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**Application of Subaltern Theory to Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Meena Kandasamy's semi-autobiographical novel, When I Hit You is viewed through the lens of subaltern theory. Kandasamy is a contemporary Indian poet, novelist, and activist known for her fierce feminist writings. She advocates for social justice, especially issues surrounding caste, gender, and violence. When I Hit You demonstrates an intense account of domestic abuse that surpasses personal experience and becomes a political act of resistance. The novel challenges patriarchal structures and analyses the ideology where women are silenced. The protagonist, a young writer, endures brutal physical, psychological, and emotional abuse at the hands of her ideologically motivated husband, whose actions reflect broader socio-political structures of control. Using theoretical insights from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, this paper argues that the protagonist's journey from voicelessness to self-expression exemplifies a subaltern subject's resistance through narrative. By exploring the intersection of the personal and political, the paper argues that Kandasamy articulates the trauma of a subaltern woman and pushes the boundaries of feminist resistance through the act of writing. Her narratives match the key tenets of subaltern theory, especially the importance of giving a chance for oppressed people to speak, resist their oppression, and reclaim agency. This paper explores how Kandasamy in When I Hit uses personal trauma to criticize political structures, positioning the storyteller as a subaltern whose writing reclaims agency.*

**KEY WORDS**

*Meena Kandasamy, When I Hit You, Feminist Resistance, Subaltern theory, Patriarchy.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy was born in 1984 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She is a poet, novelist, translator, and anti-caste activist. As her parents were University Professors, Kandasamy grew up in an environment shaped by cerebral rigour and anti-caste activism. She began writing poetry at the age of 17. She received the Hermann Kesten Prize (2022) from PEN Centre Germany for her literary activism. Her work fiercely confronts the deeply rooted structure of caste, patriarchy and violence, blending raw emotion with sharp political critique, highlighting the realities of marginalized communities.

Her second novel, *When I Hit You*, published in 2017, is a powerful work of auto fiction that confronts the harrowing experiences of domestic violence. Drawing attention to her abusive marriage, the novel explores the intersectionality of gender, caste, and power in contemporary India. The novel follows an unnamed narrator, a young poet and writer set up in an unnamed city in India. She marries a young University Professor and a self-proclaimed Marxist. Initially drawn to his intellect and ideals, she finds herself trapped in a cycle of emotional, physical and psychological abuse. Her husband tries to isolate her, controls her communication, and makes various attempts to erase her identity as a writer, demanding that she be a traditional housewife. The narrative traces her struggle to reclaim her voice and power, culminating in her escape from the marriage. More than a personal story, it serves as a feminist viewpoint, gaining support through the act of storytelling. Kandasamy changes personal suffering into political commentary, placing the novel in subaltern discourses.

Subaltern refers to groups and individuals who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized or excluded from dominant power structures. The term originally comes from Antonio Gramsci, who used it to describe oppressed classes outside the hegemonic power of the ruling elites. In Postcolonial and Subaltern studies, the term has been broadened to include colonized people, indigenous communities, women, Dalits, and others who have been historically silenced or overlooked in mainstream narratives. Subalterns are those who lack agency and voice within dominant discourses and whose experiences are often misrepresented or ignored by elite perspectives. The subaltern theory, within a postcolonial studies framework, examines the voices of those groups and individuals marginalized by dominant structures of power, focusing on those silenced by class, caste, gender, race, or other hierarchies.

### The Subaltern Woman and the Politics of Silence

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can Subaltern Speak?" forms a backbone to any questions about marginalized voices. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, a literary theorist and postcolonial scholar, extended Subaltern theory into the realm of Literary and Cultural Studies. Her landmark essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" published in 1988 critically examined whether the subaltern could ever truly have a voice within dominant discourses shaped by colonial and patriarchal structures. Spivak highlighted how the subaltern woman, in particular, is doubly marginalized and often spoken for rather than heard. In *When I Hit*, Kandasamy shows how the narrator, a young, educated, and aspiring writer, is silenced in the institution of marriage. Despite her intellectual and social capabilities, she is rendered voiceless by a partner who is equally educated but uses patriarchal dominance to control her. This reflects Spivak's opinion that even educated women, when trapped in domestic oppression and cultural structures they struggle in making their voices heard in significant ways.

The protagonist does not remain silent, instead, her silence is caused by the calculative emotional manipulation, pressure, and violence observed in patriarchal societies. Her ideas, thoughts, opinions and writings are taken over or dismissed by her husband. He abuses her and justifies it as part of a radical political belief. This echoes how the voices of subaltern people are often ignored or are seen as less effective, especially when they speak out against any authority. This reflects the way subaltern voices are often labelled as emotional, illogical, or old-fashioned in both academic and activist settings. Through the novel, Kandasamy breaks the

myth that political ideology is always right. She shows that without awareness of different forms of oppression and being honest, ideology can become a dangerous tool in the hands of patriarchal power.

### **Writing as Resistance: The Subaltern Speaks**

Kandasamy, in *When I Hit You*, presents writing as a tool not just to tell the story but as an act of radical resistance. For the protagonist, writing becomes a tool for survival, self-reclamation, and standing up against personal and social violence. Denied a voice, where her husband controls her speech, her body, and her freedom, Kandasamy turns to writing as a way to take back her freedom and control. This act echoes Spivak's notion that for subalterns to speak, they need a space where their voice will be heard and respected: something Kandasamy achieves through literature.

For the protagonist, the act of writing is rebellious as it challenges the silence imposed upon her. It is through writing that she fights against the dominance of male authority and the idea that women should always submit. Her narrative creates a new version of her story where she reclaims her truth and speaks back to power. In doing so, Kandasamy shows that writing is not just passive reflection; it is an active resistance, a way of refusal or saying she will not be silenced by her abuser or society.

Moreover, the meta-narrative structure of the novel, where the narrator talks about the act of writing while narrating her trauma, shows the power of language in articulating subaltern identity. Writing helps her express her identity as someone who has suffered, she does not write about her pain, she writes through it, transforming her suffering into a powerful political message. The novel becomes a document of resistance that challenges patriarchal control, the silence around domestic abuse, and the societal and academic gatekeeping of female suffering. She shows that society plays a vital part in silencing women. These women are not given any chance to resist or speak. Their experiences are ignored or misunderstood by those who occupy the dominant progressive space.

Moreover, she criticizes the layers of complicity in society where families feel women to "adjust" the legal systems that delay justice, and societal pressure to preserve marriage over a woman's safety- each of the elements reinforces the idea that a woman's suffering is personal, not political. By showcasing these examples in her novel, Kandasamy explains how subaltern women are silenced through direct violence and neglect and a lack of care by the patriarchal system. Thus, the novel does not merely answer Spivak's famous question whether the subaltern can speak but expands on it, showing subaltern can speak, but only if she fights for her voice, wrestles back to take control of her narrative, and dares to name the structures that try to silence her.

### **Ideology: A Tool of Patriarchal Control**

Kandasamy points out the gap between social ideology and personal behaviour in the novel. The character of husband, a self-proclaimed Marxist, presents himself as an intellectual dedicated to dismantling systemic oppression. However, inside the marriage, he behaves just like the patriarchal system he claims to outwardly condemn. This contradiction becomes a key point in Kandasamy's criticism. When the beliefs or ideology are not matched by their actions, it becomes a cover-up that conceals and even justifies abuse.

The Husband uses Marxist ideas as a weapon to exert control over the narrator, framing her resistance as selfish, individualistic or against the revolution. In doing so, he misuses political beliefs to justify gender based domination. This shows not only his hypocrisy as an intellectual but also how political and ideological spaces can be complicit in the silencing of subaltern women. Suggesting that even ideas that seem fair and progressive can become dangerous when they are used to support male power. The husband's ideology becomes a mask for his cruelty. He says he wants to fight against the system, but inside the home, he becomes the system, the one who gives orders, the one who punishes, and the one who silences.

The woman is already marginalized by class, caste, and gender; she faces double oppression first by patriarchal norms and second by manipulative use of power. In this novel, Kandasamy's novel responds to

Spivak's question by showing that the subaltern can indeed speak, but only when she disrupts the hegemonic modes of representation and takes back the power to tell her own story. Writing, therefore, becomes a way for her to gain freedom and space where the subaltern not only speaks but shouts.

### **Protagonist's Journey: Victimhood to Survival**

By telling a personal tale of abuse as a political one, Kandasamy connects feminist ideas with subaltern issues. The protagonist's journey from silence to speech shows that gender-based violence is just not personal: this is a powerful form of political resistance. Her story challenges not just the abuser, but also the society that allows such violence to continue.

The famous feminist idea "the personal is political" is strongly visible in *When I Hit You*. Kandasamy dissolves the boundary between personal trauma and social resistance. The main character's experience of domestic violence is not just a personal issue between husband and wife: it reflects the larger social and political systems that accept and continue the oppression of women. Kandasamy shows how personal suffering is shaped and kept in place by cultural rules, patriarchal traditions, and complex institutions. These forces don't just exist inside homes: they are active throughout society and politics.

Through the lens of subaltern theory, the novel presents the protagonist as a subaltern woman, someone who is marginalized not just because she is a woman, but also because of her class, caste, and cultural pressures. Her story challenges the idea that the home is a personal, non-political space. Instead, it shows that even inside homes, power is used, challenged, and resisted. The violence she faces is not just bad luck, it's a part of a larger system of patriarchy that silences and erases women, especially those who refuse to fit into the traditional idea of being quiet, obedient, and submissive.

Kandasamy's main character does not just suffer through violence: she questions it, speaks out against it, and turns her painful story into a way to fight back for herself and others. Her refusal to stay silent, to adjust, or to see herself only as a victim becomes a powerful feminist protest. This challenge reflects a key idea in subaltern feminist thought: when a woman takes back her voice and power, it's not just about freeing herself, it's a political act. The novel shifts the focus from seeing domestic abuse as a personal issue to showing it as an act of resistance. The character shows that the violence done to her is not just personal: it is a political, built into the system, and must be challenged.

### **CONCLUSION**

Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* is more than just a personal story of domestic abuse. It is a strong political statement that explores how gender, power, and ideology are connected, using the ideas of subaltern theory. By focusing on the voice of a woman from the margins who refuses to be silent, the novel challenges the belief that personal pain is not political. Instead, it shows that the personal struggles of subaltern women are closely linked to larger systems of oppression. Responding to Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" the novel clearly states affirmation to it stating not only can she speak, but she can reclaim and reshape her identity through storytelling. The main character does not remain a silent victim. She becomes a witness to her suffering, a critic of the system, and an activist within her own story. Her fight against both physical and ideological control reflects the larger feminist struggle to be heard, trusted, and respected. Through writing, she turns her trauma into truth and her pain into protest. The novel becomes a space where hidden violence is exposed and personal resistance becomes a political act. Thus it illustrates how literature can be a powerful tool for subaltern expression, feminist awareness, and true freedom.

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