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A Paradigm Shift in the Voice and Gaze: Gender Violence in *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy

Komalasikha Mallick[1], Dr. Debasisha Pati[2]

1. Lecturer, Department of English, SKCG Autonomous College, Paralakhemundi, Odisha, India
2. Associate Professor, Department of English and Modern European languages, University of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

From classical to contemporary works, Indian literature has a remarkable repertoire of stories, depictions, and narrations of gender violence, sexual abuse, and domestic crimes against women. What, however, is worth investigating in the evolution of the narratives of violence meted out to women is the 'paradigm shift' in the voice and gaze of the survivor-narrator, inaugurating a departure from silence to agency, from the masochist to the feminist, from the margin to the center. As the gender of the narrator of women-centric works has begun to change, storytelling is being informed by the female gaze and voice. Moreover, the recent #MeToo digital movement has turned around the whole discourse of gender-based crimes. Among the writers who have ushered in this shift in storytelling, a defining voice is Meena Kandasamy. Her work *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, a fictionalized account of her own abusive marriage, offers to change the way readers view the perpetrator vis-à-vis the survivor or fighter in a sexual assault. The novel may be seen as a groundbreaking endeavor toward challenging the stereotypical flawed or prejudiced style of storytelling that pushes readers to feel pity, intrigue, revulsion, or even vicarious attraction towards fictional survivors of gender violence, which is unimaginative and lacking in empathy. This paper attempts to discuss the 'paradigm shift' in the narration, arguing how Kandasamy replaces the voice and gaze of intense sexual brutality and domestic cruelty narrated by male perpetrators with the conversation on women's agency and their own physical and psychological realities. The study also seeks to celebrate the positionality and power of Kandasamy's voice as it breaks through domestic imprisonment to a world of freedom in the line of the celebratory postmodern catchphrase 'the personal is political'.

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CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉komal.sikha@gmail.com

Gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual assaults, and other crimes against women are malicious practices that have evolved and become normalized in Indian culture through the medium of patriarchy, visibly or invisibly, consciously or unconsciously. It is reported that thirty three percent of Indian women suffer from intimate partner violence, although only ten percent of these victimized women speak up against the perpetrator, or file complaints against them to the police or healthcare professional (Krishnamoorthy, Ganesh, and Vijayakumar 732–740). Be it fiction splashing out of a creative mind, or the narrator of a victim of gender-based violence or a powerful digital movement like #MeToo, women stand strong in the mainstream media to raise voices against gender-associated crimes. Works such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, A. Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, and Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* demonstrate how women navigate marginalization and reclaim their voices. Similarly, films such as *Fire* (1996), *Matrubhoomi* (2003), *Queen* (2014), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Thappad* (2020), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) portray Indian women redefining and reclaiming their identity in a globalised, modern world. Though a deluge of contemporary fiction in Indian literature is attributed to such relevant tales, when caught between the dualities of propriety, socio-cultural conditioning, and personal beliefs, the female victims in such portrayals often experience silence, shame, and blame after being subjected to male sexual or other forms of abuses.Worse, their records might have a massive chance of being hijacked for pornographic content. But with the appearance of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* on the map of Indian women's fiction, the paradigm has forcefully shifted in favour of the female victim or survivor, foregrounding her point of view and gaze that was lacking earlier in the narrative and expressive aspects of silent and complicated circumstances like marital rape. She gives herself full and powerful authorial agency in recording her personal experience of her own abusive marriage. Being an unconventionally experimental voice, she allows readers to meditate on her responses to shock, and to take actions against it. *The New York Times* reviews her book as "a novel that begs no response from her partner, no corrections from a lawyer, nor queries from a police officer about the final details of an argument here, a beating there" (Maher). This paper will explore these discursive changes in the ways sexual violence is narrated from the positionality of women's agency and monopoly on telling stories of sexual violence and power, and how the story is told and who gets to tell the story, with the enclosure of solid testimony

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

from *When I Hit You*. Additionally, the article seeks to celebrate the positionality and the authority of Kandasamy's voice transgressing domestic captivity to world of freedom and agency in the line of the powerful postmodern catchphrase 'the personal is political'. As Kuhn opines the "[r]esearch under a paradigm must be a particularly effective way of inducing paradigm change" (Kuhn), this paper professes to reflect the tectonic shift in the discourse of gender violence through narrative analysis, powerful style and forceful language of Meena Kandasamy.

> "My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips, My Sita climbs up on a stranger's lap.
> All my women militate. They brave bombs, belittle kings, take on the sun,
> take after me." (Kandasamy, ch. 3)

The title, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, is inspired by James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which marks his debut novel centered on the formative years of a young man, essentially reflecting his alter ego. In a similar vein, this story explores the experiences of a young wife as she navigates the early phases of her marriage. The unnamed protagonist shares her journey through an intense romance that leads to marriage with a Marxist scholar. However, what begins as a hopeful partnership rapidly converts into a disturbing account of domestic violence and marital rape within just four months of their union. In search of job prospects, separating from their family and support groups and entering a different social and cultural milieu where they face language barriers, the circumstances slightly make the way for increasing violence. In a setting that often demands women to be compliant and voiceless, the narrator's truthful portrayal of intimate partner abuse situates Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* as an extraordinary and compelling feminist retort to those who have faced gender-based violence.

Thomas Kuhn in his classical work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), promulgated the concept of 'Paradigm' which can be said to be a dominant or standardized worldview. He explains: "[a]ll the significant breakthroughs were break-withs old ways of thinking" (Kuhn). In the exploration of Indian women's narratives, resilience emerges as a response to systemic patriarchal oppression and violence. In patriarchal India, women face innumerable physical and sexual vulnerabilities, both in the domestic and the public sphere, including homes, workplaces, parks, schools, universities, and public transportation, among others. The violence against women ranges from verbal abuse and eve-teasing to sexual harassment, battery, acid attacks, and rape. Despite the personal/systemic challenges, women's narratives in fact and fiction often illuminate profound instances of fortitude and resilience.

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

This paper proposes to bring forth the monumental narrative shift in the voice and gaze that feature resilient women characters who fight the challenging circumstances and emotional traumas to regain a semblance of 'normalcy', through the particular contemporary work – *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy.

Kandasamy has endeavoured to explore and foreground that marital rape is no more silenced or normalized sense of gender violence represented in Indian fictions. It has become a norm to reflect in the struggles, victimization and resistance to the oppressive discourse through and aftermath of the trauma experience of the survivor. But Meena Kandasamy uses her own fire-filled brand of feminism to reconstruct past ideas around gender-based violence and assimilate new corresponding narrative style and language to shake the silence and create noise in the right direction. As Kuhn observes, "[a]lmost always the men who achieve these fundamental inventions of a new paradigm have been either very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change" (Kuhn).

"The number one lesson I have learnt as a writer: don't let people remove you from your own story. Be ruthless, even if it is your own mother," writes the unnamed narrator of Kandasamy (Ch. 1). However, Kandasamy acknowledges that writing the book was a difficult and challenging work. She says:

> One, my writing was based on my first-hand experience of the horror of marital violence – and it was something I desperately wanted to forget. So, writing it felt like the act of salvaging something from a burning house –something you wanted to actually destroy. Two, how do you talk about something that is so every day, so commonplace, so widespread – and weld into high art and literature? (Ch. 7)

Even long before it all came to paper, the idea of *When I Hit You* was conceived of raw hope, desperate defiance, and confident pledge to resist through creativity and originality. Speaking about the novel, Paromita Chakrabarti observes:

> There is a point in the novel where the narrator says how she is thinking about writing the violence even as it is happening and how that holds hope for her, because writing means that she has already overcome it. In that sense, this book was being mentally written even during the marriage. But the actual writing started in the late 2012. (Chakrabarti)

For all the atrocities committed to and experienced by women, at the hands of their husbands – the narrative is explored from and informed by patriarchal perspectives: it is

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

accepted as women's responsibility. Not only does Kandasamy bravely face the intense scrutiny but also, she seizes the control of narration and describes her experience when she went to file complaint: "I went to the police in India. I had this nine-page complaint, literally everything that had happened to me. The officer was really kind and he said to me: 'You've written a novel!' she laughs" (Ch. 3). It was a representation of her personal journey, but she anonymized the narrator of the text to universalize the experience: she had realized that "feminist, outspoken, successful, loud" was no protection against violence (Self). The novel is critically acclaimed as daring, heroic, significant, brutal, heartbreaking, uplifting and shocking, and gained praises for its stories surrounding the central character, the form, and the manner it was told. With all her capacity, Kandasamy tries to gain control of her survivor-narrator: "[w]ho is the narrator? Who is allowed to tell the story?" (Ch. 6)

The novel not only recounts the events with increasing intensity but also explains the fullness of narrative control by the author as the story progresses. Kandasamy proficiently views her distressing account with shrill leftist humour. "And cut!", she surprises, visualizing her life in a movie-making process: "I am the wife playing the role of an actress playing at the role of dutiful wife. For a movie that will never be made and never hit the screen," the protagonist expresses, "I have already prepared the publicity material" (Ch. 2)

Her creative vision in the film, "TWELVE ANGRY MEN (IN BED)", depicts a young, avant-garde writer being enlisted by her controlling husband to advocate for a Communist Revolution. He innocently accepts that sexual relations encompass more than mere physical interaction; believing he is instructing ideology to his erratic and unruly wife, he inoffensively brings eleven furious men to their shared bed each night, reducing his own status to an object of affection in front of her. At times exciting and at others dull, the presence of Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Edward Said, Gramsci, Žižek, Fanon, and the iconic Che Guevara proves detrimental. The writer soon recognizes that as she transforms herself, the underlying realities remain unaffected. In an attempt to rescue her marriage, she sarcastically adopts the guise of an intellectual. By pretending ecstatic engagement in discussions about the principles of The Second International (The Socialist International) or rejecting postmodern notions of deconstruction, she navigates this complex landscape with ease. This parody intertwines lofty intellectual escapades with mundane domestic life, featuring twelve irate men and one captivating writer who is scheming to break free from their ideological grasp. With bold performances and dialogue that oscillate between humour and horror, this comedic spectacle promises to disrupt our awareness through delight.

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

An analysis of Kandasamy's engagement of stylistic elements, chiefly repetition, reveals the narrator's belief that every usage holds narrative implication. The risk of desensitization is contradicted by her resolution to be spirited and bluntly candid. Her writing journey progresses into the themes of desire, abuse, and trauma. *When I Hit You* appears to be Kandasamy's answer to this predicament. Brilliantly, Kandasamy combines chapter epigraphs from famous feminist authors such as Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, and Elfriede Jelinek ("art creates the / suffering in the first place" (Ch. 5)), thereby linking herself to feminist voices that looks beyond class, caste, race, or culture, and even linguistic divisions. This method aids in challenging the declaration owned by the novel's abuser that the boldness of Indian female writer crafting in English resembles the shamelessness of prostitute or tawaif. She establishes that writing may serve as her shelter— still Kandasamy battles with the question: "how could I open up to strangers who buy the fiction performed for their benefit?" (Ch. 8).

Kandasamy studies a distinct form of deadly masculinity common in India. In a few succinct and amusing pages, she summaries a line of sexual suppression that extents from Gandhi to the current prime minister, eventually relating to the narrator's first love— an alluring leader who openly renounces her existence and strong-arms her into marrying her abuser. In this context, public celibacy is represented as crucial for attaining virtuous status; as Kandasamy aptly states, "to ejaculate was to emasculate" (Ch. 6). Regardless of their political beliefs, Indian politicians are projected to uphold the image of bachelorhood, while women suffer subjugation.

Viktor Shklovsky's essay from 1917, titled "Art as Technique" (also known as "Art as Device"), denotes an important point in Russian Formalism, where the focus on art departed evidently from conventional mimetic or realist perspectives. The concept that the goal of art is to alter reality rather than merely imitate it has since become an essential aspect of fiction theory. However, this impression, along with several forms of formalism and surrealism, has not been well-received within the broader context of Indian literary scholarship, mainly concerning victim-survivor narratives. But there seems to be a large shift happening with Kandasamy's presence. She has heralded a movement of her own. It is exemplified by the powerful and lyrical: "I am the woman who is willing to display her scars and put them within exhibition frames" and "To stay silent it to censor all conversation. To stay silent is to erase individuality" (Ch. 9).

This paper also underlines narratives that recognize the typical human cognition in fascinating ways, suggesting a connection to the "out there" stories found in imaginary fiction.

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

For instance, it examines how one observes imaginary worlds and relates to fictional characters. Earlier, there has been inadequate focus on the prospect of fictional narratives to inspire our minds to participate in activities beyond their normal patterns. However, this outlook is increasing and shifting. As consciousness grows in how fiction can prompt unusual thoughts, there is also a broader acceptance of estrangement while sharing personal experiences publicly. Kandasamy is particularly unreserved about this topic at a time when women are encouraged to share such narratives as a means of healing from trauma. The goal is for these stories not to dictate their identities or define their lives. As she says: "[b]eing a writer is now a matter of self-respect. It is the job title that I give myself…" (Ch. 7)

Analyzing further, it presents a more disheartening scenario when both the men in her life, her father and her husband, intimidate her inclination toward creativity and freedom. As Virginia Woolf in her influential and widely accepted treatise, "A Room of One's Own", has delineated that a woman must possess 'privacy' and 'freedom' in order to write something. Without a sense of independence, it is impossible to aspire to be creative with a pen. Before marriage, the girl observed the university lecturer, who captivated her with his discussions on contemporary issues, as her true hero. They had even talked about their future together; however, after they married, she recognized that what she perceived as a loving bond was, in his eyes, simply an agreement of possession. She also came to realize that her husband aimed to transform her into an idealized version of a submissive wife by limiting her access to social media platforms, like Facebook, ultimately stifling her aspirations of becoming a writer.

The #MeToo movement is a global social and awareness campaign against sexual harassment and abuse, which received global acknowledgement in 2017 after actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag following news reports about Harvey Weinstein. Although the phrase was coined earlier by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to support survivors, the 2017 viral moment made it a global rallying cry for people to share their experiences. The movement has led to cultural shifts, legal and policy changes, and consequences for many powerful individuals accused of misconduct. To Kandasamy, Facebook was a brilliant medium of resistance. She acknowledges the impact of Facebook in her writing aspirations: "Facebook helps me promote my work, gives me news, keeps me in news, keeps me in the loop of the literary scene, allows me to have an online presence which is pivotal if I do not want to be forgotten in a freelance world" (Ch. 4). Thus, it probes into Kandasamy's contemporaneous narrative panache, keeping in pace with the changing climate of literature and culture.

CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

Simone de Beauvoir claims that "[i]t is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life" (Beauvoir 69). In that respect, Kandasamy's story serves as a clarion call for women to retrieve their agency and question systemic and nationalized oppression. It demands a reinterpretation of power, resistance, and the resilience of women operating in patriarchal frameworks. Kandasamy is able to incorporate special writing devices to mirror the structures and consequences of gender violence, and trauma on the mind and body, which this memoir explores. This narrative goes on to vividly describe the abuse tactics, the use of control, isolation, and manipulation, the abuser uses when trying to cut off communication with the outside world and control her writing, all of which serve to underscore the mental and creative impacts of the abuse. The novel discovers how the narrator's rise from victimization to survival is indistinguishably linked to her identity as a writer. She decides to write her own story, but by writing it down secretly she practices this as one of the most powerful forms of resistance: through it all she is able to process the trauma of her past, regain her voice, and, with the right kind, emerge on the other side of things as well. As Taneja observes, "[i]t screams from its demure outerwear, refusing to be silenced in its search for love. The reader is left with the impact and implications of that, and the ideal of servile Indian femininity is in tatters at last" (Taneja). Kandasamy makes use of her writing in every step of her work to translate personal and collective suffering into a statement as a social activism and a forceful plea for empathy, awareness, and social change.

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CONTACT Komalasikha Mallick ✉ komal.sikha@gmail.com

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