



The Intersection of Patriarchy and Power: Analyzing the Writer's Journey in Meena Kandasamy's Novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

Arya Awasthi

BA English, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, Uttar Pradesh, India.

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the novel *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, written by Meena Kandasamy. This novel was shortlisted for various prominent prizes, namely, Women's prize, Hindu prize, and Jhalak prize etc. This book is also considered the 'Guardian Book of the year.' This book was once the written account of an abusive marriage and a celebration of the unbeatable power of art, *When I hit you* is a smart, ferocious, and courageous take on traditional wedlock in modern India. This novel shows that though women have comparatively more freedom as compared to the ancient times. But their struggle is still not over, as the roots of patriarchy are so deeply woven in the Indian society that it has left adverse impacts on both the individuals i.e. male and female. The novel's protagonist undergoes psychological, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of her husband, whose need for control is deeply rooted in patriarchal conditioning. This paper examines the psychological factors contributing to the husband's abusive behavior, highlighting how toxic masculinity, narcissistic tendencies, and entitlement shape his need for superamacy. Additionally, this paper explores the protagonist's journey from victimhood to resistance, analyzing how she challenges traditional gender roles and reclaims her agency.

The situation today is complicated and there are many overlapping theories. However, people need to understand that the fight is not between males and females. It is a fight between two kinds of mindset, one who favours this ideology and the other who opposes it.

Key Words: *Abusive marriage, Patriarchy, Agency, Toxic Masculinity, Male Entitlement*

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy born in 1984, is an Indian poet, translator, fiction writer, and activist from Tamil Nadu, Chennai, and India. She was born to Tamil parents and both were university professors, due to which she developed an early interest in poetry, and later adopted the name Meena. She began writing from the age of sixteen and began translating books by Dalit leaders and writers into English. The main aspects on which she focuses on her writings are caste annihilation, feminism, and linguistic identity. Meena is also an activist, who works closely with issues of caste and gender and the society puts individuals in stereotypical roles on the basis of these categories. In many of her works, readers can come across a harsh criticism of the Hindu society because of which she has faced threats in the past itself. To which she says: "This threat of violence shouldn't dictate what you are going to write or hinder you in any manner." She is also one of the Dalit writers who attempted to spread light on those aspects of a Dalit individual's life which are often removed from the mainstream literature. Untouchables in her poetry are neither represented as sympathetic beings nor as inferior individuals.

Kandasamy's voice represents the kind of critical and dissenting perspective that the Indian far-right seeks to suppress. She holds up a mirror to a society that lives by one question and one question alone, come what may: What will people say?. *When I hit you* is a gripping and horrifying portrayal of narrator's isolation and abuse at the hands of her husband. In a society where women are supposed to be silent and bear the pain alone, she comes to realise that she must rescue herself. This novel is often praised for its poetic intensity and establishing the fact that Meena has a sharp antenna for injustice. The title hints at James Joyce's debut novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), which explores the coming-of-age journey of a young man—essentially Joyce's alter ego. Similarly, this novel follows its protagonist as she navigates through the starting months of her marriage, experiencing life as a young wife.

The term patriarchy is derived from the Greek word 'patriarkhēs' and patriarchy literally means "the rule of the father" and is often used to refer to a social system that gives more power and control to men rather than women. Though on the surface level, people may have an automatic assumption that on the receiving end of this oppressive power structures of patriarchal society is solely a women. Unfortunately, this is not completely true. Becker (1999) observes that it is not only women in the oppressed section. Instead, it is also men, not only those who are younger, but men of all ages who are 'different', who do not have hyper-masculine traits, and are therefore rejected as being 'sissy' or 'feeble' as being 'not men enough.' Roots of patriarchy are everywhere. Patriarchy is a social system like any other existing in a society, for instance, caste, class, and race. According to Kamla Bhasin, an Indian activist and poet, patriarchy can be understood through two prominent mediums: structure and mindset.

The first medium, structure, is significantly visible to human beings because it has a widespread framework affecting almost every aspect of an individual's life. The most prominent is the familial structure, where the chief heads of the family are predominantly male. In the corporate sector, most leaders are men, and ninety-nine percent of religious leaders are also male. Here, the family becomes the primary school of patriarchy, where this ideology is taught to both the male and female members through an audio-visual mode. Next comes education. In ancient times, girls were not allowed to attend school. One of the most renowned institutions, Harvard University, did not permit female students, and it took approximately 243 years for the university to accept them.

Although women now have the right to education, society often struggles to accommodate educated women. Additionally, several other significant structures contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchy, including legal institutions, economic systems, and the media. As a result, individuals can easily become trapped within these systems. The phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" coined by Bell Hooks, an African-American author, feminist, theorist, cultural critic, and an educator encapsulates the interconnected systems of oppression that shape societal structures. In her essay, *Understanding Patriarchy* (2004), she uses this term to highlight how patriarchy does not function in isolation but is intertwined with other forms of domination.

Another way to understand patriarchy is through the mindset of individuals, which is not as visibly apparent as its structural aspects. For instance, advertisements and the lyrics of certain songs that we encounter daily contribute to shaping such perspectives. In her book *Understanding Gender*, Kamla Bhasin defines patriarchy as a social system, emphasizing that no specific Husband or father can be solely blamed for perpetuating this ideology. At the same time, men themselves are also victims of this system—an aspect often overlooked due to the very ideology that upholds their supposed superiority over women. In the essay, *Understanding Patriarchy*, Bell Hooks critiques patriarchy as a deeply entrenched system of domination that harms not only women but also men and children by enforcing rigid gender roles and suppressing individuality and emotional expression. This misconception must be challenged to foster a more equitable society.

Patriarchy also believes that "gender is synonymous with sex [...] women and men are 'naturally' different; [...] maleness is inherently rational and femaleness is inherently emotional" (Cynthia Enloe, 2017, p.5). Therefore, the fusion of these characteristics would not be an ideal condition. On the other hand, Kamla Bhasin believes that nature by its very quality has given a lot similarities between men and women and the differences are very few. The most prominent is the anatomy of male and female body. This difference is only made for the sole purpose of reproduction. This difference is not made for the purpose to assign specific roles to the different genders.

Not only women but men are also suffering due to patriarchy. For instance, they are not allowed to express their emotions because there is a stigma attached to this notion that men are strong and they don't cry. According to psychology, this is called 'emotional castration', referring to an experience where someone feels deeply undermined, devalued, or rejected in a relationship leading to a sense of powerlessness and a significant decrease in their self-esteem, as if their emotional needs are being "cut off" or ignored. This extent of emotional castration leads to the unawareness from emotional intelligence. The consequences of this experience are at such an extent that men are often not able to handle rejections in relationships leading to many heinous crimes against women. This system has made men "uni-dimensional" conveying a message that their sole purpose is earning money and doing nothing else. Patriarchy has also killed the essence of humanity in men. This is proven by the incidents happening around us and to which we come across on a daily basis. Women and men, girls and boys, even the earth itself is suffering under the domination of patriarchy. To heal our land we must bravely untangle our traditions from this oldest oppression. What was made by our hand can also be unmade.

Nature, by its very essence, has provided men and women with numerous similarities, while the differences between them are relatively few. The most prominent distinction lies in the anatomical structure of the male and female body, a difference that serves the primary purpose of reproduction. However, this biological distinction was never intended to assign rigid social roles to different genders. The hierarchical structure of patriarchy, which dictates societal norms and expectations, affects both men and women in profound ways.

One of the less acknowledged consequences of patriarchal conditioning is its impact on men, who are often discouraged from expressing their emotions due to the prevailing belief that masculinity is synonymous with strength and emotional restraint. This societal expectation fosters a stigma around male vulnerability, reinforcing the notion that men must suppress their emotions, particularly sadness and distress. Over time, this suppression of emotions can erode a man's ability to cope with rejection and interpersonal conflicts, ultimately decreasing his tolerance levels in relationships as discussed earlier.

While discussions on patriarchy often highlight the privileges afforded to men, it is equally important to recognize the disadvantages it imposes on them. The deeply ingrained patriarchal framework has given rise to a multitude of negative consequences, many of which manifest in patterns of violence and deviant behavior. Numerous studies indicate that an overwhelming majority of violent crimes are committed by men, with statistical findings revealing that nearly 100 percent of rapists are male, 99 percent of terrorists are men, and over 95 percent of criminals and drug addicts are also male. However, it is essential to acknowledge that men are not inherently predisposed to such behavior; rather, their fundamental sense of humanity is often stifled by the rigid constructs of patriarchy, which condition them to equate dominance and aggression with masculinity.

The consequences of this patriarchal structure extend beyond men and have severe implications for women as well. Gender-based discrimination continues to claim countless lives, with studies revealing that approximately 239,000 girls under the age of five die in India each year due to neglect rooted in gender bias. The statistics on domestic violence in India are deeply alarming, with violence by husbands against wives being disturbingly prevalent. Nearly two in five, which means, (37%) married women have experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands. While the prevalence of spousal violence differs based on the level of education attained by either spouse, it remains a pervasive issue. Notably, 12% of married women who have completed twelve or more years of education have faced such violence, compared to 21% of women whose husbands possess a similar

level of education. One aspect that often astonishes Western readers is that while higher education reduces the likelihood of abuse, it does not eliminate the risk. Even highly educated women, married to equally educated men—such as the university professor in this book—are not immune. No one is.

Violence practiced against women is not accidental, it is structural and systematic because it is a very prominent medium to run this patriarchal system. And every unjust system is executed by this very aspect. This staggering statistic underscores the systemic nature of patriarchy, which not only perpetuates inequality but also results in tangible harm, depriving individuals—both men and women—of their right to dignity, freedom, and emotional well-being. Thus, dismantling patriarchal norms is not solely a women's issue but a societal imperative that demands collective introspection and structural change.

Male chauvinism reinforces the internalization of patriarchal norms in society. The abusive husband in *When I Hit You* exemplifies how deeply ingrained patriarchal socialization fosters male entitlement. Raised in a society that privileges men and conditions them to see women as subordinates, he internalizes a sense of superiority that manifests in his need for control over his wife.

Kamla Bhasin argues that this entitlement is instilled from an early age, as boys are taught to dominate while girls are encouraged to submit. The husband's academic background and leftist ideology do not protect him from these patriarchal influences; rather, they provide him with an intellectual justification for his oppressive behavior. He believes that his wife's role should align with his expectations, and when she asserts independence, he perceives it as a direct challenge to his authority. This effects every decision of the protagonist of the novel which is clearly evident in the following passage:

I begin by wearing my hair the way he wants it: gathered and tamed into a ponytail, oiled, sleek, with no sign of disobedience. I skip the kohl around my eyes because he believes that it is worn only by screen-sirens and seductresses. (Kandasamy 5)

While the husband exudes dominance, his need for control is rooted in deep-seated insecurity. Psychological studies on abusive relationships suggest that many perpetrators struggle with low self-esteem and a fragile sense of masculinity, leading them to assert control through coercion and violence. In *When I Hit You*, the husband's insecurity becomes apparent in his need to isolate his wife, dictate her intellectual pursuits, and undermine her confidence. This is evident in the following passage:

This(laptop) is going to stay here, he says. Only the two of us are going on this trip. We are going to my village, to meet relatives, to attend a marriage, to stay with my mother. I do not want you to sit there and keep typing your essay when there are important things to do. Should I remind Writer Madam that she is also a wife ? (Kandasamy 76)

His abuse is not simply about power but about compensating for his own vulnerabilities. This aligns with Chris Weedon's argument that patriarchal dominance is not only maintained through direct physical force but also through psychological tactics that erode a woman's autonomy and self-perception.

One of the most stealthy consequences of patriarchy is its ability to inflict profound psychological trauma on women, stripping them of their agency and self-worth. In *When I Hit You*, the protagonist endures relentless gaslighting, humiliation, and physical violence, all of which contribute to her deepening sense of alienation and despair. The psychological manipulation she experiences is not incidental but a deliberate strategy used by her abusive husband to assert control over her thoughts and emotions. Over time, she internalizes his criticisms, blaming herself for the abuse—an all-too-common phenomenon among survivors of domestic violence. The emotional and psychological consequences of patriarchy extend beyond the individual, affecting women's mental and physical well-being in profound ways. Constant exposure to stress and abuse can lead to chronic anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms such as hair loss and skin disorders. The protagonist's mother, though sympathetic to her daughter's suffering, echoes societal attitudes that minimize the impact of patriarchal oppression, instead offering superficial solutions to deep-seated issues. This is evident in the following passage:

'Stress. Stress can have any reaction on the body. Stress is what's making your psoriasis worse. Skin and hair. That's the first level where stress operates. When my daughter was having a bad time—yes, in that marriage—you cannot imagine what happened to her hair. What can I say? Distance yourself from the stress. Do breathing exercises. Learn to be relaxed.' (Kandasamy 5-6)

This response, while well-intended, exemplifies how deeply ingrained patriarchal conditioning can be. Instead of acknowledging the structural roots of gendered violence, the mother suggests that stress management techniques—rather than leaving the abusive marriage—are the solution. This reflects a broader societal pattern where women are conditioned to endure suffering in the name of marriage, family, and societal expectations.

Internalized patriarchy leads women to become enforcers of their own oppression. Kamla Bhasin, in *Understanding Gender*, argues that one of the reasons patriarchy persists so effectively is because women themselves become enforcers of its norms. This internalized patriarchy is evident in the protagonist's interactions with her mother, who believes that a woman's ability to endure hardship is a measure of her worth. The mother's advice to "adjust" rather than leave her husband highlights how patriarchal structures are reinforced not only by men but also by women who have internalized these values. This is very much evident in the following passage:

So, when she begins to talk about the time that I ran away from my marriage because I was being routinely beaten and it had become unbearable and untenable for me to keep playing the role of the good Indian wife, she does not talk about the monster who was my husband, she does not talk about the violence, she does not even talk about the actual chain of events that led to my running away. That is not the kind of story you will be getting out of my mother, because my mother is a teacher, and a teacher knows that there is no reason to state the obvious. As a teacher, she also knows that to state the obvious is, in fact, a sure sign of stupidity. (Kandasamy 3)

This normalization of suffering within patriarchal societies creates a vicious cycle. Women are socialized to see endurance as a virtue, and any attempt to resist or escape is met with societal backlash. In *When I Hit You*, the protagonist realizes that leaving her husband means more than just leaving an

individual—it means rejecting the deeply ingrained beliefs that dictate a woman's place in the world. This is not an easy decision, as she is made to feel that she is failing not just her husband but also the institution of marriage itself.

Patriarchy maintains control over women's voices through silencing and erasure. Another significant way patriarchy sustains itself is by silencing women and erasing their experiences. The protagonist's husband does not just physically abuse her; he also seeks to control her intellectual and creative expression. As a writer, she finds that her voice is stifled under his authoritarian rule. He dictates what she should think, what she should write, and even what she should believe. This suppression of her intellectual freedom is just as violent as the physical abuse she endures.

There is no reason why you should be on Facebook. 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 peep show, but I'm a revolutionary. I cannot let you endanger me. (Kandasamy 50)

Chris Weedon, in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), highlights the crucial role of language in shaping identity and power. According to her, patriarchal discourse exerts control by dictating the narratives women have access to, ultimately influencing how they see themselves and restricting their autonomy. This dynamic is evident in the protagonist's relationship with her husband, who systematically belittles her writing and intellectual ambitions. By doing so, he attempts to erase her identity as a thinker and creator, reducing her to a passive figure within their marriage. Weedon's perspective underscores that patriarchy is not only upheld through physical violence but also through more subtle yet deeply entrenched forms of ideological and linguistic domination.

Breaking the cycle of oppression requires resistance and the reclamation of power, with writing serving as an act of feminist rebellion. Despite the overwhelming oppression she faces, the protagonist ultimately reclaims her agency through writing. Her decision to document her abuse is both an assertion of self and an act of rebellion against the structures that sought to silence her. Writing becomes her tool of resistance, a way to rewrite the narrative of her life on her own terms.

This act of self-expression aligns with Chris Weedon's theory that language can be a site of subversion. By telling her story, the protagonist challenges the patriarchal discourse that seeks to render women passive and voiceless. Writing allows her to reassert her existence, refusing to be defined by the abuse she endured. Her words become a weapon against the system that tried to erase her, illustrating the power of self-narration as a feminist act. Furthermore, writing serves as a means of healing. By putting her experiences into words, she begins the process of reclaiming her identity. This is evident in the following lines:

I find poetry easier. I try to burn my anger in words. As I sit and type at my laptop, tears running down my face, I realize he is watching me intently. (Kandasamy 81)

The act of writing, then, is not just about documenting pain but about transforming it into strength. This reflects a larger feminist tradition where storytelling is used as a means of resistance, from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. In each case, writing is not just an act of expression but an act of defiance.

Rejecting victimhood paves the way for a new model of empowerment. Her escape from the abusive marriage is not just a physical departure but a symbolic rejection of patriarchal norms. Unlike conventional narratives where women are "rescued" by external forces—whether by male saviors, family members, or society—the protagonist in *When I Hit You* liberates herself. This self-determined escape is a radical act, aligning with feminist ideals of self-empowerment and autonomy. By choosing to leave on her own terms, she subverts traditional gender roles that cast women as dependent on men for survival. Her departure is not framed as an act of desperation but as an assertion of agency.

I am not the damsel-in-distress. I am not the picture of virginal innocence, someone whose parents hitched her to a man in an arranged marriage. This is the kind of thing that can happen to a helpless woman like that. (Kandasamy 219)

She refuses to be defined by the violence she has endured, instead reclaiming her identity as a writer, a thinker, and a survivor. This mirrors Kamla Bhasin's assertion that true empowerment comes from dismantling internalized patriarchal conditioning and asserting one's independence.

Challenging societal norms carries broader implications for resistance and social change. The protagonist's journey in *When I Hit You* is not just a personal story; it carries broader societal implications. Her decision to leave challenges the cultural and institutional frameworks that uphold gendered violence. By refusing to stay silent, she disrupts the expectations placed on women to endure, sacrifice, and adjust.

This act of defiance is particularly significant in societies where domestic violence is often normalized or excused. By rejecting her husband's control, she also rejects the broader cultural narratives that equate a woman's worth with her ability to conform to patriarchal expectations. In doing so, she paves the way for other women to question, resist, and reclaim their own agency. Her resistance is evident in the following passage:

It does not cross their mind that a woman who is being beaten is intimidated into feeling, believing, knowing that to ask for help from others will only put her at greater risk. In their questions and their responses I come to know that even those of them who have mastered the theory have not lived through the experience: they lack the insight that a woman being abused can mostly trust only one person for help. Herself. (Kandasamy 220)

These lines emphasize that the responsibility of adjustment and cooperation in a marriage should not rest solely on women. A woman's worth as a wife should not be measured by the extent of her endurance or sacrifices. Marriage is not a competition where the one who tolerates the most is deemed the best. Through her work, Meena Kandasamy advocates for women to develop a strong belief in themselves. She argues that only when women assert their agency and self-worth can the existing power dynamics in society be transformed.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchy and its deeply entrenched mechanisms of control. The novel exposes how patriarchal dominance operates at structural, psychological, and discursive levels to maintain male authority. Through the lens of feminist theorists such as Kamla Bhasin and Chris Weedon, this paper has explored how societal norms, language, and power structures reinforce gendered oppression, often making resistance seem impossible.

The protagonist's abusive husband is not merely an individual perpetrator of violence but a manifestation of toxic patriarchal conditioning. His actions reflect the societal belief that a husband has the right to dominate, discipline, and control his wife. Kandasamy highlights how such abuse is not just physical but also psychological and linguistic, aiming to erode the protagonist's sense of self. However, rather than submitting to this oppression, the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-liberation. Her resistance is not immediate but evolves through a process of self-awareness, inner defiance, and, ultimately, physical escape.

By reclaiming her narrative, the protagonist dismantles the foundations of patriarchal power that seek to silence and subjugate women. Her journey from victimhood to empowerment serves as a testament to the resilience of women who refuse to be defined by their suffering. *When I Hit You* does more than just portray the horrors of intimate partner violence—it calls for action, urging women to recognize their agency and resist oppressive structures. In a world where domestic violence remains pervasive, the novel stands as both an indictment of patriarchal oppression and a powerful call for feminist emancipation. Kandasamy's work underscores the necessity of challenging patriarchal ideologies and fostering a society where women's voices and choices are valued.

Works Cited

Bhasin, Kamla. *Understanding Gender*. Kali for Women, 2000.

Hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Atria Books, 2004.

Ilich, Veronica. *How Patriarchy Hurts Men Too*. Independently published, 2021.

Kandasamy, Meena. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Atlantic Books, 2017.

Self, John. "Meena Kandasamy: 'If I Was Going to Write My Life Story, I Would Condense That Marriage to a Footnote.'" *The Guardian*, 25 Nov. 2019.

Raval, Arya. "Patriarchy – An Argumentative Essay." 30 Aug. 2022.

Taneja, Preti. "*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife by Meena Kandasamy* – Review." *The Guardian*, 7 July 2017.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Blackwell, 1987.