have been in existence before the traumatic events are exposed and reinstated in the construction of the experiences of traumatized victims. As an all-pervasive normative reality, gender dynamics form an essential component of the structural inequalities of the victim's experiential context. For women victims of domestic abuse, the nature of patriarchy constitutes what Dominick LaCapra describes as the "founding trauma" that is "the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective and/or personal identity" (81). It is crucial to critically understand the idea of a 'founding trauma' of battered wives. Women experience trauma through their encounter with the politics of gender and the tyranny of patriarchal violence.

It is this violence behind closed doors, within urban spaces of modern 21st century India, where both the perpetrator and the perpetrated are from literate, well to do class that Meena Kandasamy depicts in her novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). Based on the author's authentic experience during her marriage, the novel chronicles the four-month marriage of the unnamed female protagonist and the abuse she has to suffer in the hands of her super manipulative husband. She falls in a whirlwind romance with a Marxist academic who happens to be a lecturer in a university. She marries him but soon her life turns out to be disastrous as her husband starts controlling every aspect of her life. The writer attempts to bring out the nuances of being stuck in abusive marriage and one's inability to escape from it.

Contrary to the popular concept of a spousal relationship, endowed

with care, support and respect for each other, assault and offence in reality makes the situation twice removed. The narrator is subjected to every possible form of domestic violence, which her husband tries to justify as an attempt to turn her into a responsible comrade. She meets her husband while organising a campaign against death penalty. She claims that she sympathises with the Left. Her to-be-husband believes that only Marxism-Leninism-Maoism can be the source of liberation for people. It is on this accord of his commitment to the cause, to his adventurousness and his claim of making a true revolutionary out of her that she falls for him. But soon he turns out to be an abusive, wife-beating pseudo-communist who justifies socialism and Marxism for his own sadism. He begins to weaponize his political ideology against her. He systematically tries to conform her to his idea of Communism which clearly transforms into abuse and manipulation.

Controlling the personal space, freedom and the body of a woman in a conjugal marital relationship leads to the psychological domination of women. Reversely, having complete authority over the mind of women would ensure their complete subjugation. Domestic captivity need not be equated with prison for "physical barriers to escape are rare... The barriers to escape are generally invisible. They are nonetheless extremely powerful. Women are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and legal subordination, as well as by physical force" (Herman 74). His subtle control starts with his attempt to socially isolate her from the physical as well as the virtual world. Moving to Mangalore for his job renders her an alien to the language and severs her connection as she cannot speak Kannada and is away from the comforting presence of her family and friends. He begins asking for full access to her emails and social media accounts. He tries to reason that the openness would make their relationship more intimate. Soon, she is asked to come off Facebook as he thinks that it is a waste of time and a platform for encouraging one's narcissism. He interprets it as an act of feeding information to the RAW, IB which he thinks are hounding him since he is a communist revolutionary. As the narrator is unwilling to do so, he resorts to physically harming himself with lighted matchsticks in order to instill fear in her mind. The devices used for staying in touch with the outside world become weapons to subdue her to subjugation. Sometimes, she is literally beaten with the chord of her Mac, leaving red welts on her skin, her emails wiped off, her calls monitored.

Her identity as a writer and as a woman is compromised on both levels with constant restrictions on her freedom. She uses Facebook, Gmail and Yahoo Messengers to connect with editors for whom she writes essays

and articles. Commanding her to deactivate her Facebook account meant cutting her off completely from the outside world. As a writer, the narrator explains that it would be disadvantageous for her career since it is her only professional link as they moved to Mangalore. In the new city she is devoid of artist friends and her family, therefore Facebook served as the connecting link. It was the virtual portal for her to promote her work, receiving news, keeping her relevant in the literary scene. To not allow her from using the only source that is quite pivotal to her ambitions, the narrator describes the act as “career suicide”. He goes on to control even her messages as he opens, reads and replies to those messages, signing off with both their names. It becomes a kind of a systematic psychological and emotional loophole in which the victim feels trapped. Her sense of self, the freedom of making choices for herself is highly shattered.

Even the choice of words for her writings is strictly scrutinized by her husband, commenting on one way or the other that greatly reduces her confidence and esteem. When editors ask her to write on female sexuality, her husband attempts to sarcastically attack on her virtue. He links the reason as her wide experience of sleeping with men of different ages. This is the height of sexism as he as a Marxist academic professes his belief in liberation from all kinds of chains but these incidences perpetrated against his writer-wife reveals his deep-rooted sexist ideology. As a person living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; he surely knows the importance of internet as a means for contact and communication but he sabotages all her social media accounts thereby putting her literary career at risk. In addition to these heinous personal attacks, his accusation on her sexual behaviour as transgressive, once again confirms him as a sexist. This brings to light the continued existence of one facet of society, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the institution of patriarchy seems to have eroded, that is even highly educated professional/academician like the husband continue to pose threats to women’s liberation for “as long as sexism as an ideology exists, patriarchal relations can easily be re-established, even when legal changes have occurred to outlaw them” (Lerner, 240).

Despite the new laws passed for protection of women against domestic violence, men continue to take advantage of legal lacunae or lack of evidence for it is not easy to prove violence (especially psychological violence and the trauma associated with it) against women in domestic settings or intimate relations. Over and above, the husband exploits what Gerda Lerner (in a different context) terms “male monopoly on definition” (219). To define what a woman/ a wife ought to do or not to do seems to be the prerogative of the husband whose chauvinism at the expense of his wife’s

personal life and career knows no bounds. His self-made power to define or name things and areas his wife can have access to or denied has been deliberate and these pervasive acts of all forms of violence against her creates mental agony, emotional instability and weakening of will power in her.

A writer should be free enough to write on a topic of her choice, having assured the space to ponder upon it and freely express her take on it. However, the husband invades that basic individual space of a writer by constantly interfering with how things should be perceived, through a communist outlook. Her writing of letters to her imaginary lovers can be seen as an act of defiance but the pervasiveness of fear cannot be overlooked as she deletes everything before her husband comes home. The duality of resistance and submission can be seen in the protagonist. It is ironical that the narrator believes herself to be a feminist writer, but finds herself unable to leave her abusive husband. Her ambiguous position leaves her to self-pity. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf advocates for financial independence and a physical space for women to exercise their intellectual freedom. Kandasamy's protagonist is not only devoid of that physical space but she is also denied a mental space of her own.

Common symptoms of psychological trauma such as "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation" (as qtd. in Herman 33) can be observed in the character of the protagonist. Constant fear pervades her every action as she is aware that even little details like forgotten laundry, slowness in the speed of washing dishes, the level of salt in foods can easily provoke anger in her husband. The unnamed narrator also suffers from hyper arousal or hyper vigilantism which is another stark symptom of trauma. In the words of Judith Herman, "After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment. Physiological arousal continues unabated" (35). In the novel, the protagonist has to be alert about what she has to say to her husband, how she presents herself before him. She has to carefully structure her behaviour so as not to raise any suspicion in him. She describes the afternoons as the most dreaded, unbearable time in her life as a wife. She says:

I have to anticipate his arrival. I have to show him solid proof that I have been busy. I am lost in restlessness, lost in time that I cannot will away, that I cannot spend. The minutes swell into formless monsters. Afternoons are beginning to carry in their silence and their stillness the whispered suggestions of suicide. Do

it now. It will not hurt. It will be over before you realize... I swing on a pendulum of choice. Alive. Dead. Dead. Alive. (Kandasamy ch. VI)

Sense of being trapped without any possible end to her misery leads her to contemplate suicide. Moreover, when she confides to her parents about her abusive relationship with her husband, they try to reason it out as a normal phase of married life. They ask her to be patient and polite, rather suggesting to not talk back and be completely obedient to him. Laub and Felman suggest that it is essential for the traumatic event(s) to be articulated, to be told and transmitted and equally crucial for it to be heard because it is through the relationship between the victim and the witness that the trauma can be comprehended (81). Unwillingness on the part of her parents to even listen to her suffering and misery leads to what Herman terms as "betrayal of intimate relationships" (55). Her basic sense of trust upon her parents is shattered as she is asked to put up with him. Her parents as her only hope and saviour fail her. She feels abandoned and lost. This feeling of disconnection and loss of trust that not only pervades the relation with her husband, but also with her parents which makes her realize that she belongs more to the dead than living.

Paradoxically, it is also the terror of annihilation which is traumatic for her. She views her husband's beatings as resulting in her murder. What horrifies her is not the pain or the physical scarring or the shame of not being able to fight back but of the certainty in continuous nature of her abuse. She states:

When he hits me, the terror follows from the instinct that this will go further, that this does not end easily, that today it is my arms that he is punching, but tomorrow it will be my hair that he will wind around his palm to drag me through the rooms, the next day it will be my backbone that will endure a shattering blow, the day after that it will be my head on which his angry fists will descend. (Kandasamy ch. IX)

Every day, I inch closer to death, to dying, to being killed, to the fear that I will end up in a fight whose result I cannot reverse. (ch. IX)

When he hits her, all she can do is to pathetically cry out aloud for forgiveness and to declare that nothing will happen to annoy him, to beg for a last chance to reform herself.

Applying makeup/cosmetics is often regarded as an art, a form of self-expression. The husband, however, links it with capitalism as he opines that the beauty market extracts money by making women believe that they are ugly without these products. Nevertheless, his opinion is not just confined to his personal views but extends to a tirade of verbal abuse which ultimately reveals his inherent sexism. Applying kohl and lipstick prompts him to call his wife a bourgeois prostitute. He goes on to refute her claim that even sex workers are women of the working class. Instead, he starts burning with rage and grabs her bag and hurls on the wall thus physically threatening her for going against his beliefs. He is of the idea that those who wear makeup are women on heat, signalling their sexual availability to onlookers. Moreover, he condemns the concept of women harbouring sexual urge and pleasure as he reasons that "Lenin condemns such promiscuity in sexual matters as nothing but bourgeois" (Kandasamy ch.III) The narrator pitifully remarks that her husband is a hypocrite who divides women into two different entities, working class and bourgeois. She states: "I must learn that a Communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind the closed doors. This is dialectics" (ch. III). Regarded as one of the subtle forms of domestic violence, verbal abuse can have devastating effects on the self-worth and self-esteem of the victim, often leading to anxiety and depression. It involves belittling, name calling, gaslighting and yelling aimed at maintaining power and control in the relationship. Sexist-slurs that includes gendered insults like "slut", "whore" is aimed at promoting cultural, traditional beliefs about femininity which are ultimately directed towards shaming the victims for falling short of the normative standards. Therefore, it can be understood that the husband's misogynistic tendencies arise not out of communism but from the deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs regarding women.

Psychological domination becomes complete when the victim resorts to self-blame and violates her own moral principles. The narrator starts to criticise herself for her inability to become the comrade as her husband expects out of her as she says

I learn to criticize myself for who I am. I criticize myself for my reluctance about housework. I criticize myself for my choice of clothing. I try to point out the feudal remnants in my behaviour. I take blame for the petit- bourgeois mentality that I harbour... I do my best to criticize myself viciously until I become a 'true comrade'. (Kandasamy ch VIII)

What she feels is guilt, an acceptance of her deserving to be abused. Her self-esteem is shattered by experiences of humiliation and helplessness. Despair and helplessness are emphasized by the awareness that action is rendered useless to her condition. "Traumatic reactions occurs when action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self defence becomes overwhelmed and disorganised" (Herman 34).

The narrator is aware that any action of hers is futile to please her husband. Therefore, she withdraws into silence as suggested by her father that silence is peace which can also be used as a weapon. Silence censor expression and thus erases individuality. She sees it as self-flagellation, he sees it as a sign of her defeat and his victory. However, it turns out to be a brief respite as he starts blaming her of inhabiting a world of her own in her mind with her ex-lovers from where he has been debarred. He kicks her and physically abuses her for her silence. It is his sense of need to have a complete control not only over her physical body but also over her mind that has a debilitating effect on the narrator's being. When he realizes that he cannot control the space and thus the body of his wife, he starts raping her. The narrator remarks: "I never understood rape until it happened to me. It was a concept - of savagery, of violence, of violation, of disrespect... Sex, actually rape, becomes his weapon to tame me" (Kandasamy ch. X). He rapes her, calls her a whore. He claims her unfit to be called a wife.

Rape is served as a lesson, as a punishment. Contending the act as not only to discipline but to disable her, she says "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". Rape is a form of control, to subordinate women through terror. Judith Herman quotes Susan Brownmiller regarding the exercise of rape as a means to maintain male power: "Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and first crude stone axe... It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (as qtd. in Herman 32). Conversely, Kandasamy takes a jab on feminist writers like Kate Millet and Susan Brownmiller who wrote extensively on the gender politics of rape but nevertheless none taught how to handle it if one were to succumb to rape. Not only has she lost hope on feminist ideals but also on the state's system of law enforcing agencies as the author writes: "Given a choice between punishing a wife-beating rapist, and having an opportunity to milk an ex-guerrilla

for intelligence, I know where the interests of the state machinery would be" (ch. XI). Overcome with utter dissatisfaction, the narrator projects her helplessness in not knowing whom to rely on. The perpetrator, moreover, is not a stranger who would run away after the violation but her own husband who will wake up next to her, for whom she will have to make coffee the next morning, who will easily justify his act as caused by unbridled passion.

Talking about "rape culture" "the very specific problems that rise from a culture mired in sexual violence" (Gay 133) points out that the aftermath of rape can be "more devastating than the rape itself" (133). Though she is referring to gang rape, the same yardsticks can be applied to marital rape in which the latter is more problematic. In a gang rape, the perpetrators of the crime are mostly caught and punished according to law but when it is perpetrated by a husband on his wife, he is rarely accused except in a few cases where the wife chooses divorce which implies long drawn cases in the family court, condemnation from the family members of the husband, even from her parental family for causing problems. Most wives whether educated or not are also afraid of losing face among their acquaintances and they tend to hide and endure mental, physical abuse so that the dirty linen remains invisible to the outside world. In addition to it, the victims are often subdued by their own family members as it may result in them losing honour in the society which is evident from the narrator's parents trying to coerce her into silence about her abuse. Gay also opines that women "live in a strange and terrible time", even in the contemporary times as "womanhood feels more stranger and terrible now because progress has not served women as well as it has served men" (132). Both the husband and wife are educated career-oriented people but in spite of that male authority tends to prevail through coercion.

Being compelled to go through the terrifying ordeal of living with an abusive husband for almost every day, she completely surrenders herself to his abuses. When he rapes her, she compares herself with a corpse - lying still and emotionless. She deliberately constricts and numbs herself so as to mentally escape her own helplessness. However, in disassociating herself from her body and bearing second witness to her own violation, Kandasamy bestows a degree of power on the narrator. Being a witness, according to Laub and Felman is an exercise of power for it incorporates the agency to speak for others and to others (58). The victims who bear witness to the trauma of their powerlessness and incapacity are also endowed with a possibility to transgress the confines of the inexpressibility and invisibility imposed by the regimes of patriarchy.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is an essential gendering of trauma in the narratives of domestic violence. Attitudes towards violence is substantiated by attitudes towards gender. Women's experiences around the internal mechanism of subjugation and oppression are silenced enhancing their traumatic state. Repeated physical and psychological violation which are eminent in domestic abuse, renders the victim an alien to their self. Moreover, the novel raises the question of domestic abuse as an impetus to empowerment of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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