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Resilience through Autofiction: The art of Writing Back in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*.

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Abstract

Postcolonial women writers often feature the issues and concerns faced by women located in specific cultural contexts. They come up with stories which retain their individuality even as they resonate with experiences from around the world. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) narrates one such story in which the protagonist finds herself marginalized within the society which turns a blind eye towards domestic violence and rights of a wife. This paper attempts to study how toxic masculinity and rigid socio-cultural values render the subject helpless and how the process of writing can be used to empower the voiceless. It also explores the use of auto fiction as an empowering narrative strategy.

Key Words: gender, patriarchy, trauma, resistance.

Introduction

Contemporary women writers give voice to the concerns and problems of the voiceless women who are caught in the quagmires of patriarchy, which in turn are fuelled by cultural norms and social acceptance. The marginalized are silenced and suppressed using unwritten socio - cultural norms. This becomes relevant, as gender-based violence, often within the ostentatiously protective walls of family, is a common phenomenon in many developing countries including India. Thus these social institutions become sites of oppression, marginalisation and injustice. The operation of socio - cultural forces are so subtle that even the educated and enlightened women are often brainwashed or forced to accept violence in multiple forms. Domestic violence is one such example where women are marginalized and traumatized within familiar domestic spaces. Critics like Veena Das have observed how violence is implicated in the ordinary and how it blurs the boundaries between the victim, the perpetrator and the witness in a shared social space (77). It is in this context that Meena Kandasamy's autofiction, *When I Hit You* which narrates the tale of a woman who survives marital violence, becomes significant. This paper attempts to study the trauma caused by toxic masculinity and rigid socio-cultural values and explores how the process of writing can be used to embolden the voiceless. It also looks into the use of auto fiction as an empowering narrative strategy.

Trauma and Resistance

Meena Kandasamy, the Indian writer, translator and activist has come up with several works focusing on feminism and anti-caste movement. Her work *When I Hit You* provides a moving account of the subjugation of the female subject by patriarchal values. It sharply criticizes the misogynistic yet highly accepted notion of the wife being a mere appendage to the husband. The book features an unnamed narrator who has an active and productive professional life until she marries the man she loved. Her husband is a university professor whose political ideals and literary views attract her in the first place. However, soon after the marriage, her husband begins to consider her as an object on which he has complete ownership. He robs the life out of her, through his attempts to reduce her into his own idealized image of a submissive wife.

He ridicules her writings and forbids her from putting her own life experiences into poetry. He equates her role as an Indian woman writer writing in English, as a prostitute who acts as a bridge between the colonizer and the colonized. She is isolated from her friends and colleagues through emotional blackmailing. All the while, a glittering veneer of blissful marriage is created for the sake of the outside world so that none of her friends and family is aware of her unhappiness and helplessness. When she attempts to resist her husband's demands, she is punished with physical violence. Societal expectations and parental pressure force her stay within the abusive marriage. According to WHO's study on violence prevention, "A variety of external and internal pressures are thought to maintain cultural and social norms. Thus, individuals are discouraged from violating norms by the threat of social disapproval or punishment and feelings of guilt and shame that result from the internalization of norms" (www.who.int). The woman here is being oppressed by the rigid cultural and societal structures. Her husband expects her to be good housewife who should even lack a presence. As Meena Kandasamy writes,

"I should be blank. With everything that reflects my personality cleared out. Like a house after a robbery. Like a mannequin stripped out of its little black dress and dragged away from the store window, covered in a black sheet and locked off in the godown" (16). The imagery used by the writer clearly projects the marriage as an aggressive intrusion which robs the woman of all her essence and reduces her to the role of a puppet with no self-will.

The narrator feels that she has lost her identity as she finds her name co-signed in her husband's mails to his students and colleagues. To make matters worse, he even answers her emails without her knowledge. She is asked to change her phone number to avoid roaming charges. And the new number is procured in the name of some unknown friend of his student. A three-hour long internet usage in his presence is rationed out to her. Though she is not encouraged to get a job, she is given the concession of handling his class on postcolonial literature. During her lecture, she is judged for her appearance and is ridiculed for her short hair left loose.

This incident leads to a discourse on women's hair and how it had been a symbol of wantonness in ancient times. During the colonial era, women with short, loose hair was often identified as the white man's prostitute. Even though the colonial masters have left for good, the remnants of the colonial attitude are still present in society's attitude towards women who doesn't conform to the norms. The short loose hair of the narrator is at loggerheads with society's expectation of a wife with long, well oiled, plaited hair. Ironically, it is revealed during a class on postcolonialism which seems to suggest that education is not enough to drive away certain skewed viewpoints nurtured by social and cultural conditioning.

The narrator's efforts to exert her identity are thwarted by her husband's insistence of marriage as a process which blends and binds together two individuals. Thus, marriage is projected as an institution which requires the total erasure of an individual's identity in order to please the dominant partner's interests and not to violate the cultural codes within a society. The narrator tries to resist her husband, he inflicts physical violence on her. This is in accordance with the age-old belief that when a woman screams in pain, the devil leaves her through her mouth. The narrator's husband assumes the role of a witch doctor and strikes her with power cords, leather belt and electrical cables. Thus, the narrator's husband becomes a metaphor for the age-old customs which aids the dominant forces to control and punish the marginalized and the powerless in the society. Force is used to instill fear within the woman and subjugate her. Later, her silent defiance is met with the torture of marital rape. Her sexuality is used as a tool to punish her and bring her into subservience. Kandasamy comes up with graphic description of marital rape to reveal the trauma of the victim and to mimic the way in which the brain receives the sensations and stores them as memories.

The issues of domestic violence and marital rape are clearly problematised in the novel. It throws light upon the victim's inability to respond or react against the atrocities committed against her body and self while being surrounded with rigid cultural codes. Theorists like Cathy Caruth has opined that trauma often causes an inability to fully comprehend or represent an experience (qtd. In. Mambrol). The narrator feels like a corpse when she is tortured by her own husband. She says: "How do I explain to anyone this savage rite? Where do I look for metaphors? How do I let another person know how it feels to be raped within a marriage? Death is all that I can think about when I lie there" (168). Here rape is used as a barbaric weapon to tame the resisting woman. Though the victim in question is an educated and liberated woman, societal stigma and cultural expectations keeps her silent. In an interview Kandasamy said: "Women ... when they are being hit, the violence is not just some momentary pain on their bodies, but it is something that not only evokes screams and shouts, but it also triggers thought, commentary, questions, unending spiral of reflection and above all theory." (Q & A with Meena Kandasamy)

The writer also tries to bring to the forefront the patriarchal values which force the women to endure much pain and hardships for a marriage to work. According to the WHO study on violence prevention, "cultural acceptance of violence, including sexual violence, as a private affair hinders outside intervention and prevents those affected from speaking out and gaining support. In many societies, victims of sexual violence also feel stigmatized, which inhibits reporting" ("Violence Prevention"). Judith Herman while talking about the women traumatized in sexual and domestic life says: "Society gives women little permission to withdraw or to express their feelings. In an effort to be protective, family, lovers, or friends may disregard a survivor's need to re-establish a sense of autonomy" (65). Her parents insist on patience and tolerance for the marriage to work. This becomes worse as her husband starts to play victim in front of her family and friends. She is forced to remain silent as silence, they say, is peace. She also analyses the psychology behind tolerating an abusive relationship as she says:

What makes a woman stay in a marriage that she should have left the day before it even happened? The need to prove a point – to those who publicly bet that a woman writer like her cannot stay married for more than four weeks, to those who bet that she was incapable of commitment, to her mother who told her to wait till she was older to settle down. To add to the list there is fear; the pressure of family; and, also hope. (182)

Thus, the powerless and marginalized victim is further silenced by the society. As Kandasamy puts it, "As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending" (197). She is not even given the choice of deciding whether to have a child or not. It is just a matter of discussion between the husband and the doctor. Even after she walks out of the marriage, she is considered unlucky to be invited to weddings and women hide their husbands from her. Thus, the novel pinpoints the toxic masculinity and the equally toxic cultural values which allow such emotional and physical violence to be perpetuated.

Marianne Flury, Elisabeth Nyberg and Anita Riecher-Rössler opine that "...it is not easy for the affected women to speak about their experiences or to ask for help. The reasons for this may be feelings of shame or guilt, fear, or perceptions based on traditional ideas of marriage and family" (1). However, the protagonist decides to free herself from her unhappy memories and the trauma inflicted by her marriage. She chose the process of writing to free herself. She uses the fierce power of spoken words to injure her husband. Being the writer-wife, imagines herself to be creating a plot in which she

remains in control of the narrative. She plays the role of the obedient wife, even to the point of endangering her life and willingly gives her husband the freedom to script the end of their marriage. All the while, she remains in charge of the entire narrative. She manages to collect details of his past which he has painstakingly tried to hide from her and the rest of the world. She attacks his self constructed image of heroic masculinity and renders him helpless with her casual comments. She then refers to these incidents in order to wound and disarm her husband when he tries to subjugate her. The offensive resistance shown by the narrator is born out of extreme anguish unleashed by the hegemonic power demonstrated by her husband.

Later, she boldly decides to walk out of her abusive marriage, disregarding the society and its bitter judgments. She proclaims that she will not let even her mother to narrate her story. She takes charge of her own life and says that "I must write my story" (9). She writes about her marriage in a magazine and engages in polemic resistance. The very act of breaking her silence and writing her trauma is an act of writing back. It can be considered as an act of resistance. Marian MacCurdy opines: "When we begin to put words to those images, we are using the parts of the brain that create narrative, and we begin to create a sense of control over those memories. They no longer control us" (92). The narrator feels that words allow her an escape and helps her to become a new woman. She identifies herself with the battered, condemned women attempting to resist their oppressors. She boldly proclaims that "I'm the woman with wings, the woman who can fly and fuck at will. I have smuggled this woman out of the oppressive landscape of small-town India. I need to smuggle her out of her history, out of the do's and don'ts of good Indian girls" (248). She says that she is not a good Hindu girl, a good Tamil girl or a good Kerala girl and refuses to fit into any of the categories she was moulded into.

What adds more power to the text is the use of autofiction as a mode to focus on issues connected with women, subverting the notion of voicelessness and thus helping her to write assertiveness into her character. The novel has been described as autobiographical and has resemblances to the author's life. Kandasamy's strategy of using autofiction makes the readers to trace the development of the character as a living human being within their own society. As Catherine Cusset remarks, "autofiction brings the reader inside what happened" (3). She goes on to say that "Going to the heart of a human tragedy, finding a voice that expresses pain, the universality of pain, is what makes auto fiction worthwhile" (5). Kandasamy's novel does this as it traces the tortures endured by the protagonist and her attempts to overcome them. As Edward Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*, stories become a method which colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their history as in the case of this autofiction. The writer takes up the role of the colonized who reclaims her space by using her pen as a weapon.

The technique of autofiction allows the protagonist to seize her voice and to narrate her story. It also inspires and empowers other women to take charge of their life as the narrative has links with real life incidents. The novel not only narrates the hardship of a woman caught in a traumatic marriage but also carefully portrays the growth of a writer and shows how the hurt and pain within transforms into art. The narrator in the novel pours out her heart into poems and imaginary unwritten love letters and even promotional material for an imaginary film to get the power to endure and fights back with resilience. The narrative sometimes shifts the focus to love letters written by the narrator to imaginary lovers, thus focusing on her efforts to resist the autocratic actions of her husband. This results in a non-linear narration of her painful past, possibly hinting at the fractured narrative memory of the survivor. She writes and erases her writing before her husband sees it. She indulges in what she calls as thought crimes as there is no material evidence for her writing process. The very fact that her husband cannot access these writings instills in her a sense of rebellion. Though not direct, these acts are expressions of trauma and are attempts to resist the onslaught of power.

The genre of autofiction turns the narrative into a site of multiple forms of resistance. Both the character and the author are involved in the act of resistance. The act of writing also becomes an act of therapy which heals the subject caught in a traumatic relationship. As Art Markman says: "the benefit of writing is not in disclosing this personal information to someone else. The benefit is in creating a story that links together the emotional memories. Making these traumatic events more coherent makes memories of these events less likely to be repeatedly called to mind, and so they can be laid to rest" (www.psychologytoday.com). While the author herself engages in expressive writing as a mode of survival, the character within the novel uses writing as a mode of rebellion. Kandasamy writes, "The defiance, the spite. The eagerness to rub salt on his wounded pride, to reclaim my space, my right to write" (88) is what propels the narrator forward. In fact, to Kandasamy herself, the novel is more about the process of writing than a mere account of physical abuse. As she herself pointed out in an interview:

It is not a question of whether something is real or imagined - sometimes we write because our imagination allows us to escape reality; sometimes, when real life begins to look like an imaginary nightmare we write because writing is the only real thing that seems real. To me, this book is a work of auto-fiction because it captures the story of becoming an artist—it is a *künstlerroman*, if you were to use a fancy German word. It is fiction as it is being formed, a fiction revealed to the reader as it is being forged. (Goyal)

The author uses a variety of narrative strategies to add power to her plot. Apart from letters and poetry, she borrows from various writers like Kamala Das, Anne Sexton, Frieda Kahlo, in her attempt to drive home her point that her own story resonates with various other narratives from around the world. The positioning of an unnamed narrator seems to suggest that the protagonist could be any woman in the Indian society, reeling under the trauma of an abusive relationship and the fetters inflicted by cultural dogmas. The author doesn't limit herself to portraying the trauma of her own character. In fact, she uses the narrative to bring attention to the numerous cases of bride burning and gang rapes which happen across the country. She specifically points out society's attitude towards the victim and its urge to put the blame on the victim. What emerges through the story of an unnamed narrator is the familiar picture of gender inequalities which could happen to any woman in this world, thus hinting at the multiple stories of abuse and the transhistorical nature of trauma.

Conclusion

According to Judith Herman: "In the task of healing, ...each survivor must find her own way to restore her sense of connection with the wider community" (73). To Kandasamy and her protagonist, it is the act of writing which heals them, empowers them and gives them back their voice. It helps them to recover and resist subjugation. This is evident as she says "I am the woman sitting down to write her story. I am the woman preparing to arrest your attention. I am the woman being propped up for the world's inspection" (245). Here the narrator not only strings together some moments from her past but also hints at a future which is waiting for her. Thus, the narrator carves a unique narrative strategy of her own to narrate her story, thereby reclaiming her voice, story and life from the oppressive forces of society and culture. The process of writing opens up new thoughts and realizations which sets the writer free. Autofiction becomes a tool for sharing trauma, for writing about one's wounded self and becomes an act of writing back. The novel thus throws light upon the invincible power of art to empower an individual and act as a mode of material resistance.

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