



**The Body as A Battleground: Corporeal Feminism, Domestic Violence, and
Autonomy in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You***

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Abstract:

This paper looks at Meena Kandasamy's book *When I Hit You: Or A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* from a point of view. It focuses on how the husband destroys the wife's sense of self and treats her like a body he can control and hurt. The study draws on feminist ideas about the body and its connection to our sense of self. It shows how the book is like a story that tells us about the abuse of women as an attack on both their bodies and minds. This attack is against the woman's will.

The analysis views the body as a place where women fight for their rights. It draws on Butler's ideas about how our bodies can be harmed and on Grosz's ideas about how our bodies are part of who we are. The husband uses ways to take away the wife's sense of self, including controlling what she says and does, and being violent with her. The wife starts writing to regain control of her life. This is a way for her to regain her independence. The story is part of a movement in which women resist being treated badly and view their bodies as places where they fight for their rights. Meena Kandasamy's book *When I Hit You* is about the wife's fight to be herself and to be free from her husband's control and abuse.

Keywords: Corporeal Feminism, Domestic Violence, Gendered Body, De-intellectualization, Feminist Resistance.

Introduction

Kandasamy's book, *When I Hit You*, which came out in 2017, is about a woman's experience in an abusive marriage in India. The story shows how her sense of self slowly disappears because of her husband's abuse. It is about a writer who gets cut off from friends and family and is violently hurt by her husband. The writer is married to a college teacher who's also a Marxist intellectual.

The husband starts using his ideas to control her. Every part of her life, like what she says does for work and who she talks to, becomes a problem. The story is based on what happened to Kandasamy. It is written in a way that could apply to any woman. This makes it a strong feminist book where the woman's body is like a war zone. To understand the book's message, you have to see that the war zone is not just physical. The husband's violence is ongoing. He uses his smart ideas to justify hurting his wife. He is not a mean man who hates women; he is someone who talks about revolution but actually believes in old-fashioned male-dominated power. This mix is important to the book's message. Kandasamy shows that in India today, men can still be traditional and male-dominated. They can also use left-wing ideas like dialectical materialism, anti-caste politics and anti-imperialism to sound smart. The book shows this through the husband, who quotes Mao, discusses party theoreticians, and lectures his wife about giving up her individuality. At the time, he locks her in the house, checks her phone, and hits her if she does something wrong. The book becomes a tool for analysing feminist issues on the left that do not challenge their own male-dominated ideas. The husband's actions and words are a contradiction. This is what makes the book's message strong.

The writer Kandasamy makes it evident that patriarchy can manifest itself in various ways in India. Rather than a passive victim, the anonymous narrator acts as an aware observer and documenter of her own annihilation. Even from the very first page of the novel, she knows, with an

unemotional, almost clinical understanding, the techniques utilised to bring about her end. She knows the disparity between her husband's public and private faces and has documented the compliance or collusion of his acquaintances and co-workers. She also analyses how her own dedication to becoming an equal spouse, along with her refusal to allow the Marxist man to conform to her stereotyped image of a wife-beating individual, works against her. It is this very knowledge that endows the novel with its devastating and politicised essence. The woman finds herself imprisoned not out of ignorance or innocence, but owing to the simple fact that she is unable to instantly realise that her husband's ideology was a deception. And it is because of the fact that the systems surrounding her-police, legal system, and even her relatives-are totally inadequate to facilitate her escape from a well-educated and connected husband.

Though *When I Hit You* continues a history of women writing about domestic abuse, from the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" to the testimonies of Indian Dalit women, it is unambiguously an Indian novel. While Kandasamy happily acknowledges the rich lineage of women authors who write about domestic terror, she makes clear that her story is firmly grounded in the specific context of modern India, one shaped by Hindu nationalism, dowry-related violence against women, state failure to protect women, and the isolation of women whose marital partners have different social standings than they do. The Marxist ideology of her character's husband is not an excuse for violence but rather a tool through which he can trivialise her grievances, referring to them simply as "bourgeois sentimentality" and framing himself as her revolutionary trainer. In *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy does not merely describe a dysfunctional marriage; she systematically interrogates the intersection of ideology, intimacy, and lack of accountability that turns hell into reality and burning writing into the only way out.

Methodology and Research Gap

This analysis uses the theoretical framework of corporeal feminism. It relies heavily on Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and Judith Butler's theorisation of corporeality, vulnerability and agency (*Bodies That Matter*, 1993; *Gender Trouble*, 1990). Corporeal feminism reclaims the body and its political dimensions, challenging mind-body dualisms and seeking to theorise power inscribed on the flesh. The methodology involves a close reading of selected narrative passages from Kandasamy's text, followed by consideration of the thematic concepts of the husband's strategies of de-intellectualisation, bodily isolation, and violence. Kandasamy's novel is situated within recent theorising of feminist trauma literature (Caruth 1996; Cvetkovich 2003; Gibbs 2024) to explain the inscription of embodied trauma into narrative. In spite of the media (Taneja 2017) and early critical reception that the novel has gained, little academic attention has been given to de-intellectualisation as a form of corporeal domestic violence, or to the wife's physical assault on her own language, speech and intellect by her husband. Moreover, very few readings of Kandasamy herself (including her later works and comparisons with other South Asian feminist life-writing) have been published. This paper argues that Kandasamy offers a new contribution to feminist trauma literature through her depiction of the corporeal as opposed to physical act of violence of domestic abuse, and the writing of the body as an embodiment of retrieval. Kandasamy is therefore placed within a feminist literary canon alongside writers such as Audre Lorde and Kamala Das, who, like Kandasamy, see the body as a text for the inscription of political experiences.

De-intellectualisation as a Strategy of Control

It is clear from the very beginning of the novel that the husband's Marxism is nothing but a flimsy cloak of sadism. Taneja notes "the opening phase: a stripping of the narrator's autonomy by this

Marxist lecturer, who uses communist rhetoric as a cover for his own sadism" (Taneja). They move to a town where the wife doesn't know the local language, and therefore is already dislocated from her immediate environment. They never discuss anything public or anything in which she does not participate by cooking, doing the dishes, complaining about house chores, and the like: the list of topics is no more and no less than a list of items to buy. The suppression of her speech foretells her absence as a subject of thought. Early on in their marriage, he does not allow her to have any independence at all - to work at his university and to lecture only under his name. When his students complain that she does not look good enough, he blames her.

These seemingly small arguments soon illustrate an enormous power differential between them. Due to his status as a professor and as a politically revolutionary figure, he reduces dinners into philosophical disputes and mocks her intelligence and her feminist viewpoint by suggesting ordering chow Mein is the closest her cunt will ever come to Maoism (Kandasamy 45). He seeks to strip her of the intellectual power she holds through the use of words and insults; in fact, he attacks her verbally as he reduces her intellect. In his use of words and insults, Kandasamy shows how this woman's intelligence is undermined. Not only is she humiliated through verbal abuse, but Kandasamy points out that her husband deliberately isolates the narrator as soon as she is married; she is removed from all of her personal and social support systems and work. She is forced to delete her Facebook profile and is instructed to give him her email password, while he insists on handling all correspondence himself. He deletes or intercepts anything to or from her emails using both their names and begins strictly monitoring all of her professional communications by giving him her email address; overnight, her academic and professional ties were broken, as her communication with others was drastically cut off. He limits her computer access to just three hours per day.

He uses other means to suffocate her mind. He strictly regulates speech, dictating to her which words she may or may not speak or read. He insists that she gets permission before she writes something to anyone who is not inside their own home (Kandasamy 102, for example). After she writes an imaginary love letter to an ex-lover, he reads it before she does, and he criticises and shames her for her thoughts and desires (Kandasamy 102). He holds her responsible for her career downfall and for all her failures. Each media form through which she attempts to give a voice to her experience only creates further silence about her and develops a narrative of her dissolving into nothingness as he asserts control: "I am losing my identity as a writer and as a person" (Kandasamy 67). Everything he does serves to strip the narrator's mind by constantly monitoring and isolating her. The silenced-wife trope is pervasive in the novel and is literalized at one point, where her external identity is constructed only "through the mouth my husband has chosen for me" (Kandasamy 89). By physically covering both her eyes and her mouth, he acts out an intentional symbolic gag, demonstrating visually that not only her mind and desire but her very physical body is no longer her own.

The Body as Literal Battleground: Physical and Sexual Violence

The transition from intellectual dominance to bodily domination follows from the above discussion of her being mentally subjugated. Her body becomes the battleground on which she wages her marriage war. The writer, Kandasamy, details how her battering evolved from the black and blue bruises, to the thrashing, then to the savaging, which she states all served the purpose of violating her bodily integrity; "All the verbal coercion, administrative bullying that he could unleash had been used, and when they failed, he resorted to rape and beatings. Domestic utensils-the washing machine hose, the cord of the laptop-were converted into implements for inflicting bodily injury. At one point, he used the cord of his laptop to strike the woman's legs. At another, he dragged her

along the floor by her hair" (Kandasamy 134). From tools of normal, daily household purposes, they were transformed into tools for inflicting bodily injury.

The bodily violation now also has a sexual dimension, serving as a corrective measure. The wife is made to have sex when the husband desires it and punished for pretending. She states that, with the rape that she describes, the husband ordered her to feel no pleasure, that her body should become "nothing to me. A bag of meat" (Kandasamy 156). Such objectification and dehumanisation of her body serve as the final element of the de-intellectualisation; the narrator's mind becomes compartmentalised, and her body is a mere appendage to please the man's ego and demonstrate her own utter helplessness.

He also employs further acts of psychological violence, which also ensure his construction of her depersonalization. His assault on her body is also an assault on her mind, in which she is verbally raped. She experiences sexual humiliation by his abuse of her past sexual experience, which serves as a form of validation for his sexual assaults on her. His horrific verbal description of her vagina as "spare change falling out" (Kandasamy 112) serves to reduce her sexuality to something so degraded and repulsive that it acts as an offence against it. Meanwhile, his boast of her unplanned pregnancy, "it is time for her to have my baby" (Kandasamy 168), seems to serve the purpose of turning her body into some kind of vehicle that will produce male offspring for him. The wife is not helped at any level; her family members and neighbours have issued instructions to "put your head down" (Kandasamy 73) to endure their suffering silently; their directives offer him justification and impunity.

The union of sexual and physical dominance leaves the body of the wife as a site of vulnerability as well as a site of resistance. In Judith Butler's words, "the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency, and it is the site where doing and being done to become equivocal" (Butler,

Bodies That Matter 66). The woman's body in its entirety suffers because of the physical violence done to her; her raped body and bruises are physical evidence of the violation she is undergoing, but they also become a scene for struggle. Each bruise inflicted upon her body is a political token of her subjection, but also a reminder of her power of endurance. As Gibbs noted, it is 'contemporary feminist writing on trauma [which] often represents the female body not simply as the scene of trauma but as its fundamental stage' (Gibbs 89). Kandasamy participates in this genre. Though pain is present as an evident subject of her physical abuse, it is, nevertheless, of paramount importance, and of political significance as it clearly conveys that she is, and has the power to claim that she is, a body.

Corporeal Feminist Theory and the Reclamation of the Body

This emphasis on the body aligns with corporeal feminism. Corporeal feminism is a deliberate rejection of mind/body dualism and an emphasis on the material body as a site of power contestation. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, writes that feminist ethics must address 'the flesh, not just abstract ideas' (Grosz 22). The body in Kandasamy's novel is both the site of abuse and the site of resistance. The narrator's body is the site of her violation, sexual and otherwise, that "writes trauma onto the flesh" as the scholar Sarah Fenstermaker argues it is, echoing the feminist scholarship about the systemic violence inscribed upon the female body, and at the same time it is also through the narrator's body that she lays claim to herself, through the violence required to resist her abuse and through the flesh of writing, a deeply embodied practice, where she works to define herself in her own terms.

Judith Butler's idea of vulnerability is a useful framework for approaching the body in the novel. Butler argues that the subject is 'given over from the start to the world of others', that 'the body is socially formed, eventually becoming the body that I lay claim as my own only with

uncertainty' (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 70). The narrator's body is given to the male body/eye of the husband from the beginning of her marriage, and the struggle is on the level of the body to understand her subjectivity and to claim ownership of her own flesh. Butler writes that the skin is vulnerable 'to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence' (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 72), and this is precisely what the narrator's husband does. The body of the narrator is the subject of his visual gaze, his ownership, and he will only recognise physical abuse as an event that inflicts damage on the flesh of the woman, not as an act that challenges her subjectivity and agency.

Contemporary theorists of trauma discuss "language attempting to recuperate bodies as a site of writing where language cannot do the job itself: telling of felt, bodily pain".¹² That is exactly what Kandasamy is doing: giving precedence to the sensation, to pain felt in the body. Through the translator's creation of metaphorical fragments and narrative from experiences of violation, the narrator provides an alternative kind of writing to what verbal narrative perhaps aims to cover up. Thus, writing trauma on the body in opposition to the husband's imposition of female subjection through obedience also requires the reader "to ask for survivors' agency and subjectivity" (Gibbs 94) through the idea that remembering bodily pain and sensation implies a recognition of one's own subjectivity.

Feminist literary history also places this text in the embodied trauma theory, which rejects analysis of female suffering solely on a psychological level and attempts to re-place the analysis of women's suffering in embodied patriarchal oppression. Thus, in this context, Kandasamy enters into dialogue with feminist mothers and mentors who write in a deliberately sensual, material, bodily style. For example, Audre Lorde, Luce Irigaray, Kamala Das, and Elfriede Jelinek, whose writings the chapter epigraphs cite, are equally obsessed with female embodiment in literature, so that we should understand the narrator's pain in relation to a history of women's bodily suffering

worldwide. Ultimately, within all the above frames of writing and theorising, while the husband intends to impose control on her body within the patriarchy of words, her narrative imposes a new politics of the flesh: embodiment.

Resistance Through Writing: Reclaiming Intellectual Autonomy

Despite having her own body methodically stolen away, the protagonist never loses her individual identity; throughout her torture, she has a life that is herself, a private one that belongs to her inner self, and the free spirit of her outer self. She manifests one of the most chilling ways she copes by composing letters of fiction written to invisible lovers when her husband is out, not to a specific invisible lover but to any that suit her, without fail, each and every time her husband leaves her alone. Although each of these letters, unwritten and undelivered, will be deleted when the husband comes home, every single one is a part of her mind's intellect; each one an example of her ability to continue thinking and feeling outside of the cage he has erected around her, so that every word is a moment of solace, coping and also control over her body prison (Kandasamy 145). She fights the imprisonment of her body by working her mind when there.

Writing, rather, becomes the enactment of bodily integrity restored. The narrator says in the novel that emerges from her post-husband writing experience, "He was the doctor, and I was the disease, and it was through marriage that I was becoming whole"²⁵. The narrator chooses to publish her story about her marriage. That she chooses to make a public spectacle of herself, her secrets and her trauma, is interesting given what Britt and Hammett have to say about trauma as cultural capital: "the act of bearing witness through writing transforms the survivor from a passive victim into an agent of narrative recovery" (Britt and Hammett 922). The disembodied body is made to speak in a way; her hands write, her voice finds life in the scratch of pen on paper.

Actually, writing is the body; writing is a wound being bandaged with blood: "Each stroke of the pen is blood in a wound being bandaged" (Kandasamy 210).

The writing becomes the narrator's intellectual counteraction to his de-intellectualisation. Instead of attempting to transform her into a "woman at whom society cannot spit or throw stones, because this me is a she who is made up only of words on a page" (Kandasamy 215), the narrator employs words to recuperate the ground lost, both bodily and imaginatively. By the end of the novel, when the narrator has left him and resolved to continue writing (her sanctuary, her escape), Kandasamy indicates that the mind cannot be vanquished by bodily violence alone; the metaphor of the body-as-battleground actually gets inverted. What had been a site of violence is reinvented as one of revitalisation.

Conclusion

In *When I Hit You*, the home is shown to be a site of patriarchal warfare waged on the body for dominance and women's rights. The systematic dehumanisation of the narrator's agency of speech, thought, and physical integrity in the narrative exposes the mutually constructed relationship between mental and physical torture. By attempts to de-intellectualise her by erasing her presence online and distancing her from his associates in his work and by forcing her to write of the kitchen and house-cleaning alone, he uses her physical person as his tool for the assertion of dominance by way of beating, sex and threats. The combined assault of his mind and body creates a distinct and influential space for contemporary feminist trauma narratives. Where the trauma inflicted upon mind and body is mutually inclusive and intertwined, and the former is already an assault on the latter because, for a woman-writer, the mind IS the body, and the attack on either constitutes an attack on both of them.

The corporeal feminist framework in which this manifests reveals an important transition toward the corporealization of trauma narratives: The body is increasingly framed in recent women's literature not simply as the site of trauma but as the site of its operation, argued Gibbs (Gibbs 89) and while heroines' body is depicted as both victim and resistance fighter, dignity and degradation, Kandasamy's insertion of intellectual labor in the body's resistance is a departure from the norm as it presents the journey to health not as magical by the help of therapy, law and family (which abandon her), but the recovery as writing - a process that is both intellectual (an act of writing, thinking, memory and imagination) and physical (an act of inscribing language through the hand on paper with great effort that becomes a ritual) that binds the violated body and reclaims the mind and this realization provides a fresh perspective in feminist critics' view of the body-trauma-creation link - how the body as an object becomes a subject of agency when the trauma on it becomes a source of narrative itself.

Judith Butler's argument that the body is 'always already in the world of others' but can be re-claimed, appears in the narrator's regaining possession of her body in writing; though not a miraculous tale of healing as it leaves her body marked with the physical manifestation of a lasting trauma and her capability for a loving, intimate relationship broken, the argument it posits is perhaps even stronger, which asserts that narration itself of experience and self-possession go hand in hand and scars never really fade. Avoiding the extremes of destruction and redemption, it presents a more pragmatic but powerful claim that writing is healing, not as erasing the scars but as re-appropriating it and taking ownership of her body even with the evidence of its desecration.

The metaphorical use of the body as a battlefield in the novel is evident in three ways. First, as a descriptive tool for the use of the wife's body by her husband for control and physical harm, leading to the existence of bruises and scars on her body. Second, as an analytical device in order

to present domestic violence not as a series of incidents, but as an aggressive form of invasion and conquest, where his attempts to colonise her very existence through violation of her physical integrity take the form of an offence to her body. Third, politically, in that by using her body as the site for a struggle against the oppression and dominance of male patriarchal dominance over her life, Kandasamy is making a statement aligning herself with a feminist praxis and criticism that has long emphasised that personal issues arising in the private sphere are equally public ones and a violation within the home is thus a social rather than personal affair. Above all else, the concept of the body as a battlefield works in the inverse as well; for if the body is indeed the battlefield, then its reconquest is possible and inevitable in the form of the wife's body, with its scars becoming a testament and her pain, a testimony and her pen the weapon against his futile attempt to make her body a blank space in the annals of her life.

The choice not to name the narrator is itself a particularly feminist decision to ponder. By deliberately excluding the narrator's name, Kandasamy avoids an auto/biographical reading the work might have invited with her own name and a carefully crafted fictitious personality. The nameless body instead stands for what the epigraphs, drawn from authors like Kamala Das, etc., seem to imply: a body that is communal, a single woman's experience of torture which is unique in its specifics but shared structurally in that it is the story of one million other women victims of torture, who lack the will or the power to voice their story. Hence, it is not an empty canvas, but a signifier of the innumerable other abused bodies out there, for taking possession of this single body through writing is but a preliminary step to the taking possession of all of them.

When I Hit You argues that the body does not belong to either the husband or society or to the self-deprecating voice in her head as a result of the mental torture she endures as a response to the physical abuse but belongs to the woman; an embodiment of a subjective woman's physical

struggle, where scars are a testimony and a pen is an object of ownership and where a woman not simply being a passive object being assaulted becomes an active subject reclaiming her body in a way prescribed by corporeal feminist criticism: by owning her bodily integrity in a world that strives to degrade it, Kandasamy's narrator becomes a living testimony that though body can be violated, it can also be reclaimed, for when healing is not an option, narration has to be. She rejects any extreme trajectory from devastation to divine redemption and proposes the more realistic and, arguably, potent argument that telling her story and writing herself into existence constitutes a recovery in its own right, regardless of whether the scars will ever fade away. This avoidance of extremes is what distinguishes *When I Hit You*; it is about survival without annihilation, speech without catharsis, and agency without denying pain.

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