

Shattered Vows: Exploring Abuse and Trauma in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, delves into the harrowing portrayal of domestic abuse and its traumatic effects on the protagonist, an unnamed writer. Kandasamy reveals the devastating impact of male dominance and manipulation on women's lives. She delves into the complexities of an abusive marriage, focusing not only on physical violence but also on the emotional manipulation, isolation and erasure of identity experienced by the protagonist. Set against the backdrop of a male dominated society, the novel exposes the silent forms of violence that trap women in abusive relationships. Kandasamy portrays her unnamed protagonist both as a victim of abuse and as a fierce woman who reclaims her identity through writing. Kandasamy uses the act of writing as a metaphor for resistance and survival. The novel brings to light the enduring nature of trauma and the cultural barriers that often prevent women from escaping abusive marriages, while offering a deeply personal story of resilience and the power of reclaiming one's voice.

Keywords: Trauma, Physical and Psychological Abuse, Marriage, Identity Crisis.

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Abuse and trauma are pervasive and complex issues that affect individuals on both physical and psychological levels. Abuse manifests in many forms like physical, emotional, psychological and sexual and inflicts profound harm resulting in lasting trauma. Trauma, as a response to such abuse manifests in a variety of ways including anxiety, depression and a profound sense of isolation. The effect of trauma is long-lasting, affecting one's sense of self, relationships and ability to trust or feel safe in the world.

When I Hit You is an emotional portrayal of domestic abuse examining the destructive dynamics of an abusive marriage and the consequent trauma on the protagonist, a young unnamed writer. Through its intense narrative and poetic style, Kandasamy crafts a deeply personal yet universal account of gendered violence, focusing on the complexities of emotional and psychological abuse in the context of a patriarchal society. This research paper explores the various forms of abuse depicted in the novel, the trauma endured by the protagonist and the resilience she exhibits in reclaiming her voice.

The novel centers on the experiences of a young married woman who takes on the role of an unnamed narrator. The protagonist fell in love with a man who had formerly worked as a university lecturer, which eventually led to their marriage. Within the confines of her marriage, she initially struggles with a sense of turmoil, grappling with the loss of her personal space and identity. After marriage the unnamed protagonist moves with her husband from Chennai to Mangalore, an unfamiliar place where she faces restrictions on speaking her native language. She is confined to a small space consisting of three rooms and a veranda with limited access to the outside world for a period of two months.

The protagonist's life revolves entirely around her husband, trapping her and cutting off any avenues for self-determination. To please her husband, she conforms to his preferences, adopting his favoured hairstyle, dressing

modestly and greeting him cheerfully when he returns from work, as if acting in a film. She cannot escape or avoid his presence and to avoid conflict, she becomes consumed by the need to impress him. She imagines herself as an actress playing the role of the perfect wife, using this mental escape to manage with the overwhelming anxiety of her environment.

To effectively isolate her from outside influences, her husband resorts to violent methods as his main form of control. The narrator recounts these experiences with stark clarity. She describes the moment her husband first strikes her: "I was too shocked to scream. The strike was not on my body alone; it struck my will to live" (Kandasamy29). The violence strips her sense of self and desire to continue. Physical abuse in the novel is not isolated to mere bodily harm; it is deeply intertwined with the erasure of the protagonist's identity and autonomy. Her husband's violent actions are portrayed as tools of control, aiming to break the narrator's spirit. In another scene, the protagonist reflects on her husband's justification for his actions: "He says it is all for my own good, and that if I love him, I must learn to listen. I must obey" (35). Steven Tracy in her article "Patriarchy and Domestic Violence" states that patriarchy is most responsible in promoting violence against women. She thinks: "Domestic violence against women is rooted in and is the logical conclusion of basic patriarchal assumptions about women's subordinate status" (577).

Kandasamy captures the sheer terror and helplessness of the unnamed protagonist. In one of the most harrowing scenes, the protagonist reflects on the cycle of violence: "Each slap is an argument won by him. Each blow, a well-rehearsed line from a script written to break me down (Kandasamy 55). The cyclical nature of the abuse, where moments of physical violence are followed by apologies and emotional coercion, mirrors the insidious ways abusive relationship's function. The protagonist's reflection reveals the psychological trap many victims face, where they are made to feel responsible for the abuse and are coerced into staying through a mix of fear, guilt and manipulation.

While physical abuse is a palpable force in the novel, emotional abuse forms the undercurrent of the protagonist's experience. Kandasamy illustrates that emotional abuse is more insidious than physical violence, as it slowly wears down the victim's self-esteem, sense of autonomy and identity. The protagonist reflects on how her husband systematically isolates her from her family and friends, creating an environment of intense loneliness: "I had lost contact with the outside world, with my family. He made sure that I was alone, entirely dependent on him" (43). The emotional isolation imposed by the husband is a powerful tool of control. By cutting her off from her support system, he ensures that she has no one to turn to and that his influence over her becomes absolute. This isolation is a common tactic in abusive relationships, where the abuser seeks to remove any external sources of empowerment for the victim.

In addition to isolation, the protagonist's husband manipulates her psychologically by restricting her ability to express herself. This restriction is most clearly seen in his control over her language: "He forbids me from speaking my mother tongue, cutting me off from the language of my childhood, my memories and my identity" (21). The emotional abuse goes beyond mere words or insults; it extends to the erasure of the protagonist's identity and culture. By forbidding her from speaking her native language, the husband severs her ties to her heritage and history, further disempowering her. This manipulation is not just a restriction of speech; it is a symbolic attack on her very being, an attempt to reshape her according to his preferences.

Another powerful example of emotional abuse is the protagonist's awareness that her husband wants to erase her intellectual and creative identity: "He doesn't want me to write. He doesn't want me to think. My ideas are dangerous, he says, and so I must forget them" (10). The husband's refusal to allow her creative expression is part of his broader attempt to control her mind and stifle any form of resistance. By diminishing her intellectual and creative agency, he seeks to make her dependent on him and compliant to his will. Marianne Hester and Lorraine Radford in their book *Mothering through Domestic Violence* states: "Emotional abuse often serves as the foundation for physical violence, as it establishes a system of power and control that enables the abuser to inflict further harm with little resistance" (124).

In *When I Hit You* Kandasamy demonstrates that impact of trauma because of abuse. Trauma alters the victim's identity, perceptions and their interactions with the world around them. The trauma experienced by the protagonist is multifaceted, encompassing physical, emotional and psychological dimensions. The psychological aftermath of trauma manifests in various ways, notably through anxiety, depression and feelings of helplessness. The protagonist frequently reflects on her emotional state, revealing the weight of her experiences: "I am haunted by his words, replaying them in my mind like a film on repeat. I can't escape from his voice" (Kandasamy 18).

Trauma traps victims in a cycle of negative thoughts and emotions, where the echoes of the abuser's words become a constant presence. The protagonist's inability to escape her husband's voice illustrates the psychological control exerted by her abuser, which persists long after the physical violence has ceased. Judith Herman argues in his book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*: "Trauma disrupts the victim's sense of safety and self, leading to feelings of helplessness and a fractured identity" (184). Similarly, the protagonist's sense of identity is profoundly affected by her trauma. She struggles to reconcile her self-worth with her experiences of abuse: "I have become a shadow of myself; a mere reflection of what he wants me to be" (Kandasamy123). This loss of self is a common effect of trauma, as victims often feel disconnected from their previous identities and struggle to reclaim their sense of self-worth.

The lingering effects of trauma also affect the protagonist's relationships with others. The isolation imposed by her abuser creates a rift between her and her family, as she becomes increasingly withdrawn: "I can't reach out to anyone; the fear of their judgment weighs heavily on me" (167). Traumas create barriers to connection, leaving victims feeling isolated and unsupported. The fear of judgment prevents victims from seeking help perpetuating their sense of loneliness and despair.

The protagonist's experiences of betrayal and mistrust seep into her perceptions of love and intimacy. She grapples with the idea of love as something tainted by violence: "How can love be tender when it carries the weight of a fist?" (149). The experiences of violence distort the understanding of love and affection. The protagonist's struggle to reconcile her feelings emphasizes the pervasive nature of trauma, influencing not only her self-perception but also her ability to connect with others.

The protagonist uses her writing skills to escape from her trauma. Through the act of storytelling, the protagonist reclaims her voice, confronts her trauma and challenges the patriarchal structures that seek to silence her. The protagonist asserts: "I write to make sense of the chaos around me, to carve out a space for my voice in a world that seeks to silence me" (227). Writing becomes therapeutic to her as it allows to articulate her experiences and emotions. By documenting her life, she creates a narrative that defies her abuser's attempts to erase her identity. Writing becomes a refuge where she explores her thoughts, feelings and truths, ultimately challenging the power dynamics in her marriage. The concept of writing as a healing process is also explored in James W. Pennebaker's book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* which states: "Expressive writing can lead to improved mental health and emotional well-being" (123). This aligns with the protagonist's journey, as her act of writing serves as a crucial step toward healing from the trauma of abuse.

When I Hit You serves as an act of reclamation for the protagonist. Through her words, she reclaims her narrative and identity, pushing back against the erasure imposed by her abusive husband. Kandasamy captures this transformative power when the protagonist reflects: "In the act of writing, I am no longer just a victim; I am a survivor, an artist shaping my own story" (Kandasamy 223). By positioning herself as an artist, she redefines her role in her own life, embracing her creativity as a source of strength. Writing becomes a form of agency, enabling her to construct her identity beyond the limitations imposed by her marriage. She confronts her trauma through the act of writing: "Each word is a battle, each sentence a confrontation with the past that haunts me" (229). The protagonist acknowledges that the act of writing is fraught with emotional turmoil. Yet, by confronting her past, she gains clarity and begins to heal. Writing becomes a means of transforming her trauma into a narrative that she can control. Kandasamy writes about her experiences to expose the realities of domestic violence and to call attention to the societal structures that normalize such behaviour: "I want my words to pierce through the silence, to reveal the truth that many women live in fear of speaking" (240).

The connection between Kandasamy and her protagonist is profound, as both navigate the oppressive realities of a patriarchal society and the complexities of abusive relationships. Kandasamy's alignment with her protagonist allows readers to understand the depth of the struggles faced by women in abusive relationships. The protagonist's journey reflects the harsh realities of emotional and physical abuse, which lead to feelings of hopelessness and victimization. However, rather than succumbing to her circumstances, she exemplifies the strength of willpower and the determination to reclaim her life. This shared narrative serves as a testament to Kandasamy's personal experiences, emphasizing that her struggles are not isolated but rather part of a broader societal issue affecting countless women.

The protagonist's refusal to remain a victim and her active pursuit of freedom is incredible. Through her resilience, she transforms her pain into a powerful narrative that not only chronicles her journey but also inspires others. Kandasamy illustrates that even in the darkest situations, individuals have the capacity to rise above their

circumstances. The protagonist's journey from victimhood to empowerment serves as an example for thousands of women caught in similar situations, demonstrating that it is possible to break free from the cycle of abuse.

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