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## A CORRELATIVE STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL "WHEN I HIT YOU" OR "A PORTRAIT OF A WRITER AS A YOUNG WIFE"

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### Abstract

Violence and Trauma, a deeply distressing experience is among the age-long themes of literature. Violence is a type of injury arising from some unintended actions, events and incidents. It has been categorized into many categories according to the nature of violence. Likewise, Trauma is an experience arising from a deeply distressing or disturbing event or events. The incidents baffle individual's ability to cope in life causing feelings of helplessness. Such incidents destroy people's sense of self and their ability to live a healthy and peaceful life. Violence and Trauma can be caused by both natural and man-made event. Whatever may its cause may be, internal human psyche ventures through plenty of conflicting emotions. There were very few writers who wrote about these evils issues of society. Only very few writers have showed their courage to talk about these transforming their private issue into public. In my study, I will deal with the budding contemporary twenty first century Dalit Tamil writer Meena Kandasamy's "When I Hit You". The study will focus on various aspects of the female protagonist's painstaking traumatized life from her birth to the establishment of herself as a feminist writer.

**Keywords:** Violence, Trauma, Marginalized, Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, Patriarchy.

### Introduction

Violence and Trauma have been the issues suffered globally. The subject matter of these earlier was deeply rooted with the Holocaust and war. But during the time period the focus has been shifted on various matters such as disasters, accidents, domestic violence, extramarital relationship, rape, gender discrimination, female foeticide, infanticide, terrorism, and several physical as well as health injuries. In India, throughout the process of cultural movement and modernization various initiatives have been taken for the elevation of these issues. During the pre-independence era and after the post-independence era, there were plentiful constitutional provisions had made to check the impact of violence and trauma suffered by women, but in reality, the conditions of them still remain very much deplorable. Violence arises from any of these leads people suffering traumatic life. The long-prevailed impact of trauma upon human being is a matter of concerns in this discussion. We have found that, people who have gone through the phase of traumatic life may not able to respond or may have lost the sense of feelings in the process. We, the human beings are very much prone to trauma by various reasons. It may arises due to the death of someone's very close to heart, physical injury, war, terrorism, divorce, moving to a new location, paternal abandonment, rape, domestic violence, prison stay, natural disasters etc.

In most of the cases, we can't very easily able to recognize the persons who suffer from this. But the phase in which these persons are going through have serious emotional reactions. But when one has face a sudden shock, we have found within him or her a drastic change of irritability, mood, anxiety and nervousness, anger, denial, depression, flashbacks, altered sleeping or insomnia, withdrawal and isolation from day-to-day activities, headaches, nausea etc. Sometime, such condition is also called Posttraumatic Disorder. Here, the people are very much affected by anxiety disorder affecting their stress hormones and changes the body's response to stress.

Meena Kandasamy's "When I Hit You" or "A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" (2017) shows us a sterling picture about the painstaking experience of women across the world. Meena as a spokesperson of these marginalized classes in our society harshly criticizes them in this novel. She presents how throughout the world women have regularly subjected to face abuses, all sorts of violence and forced to stay silent within the four walls of the house. In this respect, Proshant Chakroborty writes in one of his articles about Kandasamy's "When I Hit You" that It is a book that lingers in your, imagination and consciousness. According to him, the book is a kind of manifesto and it should be read by everyone and especially the women because the book is a kind of inspiration to them telling all the women how to cope up with life partaking violence, trauma, trouble and disruption.

People who have gone through the experience of violence and trauma, he or she may re-experience the traumatic life mentally or physically. It can be very much uncomfortable and even painful. Due to this one can lose sense of safety, self-efficiency as well as the ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships. In such cases, the person has also gone through flashbacks emphasizing the body and mind is actively struggling to cope with the traumatic experience. This has been clearly visible in the novel "When I Hit You". Kandasamy speaks about the burden of her memory from childhood till now, her fruitless love relationship in University, her engagement with politics, her violent marriage etc. This has been clearly put forwarded by the following lines from the text:



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“Here, I am the actress, the self-anointed director, the cinematographer and screenplay writer... The story changes every day, every hour, every single time every single time I sit and chart it out. The actors do not change, I cannot escape the set but with every shift in my perspective, a different story is born.” (27)

Violence can result from the unexpected reality and prevailing of such reality appears to be fatalistic and traumatic. Kandasamy goes against society's norm where a female crosses the boundary marked by the society where a female has no right to choose a companion of her choice in marriage. In the novel, the female protagonist married a person of her choice against her parents will. She has dreamed of a very happy, co-operative conjugal life. But to her dismay, it results severely “Marriage became a Re-education camp. He transformed into a teacher, and I became the wife-student learning from this communist Crusader.” (Kandasamy, 32) She goes further how her husband day after day starts mistreating her. In public, she has been given a lot of importance receiving applauding for such an amazing conjugal relationship. But in private domestic sphere, she has to suffer brutal behaviour of her husband: “I must learn that a Communist woman is treated equally and respectfully the comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind closed doors.” (Kandasamy, 34) It is very much clear from this even after so much initiative in part of women, they are still in the darker side of the society where standing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century ultra-modern society, women are the worst sufferer from this male domination.

In a society where power matters most and those are behind them are treated as of no use. Like the big fishes of a pond, the powerful people always in hunt of the powerless. Such instance of violence has been delineated by Kandasamy with her description of friendship with a college lecturer named Girish. Kandasamy shows how mean-minded the lecturers were in some places through the image of the college lecture. The lecturer in spite having his wife wants to have an extra marital relationship with her. When she denies, she plans to defile the girl: “... so he told the entire college that I tried to seduce him, and almost everyone seemed to buy his story, except the women who had similarly solicited, who saw him for what he was.” (Kandasamy, 42)

The female protagonist who in miniature none but Kandasamy has gone through several spares of trauma and among them her dislocating to new place. Mangalore is one of them. Her roots seem uprooted as she has lost the lifeline of the outside world as in Mangalore, she has nobody to know her. In such aloofness, her only one companion proves to be Facebook. Through it she tries to continue her writing profession. But she has to sacrifice this friend too when her husband comes to know about her writing. He does not like the women writing. He calls women writing “a petit bourgeois woman writer.” (Kandasamy, 80) She has to leave Facebook and this was for her “an act of career suicide”. (Kandasamy, 52) She knows how violent her husband could be if he tried to argue with him. Thus, she sarcastically says, “I simply count myself lucky that he asks me only to ‘deactivate’ and not actually delete my Facebook account.” He doesn't even stop activities secretly. He very tactfully takes her email password. He even changed her cannot number and apart from her parents. She does not share her phone number with anyone else. He does not like her writing in English: “Don't bullshit me. You know what? The whore in those times was the link, the bridge, between the colonizer and the colonized. Today, the link the writer who writes in English, this bridge – she is the whore.” (Kandasamy, 74)

Women who have been suffering violence and trauma as children are significantly more likely to be subjected to violence and trauma as an adult. Among the most important cause of their trauma is domestic violence which acts as a marker for other traumatic and adverse life events. Similarly, we have seen how our female protagonist has become the worst sufferer of it in a mismatched marriage. Her husband tortured her physically and sexually. The violence of it has reached so much that her condition becomes a fish out of water. She has entangled herself with the dichotomy between “Fight or Flight”. (Kandasamy, 61) She cannot decide whether to stay there and withstand this misogynist husband how her husband after emotionally blackmailing her started abusing her physically. She was threatened all the time with his scrutinized eyes imposing questions after questions: “Why does this man call you ‘dearest’? Why have you cleared your trash can in your email inbox? Why are there only nine telephone calls on the call log of your phone, whose number have you deleted? Why haven't you washed the sink? Why are you trying to kill me by trying to over salt my food? Why can't you write as ‘anonymous’? Why did you not immediately reject the conference invitation when you bloody know that I'm not going to let you travel alone?” (Kandasamy, 69)

She then gives an account of weapons her husband used to threaten her while abusing: “The cord of my Mac Book which left thin, red welts on my arms. The back of the broomstick that pounded me across the length of my back. The writing pad whose edges found my knuckles. His brown leather belt. Broken ceramic plates after a brief journey as flying saucers. The drain horse of the washing machine.” (Kandasamy, 70)

It was a kind of sheer shock for her, she never ever thought of that after marrying with her favourite person. She felt further traumatized when she thinks about the time of their married life. She says “I did not know that this was the exemplary life awaiting a newly married woman.” (Kandasamy, 70)

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The book is one of the finest examples of love, marriage, violence, trauma and how the female protagonist who is by heart a feminist gets trapped in an abusive marriage. A person in trauma does not act accordingly. Rather his or her work looks strange to others. Though what the person is trying to do is very much suitable for that person. In the novel, our protagonist becomes so much overwhelmed with her present condition that she has no outlet of her life. She has been suffocated by her husband in all spheres of life. Her personal and public life are not now in control of her own. Her condition seems very much deplorable and she hopes of escaping from this infernal life. So, she writes letters to imaginary lovers. In one of her letters she overtly speaks about her terrible condition: "I fell in love with the man I married because when he spoke about the revolution it seemed more intense than any poetry, more moving than any beauty. I'm no longer convinced. For every genuine revolutionary in the ranks, there is a careerist, a wife-beater, an opportunist, a manipulator, an infiltrator, a go-getter, an ass licker, an alcoholic and a dopehead." (Kandasamy, 90)

The feeling of panic and fear is another key feature of traumatic people. They are always in constant fear that something will occur which they desperately want to avoid. We have plenty of examples of such in literature where protagonists and other characters are suffering from this. Toni Morrison's "Beloved" is the prime example among this. In her novel, she has showed how the central character Seth has been going through this traumatic phase. She is in utmost fear that her daughter will not forgive her for the crime she did to her when she was only two years old. Though, in this novel we have not experienced such evil crime from our protagonist, but we see her brooding with constant fear. The most pivotal time for her fear was the time of every afternoon.

"Afternoons are the most unbearable time in my life as a wife. They sprawl out and fill me with my dread. 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 cannot spend. The minutes swell into formless monsters." (Kandasamy, 93)

In all these letters, she shares her deep rooted emotions which are not allowed to express emotions which are not allowed to express. Even writing these letters were a kind of threat for her husband. So, she has to erase all these writings before her husband arrived home: "Each of my letters, I delete after I have finished typing them. Every line I have written finished typing them. Every line I have written to you is a thought crime, a crime that does not leave a trail of evidence, a crime that is not even a crime." (Kandasamy, 94)

A desire for having something very essential part of our life is also the cause of trauma when it is not available to us. This is clearly visible in the novel. The protagonist of the novel is very much desperate to have a partner who can share mutual relationship with her. She wishes for freedom where she can speak and writer of her own. She cherishes her partner to be friendliest who can support throughout her life. But her misfortune, she receives the adverse of it. Her husband times and again condemns her for her desire of writing. He rather blames her that it is because of her feministic zeal of writing their love relation is ruining. She has nobody who can heed her voice, cry and sufferings. That's why she writes: "This is not feminism. I am just a woman in love." (Kandasamy, 128)

Providing no importance to anybody or to any special event of anybody arises within that person a feeling of marginalization, isolation, trauma within the mind of these people. In *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy tells very pathetically how her protagonist has been neglected by her husband. It is a sheer sadness to her that in a society where marriage, anniversary and other important days are celebrated pompously by others, her husband has never been thought of this. Not only has these days of her life, but her birthday not also been celebrated. Rather on that day, she has gone through all the domestic duties, caring and pleasing her husband all the day. The process of colonizing is a very pathetic phase to the colonized people. Colonizer uses various methods of colonizing which was unknown to the colonized people. This imposition of power results as a catastrophe to them. Due to this they have to go through the phase of violence and trauma. Similarly, here in this novel we have experienced such traumatic experience in the private level through the imposition of domestic violence by her misogynist husband. He deleted '25600 odd emails' from her Gmail inbox. He changed the password of it so that she could not use it further. He erased all her writings which were on her hard disk. She places herself destroyed and desolate: "I am rendered to a blank slate." (Kandasamy, 139) She further continues comparing her life with a chess game, a game where only two players are there. She compares herself with the kind who is constantly under the threat of being captured. One the other hand, her husband is the 'drama queen' vivifying with her husband's violence "Your violence is your effort to emasculate me, to live the life of middleclass luxury, to go on taking about your feminism." (Kandasamy, 150)

Feeling of depression lowers a person's mood. It provokes feelings of sadness, loss, or anger that interfere with a person's everyday activities. Experience of depression experienced by her influence our human relationships. According to her: "Depression is the disease that only middle-class women nurture and put-on display to the world. Depression, a symbol of the meaninglessness of bourgeois existence. Depression is a career choice for you. Without that, you are nothing." (Kandasamy, 151)

Sympathy is something which one can understand or imagine why someone is either going through the traumatic life with the assumption of being sad. Similarly, we have experienced in the novel how her parents react to her when she objects about her

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husband. But again, the burden of patriarchy comes at its large. This is clearly visible through her father's suggestion: "I know you, you are my daughter you do not like to lose a fight. The marriage is a give and take. Listen to him." (Kandasamy, 157) It is expected that a mother should feel the feelings of her daughter. But to her dismay, she receives no privilege from her mother. Her parents were very much curious about social structure, customs, and belief. Her mother comments: "All change is slow. A marriage is not magic. You will have to give him time. He still come around." (Kandasamy, 158)

Kandasamy in "When I Hit You" speaks about the dehumanizing effects which every Indian married and unmarried woman wearing the vile veil of marriage. She criticizes severely this very tradition of marriage in many ways. We have experienced the trace of it in her decision of marrying. But she does not stop there she is showing that even someone marries the favourite one of her choice; the relationship can also be toxic. She speaks about rape which was even not understandable to her before it happens to her. She has only read about it in the theory books of Kate Millett and Susan Brownmiller. Here, Kandasamy enumerates the experience placing it with other rape causes: "The man who rapes me is not a stranger who runs away. He is not the silhouette in the car park, he is not the masked assaulter, he is not the acquaintance who has spiked my drinks. He is someone who makes up next to me. He is the husband who wakes up next to me. He is the husband for whom I have to make coffee the following morning." (Kandasamy, 168)

The heartstaking experience of every woman or wife is that she has often been subjected to suspicious. She has been thought by her husband that before marriage she had physical relationship with other males. Every night in bed she has become judge questioning her abusively. It gets in her mind so much that she could not think beyond this. She was plagued with plenty of confusions. Her traumatic thoughts were swelling like the passive volcano which has been strengthening throughout the years without knowing when it will get bursts. Similarly, the female protagonist of "When I Hit You" becomes fed up with her husband's daily questions and she criticizes her husband by taunting his asking with the famous dialogue from Bollywood film "Sholay": "Kitneyaadmythay? How many men were there?" (Kandasamy, 175) Trauma also results the way how her husband cheats her and her parents into believing how caring husband he is "He weeps over phone to my father. He begs my mother to tell me to be more obedient." (Kandasamy, 183)

All these traumatic experiences and violence can instill in one's mind to take some means like committing suicide by which he or she can get rid of from such life. Even if someone was not directly involved in violence, the shock of what happened can be so great that she or he has to suffer in their normal life. But people can overcome if they change the tough patterns that are disturbing their life. Similarly, our protagonist understands very much that she should not allow her husband to have a baby with her. She has still the time to get freedom of her own until she is not protagonist. She plots to dissuade from it and for that she has made her kitchen a combat zone, making sure that any cooking secures me and my wombs liberty." (Kandasamy, 20) She starts eating "... died papayas sprinkled with brown sugar." (Kandasamy, 201) She has the knowledge that these fruits are eaten for marriage. She does not wish to birth a son who will match his mother being beaten up. Similarly, she does not want to bring into the world of a daughter who will be beaten up.

Her process of empowerment from the traumatic life is an exemplary one to be followed by those who are under such abusive relationship. She inspires her readers that being a woman they should not be accustomed with the concept of angel in the house where she has been eulogized with so many highly esteemed titles and responsibilities. Rather they need to walk out if they have been the subject of consequent torture and abuse. She believes that staying in a house where a woman is subjected of such negligence is nothing but the helplessness condition of the women. To fight back against this male dominated society, all the women should be like her "I am rough, gruff, tough. The one who has written these mad and angry and outrageous poems about life and love and sex. I am not afraid of men... I am anti-fragile. I've been made not to break." (Kandasamy, 219) She uses her pain as the subject matter of his writing and writes an inspirational text for her readers to arrest their attention. She says about her "I am the woman who is willing to display her scars and put them within exhibition frames. (Kandasamy, 248)

## Conclusion

To sum up, the novel is not just the brutality, the violence and traumatic experience of woman but it is even about how a woman can face the upstanding man with the strategies of survival. After moving to the different place, she becomes separated from everything from people where language even becomes unknown to her. Her loneliness was so grave that she found no outlet and started imagining herself as an actress, the self-anointed writer and the cinematographer of her role of a film. Being a writer, the narrator felt the cheek burn of her predicament with painful memories and in order to escape her present hellish condition of domestic abuses and violence she starts writing letters to imaginary lovers by disclosing all her toxic feelings. When her feministic woman voice cries within herself to escape all these ill-treatment of married life, she does not take the hasty decision to come out of this grave situation. She plots her escape acting like a woman whom she can trust by transforming her own painful experiences and her perceptions into a new form of art in the shape of a literary text.



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