



Marriage as a Tool for Male Authority in *When I Hit You*

Mrs.J.VIDHYA

Assistant Professor of English,
S.T.E.T. Women's College (A),
Mannargudi-614016,
9943185724.

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* critically examines marriage as an institution of control, particularly within patriarchal societies. The novel follows an unnamed narrator's descent into an abusive marriage, where her husband systematically isolates her, suppresses her voice, and exerts dominance over her body and mind. Through psychological and physical abuse, he reduces marriage to a mechanism of control, stripping the protagonist of her agency. Kandasamy highlights how societal norms reinforce this oppression by pressuring women to endure suffering for the sake of preserving marriage. The protagonist's struggle represents a larger feminist resistance against institutionalized misogyny. However, through writing and self-liberation, she reclaims her identity and breaks free from the cycle of abuse. The novel serves as a powerful critique of the way marriage can be weaponized against women, exposing the darker realities hidden beneath its traditional ideals.

Keywords: Marriage as Control, Patriarchy and Oppression, Domestic Abuse, Psychological Manipulation and Gender Inequality.

Introduction

Indian English literature has a rich and evolving history, deeply intertwined with the country's colonial past, postcolonial struggles, and contemporary social issues. The Indian English novel, which emerged in the 19th century, was initially influenced by British literary traditions but gradually developed its own distinct voice, reflecting the complex realities of Indian society.

Early novelists like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore addressed themes of nationalism and cultural identity, while later writers such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao focused on the struggles of ordinary Indians.

The post-independence period saw a rise in feminist literature, with authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy challenging traditional gender roles and highlighting women's issues.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) continues this tradition of feminist critique, offering a powerful examination of marriage as an institution of control. The novel portrays the lived reality of domestic abuse, where marriage functions as a tool of patriarchal oppression, reducing women to subservient roles. Through the protagonist's journey of suffering and eventual self-liberation, Kandasamy critiques the deep-seated misogyny within marital structures and the societal pressures that force women to endure toxic relationships. By blending personal narrative with political discourse, she exposes the harsh realities hidden beneath the idealized notion of marriage, making the novel a crucial contribution to contemporary Indian feminist literature.

Marriage as a Tool for Male Authority

In India, marriage as an institution that enables male dominance than female. Through the protagonist's abusive marriage, Kandasamy highlights how patriarchal societies weaponize marriage to strip women of autonomy and force them into submission. The husband in the novel exercises control over every aspect of the protagonist's life, using physical, emotional, and psychological abuse to reinforce his authority. This section provides a detailed interpretation of how marriage becomes a tool for male dominance, focusing on control over women's bodies, voices, ambitions, and personal freedoms. The novel exposes how marriage is often perceived as granting men the right to control their wives completely. The protagonist initially enters the marriage believing in love and companionship, but soon realizes that her husband views her as his property rather than an equal partner. He expects complete obedience, treating her not as an individual with her own thoughts and desires but as an extension of himself. This aligns with traditional patriarchal norms, where women are expected to serve their husbands unquestioningly.

The husband justifies his actions under the guise of marital duty, reinforcing the belief that a wife's role is to cater to her husband's needs, desires, and expectations. This reduces marriage to a power structure where the man dictates the terms, and the woman is expected to conform. The novel highlights how such perceptions of marriage enable the justification of abusive behavior under the pretext of "discipline" or "care." One of the earliest ways the husband exerts control over the protagonist is by dictating how she should dress and present herself. He disapproves of her wearing "modern" or "Western" clothes, insisting that she conform to his idea of modesty and tradition. This reflects a broader societal tendency to regulate women's bodies and attire, often under the pretense of morality or cultural preservation.

By forcing the protagonist to change the way she dresses, the husband erases her personal identity, reducing her to an object that must adhere to his preferences. This policing of women's bodies is a common mechanism through which patriarchal authority is maintained, as it not only restricts women's freedom but also reinforces the idea that they exist for male approval.

Silencing and Intellectual Suppression

Kandasamy's protagonist is an educated woman, a writer with a strong political consciousness. However, her husband perceives her intellect as a threat and systematically silences her. He discourages her from writing, dismisses her thoughts and opinions, and belittles her aspirations.

The act of silencing women whether through direct censorship or psychological manipulation is a recurring tactic in patriarchal societies. By denying the protagonist the right to express herself, the husband attempts to strip her of her agency. Writing becomes her form of resistance, a way to reclaim her voice despite the oppression she faces. Kandasamy uses this aspect of the novel to emphasize how intellectual suppression is a key feature of marital control, designed to keep women dependent and subservient. The protagonist's husband does not rely solely on physical violence; he also employs psychological abuse to maintain control. He gaslights her manipulating her into questioning her own perceptions and experiences. By constantly demeaning her thoughts, choices, and self-worth, he creates a reality where she begins to doubt herself. This form of abuse is particularly insidious because it makes the victim feel responsible for their suffering. The protagonist initially tries to rationalize his behavior, blaming herself for not being the "perfect wife." This self-blame is a direct result of the deep-seated conditioning that marriage is a woman's responsibility to uphold, no matter the cost. Kandasamy uses this aspect to highlight how psychological manipulation is often more damaging than physical abuse, as it erodes a woman's sense of self from within. The protagonist's suffering is not just a result of her husband's actions but also of a society that enables and justifies such behavior. When she tries to seek support from her parents, they advise her to "adjust" to the marriage, reflecting the cultural belief that a woman must endure suffering for the sake of preserving the relationship.

This societal complicity reinforces male authority by discouraging women from leaving abusive marriages. The fear of stigma, economic dependency, and cultural conditioning all work together to trap women in oppressive situations. Kandasamy's novel exposes how marriage functions as a social institution that prioritizes male dominance while demanding female submission.

Conclusion

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is a powerful critique of marriage as an institution of control, exposing how patriarchal societies enable the subjugation of women. Through the protagonist's harrowing experiences, the novel highlights the various ways in which marriage becomes a tool for male dominance—through physical violence, psychological manipulation, isolation, and the suppression of a woman's voice and identity. The societal complicity in sustaining these oppressive structures further reinforces the notion that a woman's suffering within marriage is both expected and justified. However, Kandasamy's protagonist defies these expectations by reclaiming her agency and choosing to walk away.

Her act of resistance serves as a powerful statement against the normalization of abuse and asserts that self-liberation is possible. Ultimately, *When I Hit You* stands as a bold feminist work that challenges traditional notions of marriage and empowers women to break free from cycles of oppression.

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