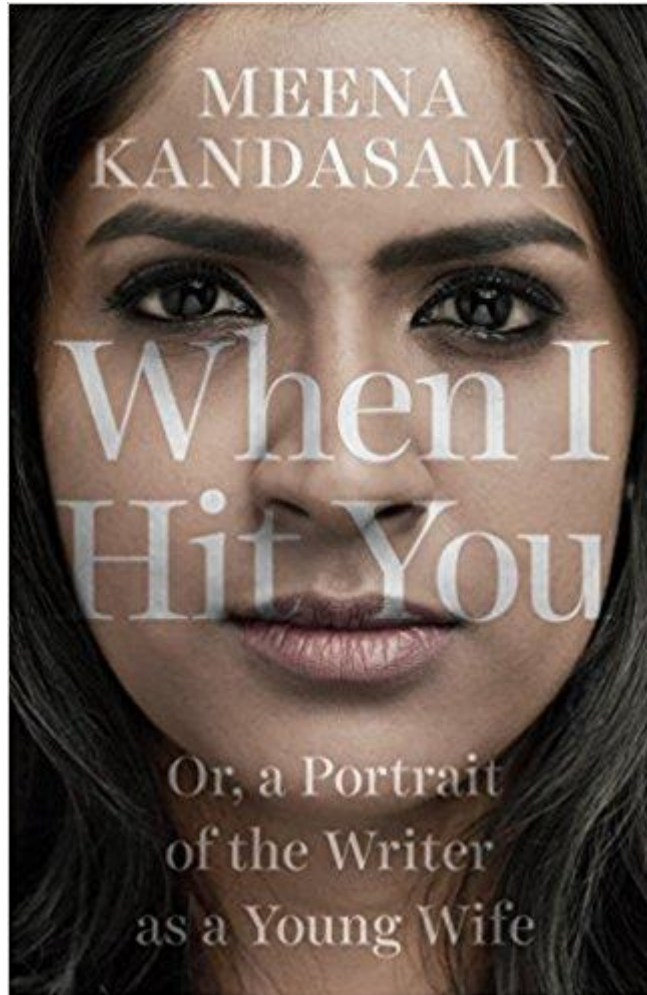


**Conquering Toxic Masculinity through Words:  
A Critical Study of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You***

**Ms. V. Koguilavardhini**

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**Abstract**

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You or the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017) is the survival story of a writer in seclusion. The nameless narrator is a woman in isolation after her marriage. This piece of work illustrates how gender-oppressive ideology and behaviour can be kept alive, irrespective of one's education, social class and political leanings. It warns people of

how a seemingly “successful” marriage could be violent, oppressive and abusive without anyone around being aware of its brutality. The novel proves that a once upon a time feminist can get trapped in an abusive marriage and domestic violence. She is informed time and again by her husband that it is her feminism that is the problem and not his abusive behaviour. At this juncture, she uses her only advantage as a writer, that is, her language to be free from the confinements. After battling the silence forced upon her, the speaker attains liberation through her fierce use of language which she uses sometimes to play along with the abusive husband in order to avoid possible violence and some other times to provoke him. To cope, to escape, she dons the role of a writer marking plot points from her own abusive marriage. Her words are her only shield weapons. *She ‘slips her words between his ribs like a stiletto knife’ as she says herself.* In the close of the novel the speaker portrays the new role of modern women in the contemporary society. In total the entire book travels around the life of the writer.

### ***When I Hit You or A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife***

Meena Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You or A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017) is the survival story of a writer in seclusion. *It is a dazzling and provocative novel of an abusive marriage. Seduced by politics, poetry and an enduring dream of building a better world together, the unnamed narrator falls in love with a university professor. Moving with him to a rain-washed coastal town, she swiftly learns that what for her is a bond of love is for him a contract of ownership. As he sets about reducing her to his idealised version of an obedient wife, bullying her and devouring her ambition of being a writer in the process, she attempts to push back — a resistance he resolves to break with violence and rape. At this juncture, she uses her only advantage as a writer (i.e.) her language to be free from the confinements. After battling the silence forced upon her, the speaker attains liberation through her fierce use of language which she uses sometimes to play along with the abusive husband in order to avoid possible violence and some other times to provoke him. To cope, to escape, she dons the role of a writer marking plot points from her own abusive marriage. Her words are her only shield weapons. She slips her words between his ribs like a stiletto knife.* When the novel reaches its end the speaker portrays the new role of modern women in the contemporary society. This paper aims to dissect and display the

male chauvinist consciousness that aims to overpower women in a domestic environment. In total the entire book travels around the life of the writer as a woman.

### **The Narrator**

The narrator, a young woman, who is also a writer moves with her newly married husband to an unfamiliar city where an assault on her tongue, mind and body begins. The novel begins with stripping of the narrator's autonomy after her marriage to a university lecturer, Marxist and a one-time revolutionary in south India who uses communist ideas as a cover for his own sadism. In the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Primrose Villa, her husband's place, as a place of kept secrets, an enclosed space of unheard and unvoiced secrets of her marriage. To escape the after-marriage difficulties she imagines her life to be a film in which she is trapped. She confesses she became an actress in real life even before she faced cameras. Her movement is restricted within the walls of Primrose Villa which becomes her setting to act. The language barrier limits her further to speak only the words of wifely domesticity when she shops for vegetables or buys cleaning products etc.

### **Initial Days of Marriage**

The First few days of marriage has its own charm as she suits her tastes and her dressing style according to his taste. She transforms herself into a blank paper which is ready to be written with new words and commands. Her husband is a man who is kind to strangers but can't extend his kindness to his wife. He frowns upon what he perceives as his wife's vacillating petit bourgeois poet-prostitute-female-writer ways. He finds mistakes with everything that she does. Like any coward, he uses small failures as an excuse to hit her. To manage the situation she satisfies her husband with a "requisite Humility" (Kandasamy 19) that makes his male mind satisfactory. She becomes the actress, the self-anointed writer and the cinematographer of her role. She was bestowed with a creative freedom when she falls out of her role of a wife. But that's just a temporary escape as the story, the situation and the role change every day, every hour and every time she sits and contemplates.

### **A Communist Lover**

Being a communist lover the writer-wife marries a communist-professor-husband who, after marriage, changes himself into a husband-teacher to teach his wife-student the ways of a typical, obedient wife. A few days into marriage the husband starts to shed his mask of a perfect husband when he burns himself in the kitchen as a preventive measure to get herself out of Facebook. The reason he gives is that he can't go along with the narcissism and exhibitionism of Facebook and says that his wife's "peep show" (50) will endanger him. In the next ten minutes she cuts off her lifeline to the outside world by deactivating her Facebook account. She commits a temporary "career suicide" (52) and bids farewell to the world with a final message which says that she was busy with a writing project. She pretends to live a writer's life masking her loneliness. Next torture comes in the form of sharing her email password with her husband and arguments follow continued by periodical checking of her mobile phone. He manipulates her into the surrender of her email accounts, the suspension of her Facebook page and he polices even her mobile phone.

### **Robbed of Her Identity**

She feels nauseous and robbed of her identity when she comes to know that her emails have been replied by her husband. So she decides to be open and give up her privacy so that her husband's world can revolve around her. She begins a pattern of obedience which fits well to his personality. As a result of this she was restricted to not share her phone number with anyone. Her parents do not realise the collapse of her world as a writer when they come to know this. The justification and denial by her parents further deepens the wounds inflicted on her. She's told it's for her own good and is instructed to be patient. She's advised to have a child to mend the brute. She fights for the rights of an imprisoned wife with silence and when she questions beatings and rapes follow, with everyday middle-class implements weaponised: the hose of the washing machine and the power cord for her laptop. Shame, pride and a society in which everyone from parents to police expects a woman to put up and shut up force the realisation that only she can save herself.

### **Empire Never Writes Back**

Teaching post-colonialism to escape the loneliness she realises that the empire never writes back because within the classrooms the oppressed are still the products of the same empire, carrying their bags of shame and sin. When she discusses this with her communist husband his interpretation is different. He says in the past the ‘whores’ are the links between the coloniser and the colonised but today the writer who writes in English, who is the link, the bridge is the ‘whore’. She is stopped from preparing her articles saying that she is not allowed to be a writer-whore. He stresses on that he owns her and she has to follow his wishes. Her current situation makes her hesitate even to make a call for the fear of being discovered midway.

### **Reduced to Nothing?**

The writer who gave up the job of a teacher to be a writer is now reduced to a position where she has nothing else to do. She is a writer just in front of the mirror as she has more important duties than writing (i.e.) household chores. Fear engulfs her as she finds herself incapable of writing even a single word. She compares herself to the women in her novels that are stronger than her and she feels ashamed. She finds an outlet for her thoughts by writing poetry. She buries her anger in words. According to her husband she imprisons their differences within a poem which becomes a poison and creates trouble for their future. But to her, it is the ointment which heals her and through which she can get over her problems of domestic oppression. He even finds differences between him writing poems and the poems written by her. He says that his poem struggles to move past his weaknesses and her poems are fuelled by hatred. So he becomes the poet of a marriage in which she is brutally beaten. ‘The institution of marriage creates its own division of labour’ (84) and the divider is the husband.

### **Writing Letters to Imaginary Lovers**

She was gifted with slaps for writing poems which marks her cheeks with painful memories. In order to escape the present hellish world of slaps, hits and torture by questions she starts writing letters to imaginary lovers to whom she discloses all her feelings and her unanswered questions. She gets the sheer pleasure of writing without his knowledge when she writes the letters even though they are temporary. She gets revenge by writing to the word lover again and again and rubbing salt on his wounded pride which reclaims her ‘right to write’ (88). The words in the

letters give wings to her lone injured self. It heals her and fills her with courage and makes her fly with word-wings. Language shapes her worldview and the worldview shapes her languages. Language makes her a prisoner. In Mangalore, Kannada language makes her a mere housewife oppressing her other self. Whereas English makes her a lover, a beloved and a poet and Tamil makes her a word huntress and a love Goddess. Whatever language is used by her husband to insult her, it always retains its charms. The wife swings on the pendulum of choice. One moment she is alive and another moment she is dead. She is kind of alive that feels dead. She transcribes her memories of love using her long forgotten words which makes her feel safe and loved. She indulges in the thought-crime, in the words of her husband, and never feels guilty.

### **Battered Wife**

Her image as a wife and a writer is converted into a battered wife who erases her memories as a writer when the evening stalks her doorstep. She functions as a writer only when she has a brief snatch of time in the make-believe situation of happy marriage. In the field of marriage the only place where she has her upper hand is the area of kitchen where she cannot be insulted or overcome by his hurtful words. In her tiny world called kitchen, the food overshadows the domestic insults and abuses. She becomes a part of the structure of a so called happy marriage which has its own forms and functions. She becomes like the peg on the clothesline, the gem clip on the table, the woman in the kitchen who transforms into the submissive between the sheets. The following lines make her to keep count of her days' routine:

*Three four*

*Sweep the floor*

*Three four*

*Do the chore*

*Three four*

*Come here whore*

### **Completely Freed?**

One fine day the husband sets the wife completely free by deleting all her emails erasing everything from her past. That's how a once upon a time feminist becomes a battered wife. The

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history of her past is gone forever which leaves her in a blank state; a state of nothingness. The narrator's only escape from the brutality and the curfews imposed on her is by writing letters. Though the narrator is a feminist she gets trapped in an abusive marriage.

At one point of time she is forced to climb the incredible sadness of silence. She conceals all her shame within the folds of her sari and censors her conversation by staying silent. She erases her individuality completely and punishes herself by staying silent when the words flood her with their presence and refuses to dislodge themselves from her tongue. She never understood violence until it happened to her. She never understood that sex is disgusting and painful until she was raped by her husband. Marital rape was a concept of savagery, of violence of violation and of disrespect. It revealed her that she was involved in a marital game of chess where she plays the King who was under constant threat by her husband who plays the role of drama Queen. She realises the sickness of a man's mind which allows him to take a woman for granted, after marriage. She understands the unwritten male supporting marital rule that a woman belongs to him after marriage and he is the owner and he has the right to do anything to her. She has no rights to talk or to say no for which she is punished in an instinctive, animalistic manner. The husband speaks in his brutal language which makes the woman physically mute. Her scream never reaches his ears to make him stop. She feels like a corpse which is devoid of all the senses when it is fed with rice. The husband uses rape as a weapon to tame her. It becomes a fight which makes it difficult for the woman to win. Her husband tries to control her body, but he will never control her mind. The narrator cringes when she realises how well language is used by men to insult women. She feels disgusted that her body is used as a spittoon where the repellent words are spat out hot from a man's mouth. She tries to reconcile her world with the linguistic theory she learnt.

It was your tongue in your mouth that forced me into silence. It was your tongue in your mouth that forced me into submission. And then, it was your tongue in your mouth that forced me. (173)

### **To Keep the Womb Empty**

The husband aims to fill her womb by forcing himself on her, but she bravely decides to keep the place of peace, the womb, empty. She transfers the emptiness of her life to her womb and

doesn't want to carry a man's child who beat her, raped her on a bed where a 'no' held no meaning and called her a whore. She uses her skills in the kitchen to secure her womb's liberty. So she begins a plot to escape. She becomes what he wants her to be: the good housewife. She cooks food that pleases him. She allows him sex when he wants it. She wears the clothes that he wants her to. She learns Kannada, as her husband does not speak the language of love. She also begins to use language to conquer his venomous masculinity. Since the writer in her is stronger than the woman, she begins her act with pity when he opens up about a comrade from his revolutionary days. She makes him fall apart emotionally, starts taking notes of his weaknesses and plays with him. She becomes a strategist and lets her writer self take in charge. She controls the narrative as she realises the basic notion of a writer.

### **Mounting Defiance**

Their brief existence of her temporary letters powers her mounting defiance. This power leads her to strip his manhood away when she explodes him with her word bombs that real men never hit women. She makes him impotent of acting on his threats and creates the space she always wanted. She becomes deaf to his detestable calling names and for the first time in her life after marriage, she pierces his male ego with her word daggers. She is not afraid of the consequences of talking which brings the end of her marital life with the man who has been rendered as a husband by the society. She takes everything that has been stripped off her by him- Passport, ATM, laptop, phone and most importantly her freedom. She leaves the miserable city at night shedding it like a second skin.

She transforms into an anti-fragile and unbreakable woman who is not afraid of men. She faces the disbelief, the shock and the shame from her kith and kin post marriage. She restores her courage and lost habits acting alongside like a black widow. Finally, she enters the world of books; the world which welcomes her with willingness; the world created by her in words; the world where she burrows word-tunnels to bury herself. She begins her writing career by writing a post-mortem analysis of her marriage for a magazine. She is astounded when she receives written statements from thousands of women all around the world saying that her pieces of writings reflect their stories, their voices and their tears. She slowly climbs up the ladder of life and wakes up to



social media picking every single thread of her life. She turns to the police, to the lawyers, files for divorce and answers the people who want a balanced picture of her past marital life. She starts meeting different people. She matures enough to understand everything and everyone; the difficulty of being a woman; a writer; of getting into an arranged marriage; of walking out of the marriage; of hearing the judgements of the judgemental people and not caring about them. Even after walking out of the marriage, forgetting everything seems a forlorn, unattainable dream. She is still caught in the web of bad marriage as she and her parents face the questions posed by the society post marriage. But still she likes the peaceful niceness of life sans domestic violence and the chokehold of marriage. She begins the process of forgetting and healing and indulges herself with her world made up of words, sentences and books.

### **Hiding Pain through Language**

She makes up a beautiful world with the dimension of her language and hides her pain. She hides her scars behind her neatness in dressing. She hides her real worn out physical self behind the body she makes up with words which is perfect and invincible, devoid of any scars. It's completely under her control. She wraps her body with words which is protected against the prying eye, against inspection and against the hands of others. Most importantly the written body is rape resistant. Her fingers capture poetry and song, music and dance and she hides the roughness of the girl's fingers spoiled by housework, behind words which trace butterflies in the air. Words allow her escape the real and cruel world; words give birth to another woman; the woman who was hidden inside the wife. Though she left his world she never forgot his words which buried a part of her soul. With the help of words she creates the woman at whom the society cannot spit or throw stones because she is completely made only of words on a page and her speech is heard by everyone in their own voice. Words released the strange, rebellious and ecstatic woman hidden inside her. Words gave her wings to fly at her will and smuggled her out of the oppressive situation, a situation where she struggled so hard and so long to wriggle out of the problems and found shelter within the words which gave her wings and courage to fly. She conjured a brave self out of words to take on the life of a woman afraid of facing her own reality.

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