



# Narrative Of Control: Exploration Of Violence And Toxic Masculinity In Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait Of The Writer As A Young Wife*

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## ABSTRACT

*When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, by Meena Kandasamy published in 2017, offers a poignant and insightful examination of domestic violence and toxic masculinity through the lens of a writer living in isolation. The novel delves into the experiences of a woman trapped in a controlling marriage, revealing how gender-oppressive ideologies and toxic behaviors persist despite education, social status, or political beliefs. It offers a critical examination of the intersections of caste and gender within the context of modern-day domestic abuse in India. This study investigates the complex interplay between gender, toxic masculinity, and anxiety, using a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the text. The findings illustrate that the protagonist's heightened fear and uncertainty stem from her husband's toxic masculinity and controlling behavior. By focusing on the intersection of gender and toxic masculinity, this study emphasizes the systemic nature of women's anxiety and highlights the urgent need for cultural and social transformation to address these pervasive issues.

**Key Words:** Toxic masculinity, domestic violence, power dynamics, anxiety

The modern Indian woman confronts a complex interplay between tradition and modernity, wherein societal expectations often conflict with personal ambitions. Rooted in a patriarchal framework, she has historically been constrained to the domestic sphere, with her identity closely intertwined with familial roles. Despite notable advancements towards gender equality, as evidenced by increased educational and economic participation, the psychological burden of reconciling traditional expectations with individual aspirations remains considerable. Marriage, a key element of Indian society, remains a central life event for women. However, marital relationships have evolved subtly, reflecting a shift in societal norms. The contemporary Indian woman, grappling with both career and domestic responsibilities, faces unique pressures and psychological struggles, particularly when confronted with expectations of submission and self-sacrifice. This internal conflict highlights the challenges of preserving a sense of self while fulfilling societal expectations. The novel is an exploration of domestic violence, systemic injustices, and pervasive power dynamics that trap women in cycles of abuse. Set against the backdrop of modern-day India, Kandasamy's novel sheds light on the multifaceted issues of domestic violence and patriarchy. It tells the story of a young educated woman, a writer, who finds herself in an increasingly violent marriage. As she navigates the complexities of her relationship with her abusive husband, she confronts the societal norms and expectations that contribute to her isolation and victimization. Through her compelling storytelling, Kandasamy captures the intricate dance of power and control that characterizes abusive relationships, offering a window into the psychological and emotional struggles faced by those who endure such circumstances. There is an exploration of how domestic abuse intersects with toxic masculinity. She highlights how these intersecting factors aggravate the vulnerability of women. The narrative also challenges the notion that education and societal status protect women from abuse. The protagonist is an educated woman who can also articulate well, yet she finds herself trapped in a cycle of violence. The novel offers a poignant examination of these themes, delving into the nexus of domestic violence and toxic masculinity within the framework of contemporary Indian marriage. Meena Kandasamy explores the intricate dynamics of domestic violence and toxic masculinity against the backdrop of a contemporary Indian woman's struggle between tradition and modernity. Traditionally positioned within a patriarchal framework, the Indian woman has historically been relegated to the domestic sphere, her identity tightly bound to familial

roles. Despite progress toward gender equality, including greater educational and economic participation, women continue to face the psychological burden of reconciling societal expectations with personal ambitions. Marriage, still a cornerstone of Indian society, remains a pivotal aspect of a woman's life, but its nature has evolved subtly. Modern women, balancing careers and domestic responsibilities, encounter a unique set of pressures. Kandasamy's narrative sheds light on how these pressures are compounded by toxic masculinity and domestic control, illustrating the profound psychological struggle women face as they attempt to maintain their sense of self while navigating the constraints of traditional marital expectations. The novel provides a powerful exploration of domestic abuse, capturing the cyclical nature of violence through the lived experiences of its protagonist. The narrative is structured around the stages of the abusive cycle, offering a profound critique of the mechanisms of power and control in an abusive relationship. The three phases include the Tension-building Phase, Acute Battering Phase and Manipulation Phase

In the tension-building phase, Kandasamy portrays how the abuser systematically imposes economic and social isolation on the protagonist. This phase is characterized by subtle forms of manipulation and control, creating an atmosphere of constant tension and fear. The abuser, who is also the protagonist's husband, isolates her from friends and family, cutting off her access to external support and resources. This isolation is a strategic move to render her entirely dependent on him, both economically and socially. The novel powerfully illustrates how isolation is wielded as a tool of control within abusive relationships. The protagonist's husband deliberately severs her ties with family and friends, effectively stripping her of her support network. This tactic is common in abusive dynamics, as it increases the victim's dependency on the abuser and allows the abuser to exert greater control over their life. The protagonist's isolation is not merely physical but also psychological. She finds herself cut off from the people who provide emotional support, guidance, and reassurance. This enforced loneliness heightens her vulnerability, making her more susceptible to manipulation and abuse. Without access to her previous social networks, she loses the affirmation and validation that comes from interactions with loved ones, which further entrenches her sense of powerlessness. Kandasamy's depiction of this isolation underscores the insidious nature of such control. By cutting the protagonist off from her past, the husband aims to redefine her reality and establish himself as the sole arbiter of her experiences and emotions. This isolation is a calculated move to break her spirit, reducing her ability to seek help or challenge his authority. The psychological impact of being cut off from familiar environments is profound, as it not only increases dependency but also erodes the protagonist's sense of self-worth and identity. In addition to the isolation imposed by her husband, the protagonist's move to a new city adds another layer of complexity to her psychological struggle. This relocation exacerbates her sense of cultural displacement, as she is stripped of the familiar surroundings and social norms that once anchored her identity. The new city, with its unfamiliar customs and environment, deepens her feelings of alienation and disconnection. This experience of cultural displacement is a common challenge for many women who relocate due to marriage. It highlights the intersection of personal and cultural identity in shaping experiences of displacement. The protagonist is forced to navigate not only the dynamics of her abusive relationship but also the disorienting effects of being in a new cultural setting. Her sense of alienation is compounded by the loss of cultural markers that once provided comfort and stability. Kandasamy uses this cultural displacement to emphasize the protagonist's struggle with identity and belonging. In a city where she feels like an outsider, the protagonist grapples with the tension between her old self and the identity being imposed upon her by her husband. This dual displacement—both personal and cultural—underscores the complexity of her predicament. It highlights how the intersection of gender, cultural identity, and social expectations can intensify the experiences of isolation and marginalization for women in abusive relationships. The narrative vividly illustrates how isolation and cultural displacement work in tandem to deepen the protagonist's sense of entrapment. By exploring these themes, the novel sheds light on the multifaceted nature of control and abuse, offering a poignant critique of the societal structures that enable such dynamics.

Economic isolation is a powerful tool of control and domination used by the narrator's husband to restrict her freedom and independence. The husband systematically cuts off her access to financial resources, ensuring that she becomes entirely dependent on him for basic needs. This economic isolation strips her of autonomy and traps her in a cycle of powerlessness, making it difficult for her to leave the abusive relationship. The husband uses economic deprivation to reinforce his authority, curtailing her ability to make decisions and eroding her sense of self-worth. Through this lens, the novel explores how financial control is intertwined with emotional and psychological abuse, highlighting the insidious ways in which economic isolation can undermine a person's dignity and agency. The writer, who once left her teaching job to pursue a writing career, now finds herself in a situation where she has nothing else to do. She remains a writer only in front of the mirror, as her household chores have taken precedence over her writing aspirations. The protagonist is not allowed to pursue her career or financial independence, which makes her economically reliant on her husband. This dependency is a crucial tool for the abuser to exert control, as it limits her ability to leave the relationship or assert autonomy.

Social isolation is when an individual experiences a lack of social connections or meaningful interactions with others. It can occur due to various factors such as physical distance, communication barriers, or personal circumstances like illness or disability. Social isolation can have significant negative impacts on mental and physical health, increasing the risk of depression, anxiety, and chronic diseases. It can also lead to feelings of loneliness, reduced self-esteem, and a sense of disconnection from society. While some people may choose

solitude, involuntary social isolation can be particularly detrimental, emphasizing the importance of fostering supportive social networks and community engagement to mitigate its effects. A few days into their marriage, the husband begins to reveal his true self, shedding the mask of the perfect partner. He tries to control her using social isolation as a tool. He says:

“There is no reason why you should be on Facebook. It’s narcissism. It’s exhibitionism. It’s a waste of time... I cannot let you endanger me... If you love me, this is the quickest way you will make up your mind.” (Kandasamy 50-51).

The above lines show how the husband manipulates his wife by framing his demand as a protective measure, implying that her Facebook activity poses a threat to him. He labels her use of the platform as "narcissism" and "exhibitionism," attacking her character and creating guilt and shame. By presenting the ultimatum, "If you love me," he ties her compliance to proof of her affection, leveraging emotional blackmail to control her behavior. This manipulation effectively isolates her socially by forcing her to choose between her relationship and her connections with the outside world. Within ten minutes, she disconnects herself from the outside world by deactivating her Facebook account. This decision feels like a temporary "career suicide" (52), and she bids farewell to her online presence with a final message, stating she is busy with a writing project. She hides her isolation by pretending to live a writer's life. The next form of control arrives when he demands access to her email password, leading to arguments and regular checks of her mobile phone. He manipulates her into surrendering her email accounts, suspending her Facebook page, and even monitors her phone, further isolating her from the world. The abuser controls the protagonist's interactions with the outside world, dictating who she can talk to and when. This control extends to her use of technology, monitoring her emails and phone calls to ensure that she is not reaching out for help or maintaining any form of support network. This phase creates a pervasive sense of fear and dependency, as the protagonist is left to navigate a world that is increasingly closed off and controlled by her abuser. Next comes the acute battering phase which is depicted with stark and brutal realism, highlighting the physical and emotional violence inflicted on the protagonist. Kandasamy does not shy away from describing the horrific abuse the protagonist endures, illustrating the extreme consequences of patriarchal control and the dehumanizing effects of violence. In this phase, the young narrator experiences physical violence and emotional violence.

Physical violence is the intentional use of physical force to cause harm, injury, or discomfort to another person. It can manifest in various forms, including hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, choking, or using weapons. Physical violence often occurs in contexts such as domestic abuse, bullying, assault, and warfare, and can result in both immediate and long-term physical and psychological damage. It not only affects the victim's physical health but also impacts their mental well-being, leading to issues like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, physical violence perpetuates a cycle of fear and control, undermining the victim's sense of safety and autonomy. The protagonist experiences severe physical abuse, which is described in graphic detail to convey the intensity of the battering she endures. This violence is not only a physical attack but also a means of asserting dominance and reinforcing the abuser's control over her body and mind. She says:

“When he hits me, the most frightening part is not the pain and the possible scarring and the perverted sense of shame. It is not in knowing that I’m defeated, or in the realization that I am not physically strong enough to match him blow for blow, that I cannot teach him a lesson never to mess with me.”( Kandasamy 155)

Alongside physical abuse, the protagonist is subjected to emotional manipulation and degradation. The abuser uses psychological tactics to undermine her self-esteem, making her question her worth and sanity. This emotional abuse is a crucial aspect of the control exerted over her, as it further entraps her in the cycle of violence. Emotional violence is concurrent with the physical abuse experienced by the protagonist. The narrator’s husband employs psychological tactics to systematically undermine her self-esteem, inflicting deep emotional wounds that are as detrimental as physical violence. Through manipulative and degrading behaviors, he makes her question her own worth and sanity, further compounding her state of confusion and self-doubt. This emotional abuse is crucial to the abuser’s strategy to maintain dominance over the protagonist. By undermining her confidence and making her feel worthless, he guarantees that she remains trapped in the cycle of violence. The constant erosion of her sense of self serves to reinforce her dependency on him and clouds her perception of reality, making it increasingly tough for her to break free from the abusive relationship. This aspect of control, together with physical violence, exacerbates the protagonist’s entrapment and emphasizes the pervasive nature of her suffering.

The acute battering phase serves as a turning point in the narrative, highlighting the devastating impact of domestic abuse and the oppressive nature of patriarchal power structures. The protagonist's husband embodies the archetype of a patriarchal figure, exerting control over every aspect of her life. His authority is not limited to overt physical dominance; rather, it permeates the minutiae of her daily existence. He dictates what she wears, how she interacts with others, and even attempts to suppress her creative expression. This control serves as a symbol of the systemic suppression of women's autonomy and reflects the broader societal norms that dictate the subjugation of women. The narrator’s portrayal of this control emphasizes how deeply entrenched patriarchal norms are internalized and enforced within intimate relationships. The husband justifies his actions under the guise of love or protection, suggesting that his restrictions are for her benefit or safety. This rationalization mirrors the societal discourse that often excuses or overlooks controlling behavior in relationships, viewing it as a form of care rather than oppression. The novel thus critiques the societal

structures that allow such behavior to persist, illustrating how patriarchy is perpetuated through both cultural norms and personal relationships.

Following episodes of violence, the novel illustrates the manipulation phase, where the abuser exhibits remorse and affection. This phase is characterized by the abuser's attempts to win back the protagonist's loyalty and trust, creating a temporary sense of hope for change. After the violence, the abuser often expresses regret and promises to change, showering the protagonist with affection and attention. This behavior is a calculated move to manipulate the protagonist's emotions and maintain control over her. The sudden shift from violence to affection creates confusion and complicates the victim's emotional response, making it challenging for her to view the abuser's actions objectively. These expressions of remorse and declarations of love are part of a deliberate strategy to reinforce the abuser's hold over the protagonist, ensuring that she remains emotionally invested in the relationship. Caught in the cycle of abuse, the protagonist experiences a conflicted sense of hope that things might improve. The abuser's temporary kindness and promises of change entrench her loyalty and make it difficult for her to break free from the relationship. This false hope traps her in a damaging cycle, as each episode of remorse temporarily alleviates the pain of abuse, leading her to believe that lasting change is possible. As a result, she finds herself oscillating between moments of despair and optimism, which deepens her emotional dependence and makes leaving the relationship seem daunting and nearly impossible.

Kandasamy skilfully portrays how the manipulation phases perpetuate the cycle of abuse, as the protagonist is drawn back into the relationship by the abuser's promises and displays of affection. This phase highlights the psychological complexity of abusive relationships and the challenges faced by victims in breaking the cycle of violence. In addition to physical violence, the novel delves into the psychological manipulation employed by the husband to isolate and dominate the protagonist. He uses gaslighting, a tactic designed to make her question her own perceptions and sanity, as well as emotional abuse to systematically erode her self-esteem and sense of self. This manipulation creates a reality in which the protagonist is constantly doubting herself and her worth, making her increasingly reliant on her husband for validation. The narrative features the insidious nature of domestic abuse, revealing that it extends far beyond physical acts to encompass emotional and mental torment. The husband's psychological tactics serve to isolate the protagonist from her support systems, such as friends and family, leaving her feeling trapped and alone. This isolation is a common strategy in abusive relationships, as it makes the victim more dependent on the abuser and less likely to seek help. The novel also critiques the role of bystanders and the complicity of society in perpetuating domestic violence. The protagonist's family and friends are aware of her situation but are reluctant to intervene. This reluctance is rooted in a complex interplay of factors, including fear, shame, and the desire to maintain family honor. The novel exposes the ways in which societal pressures can silence victims and protect abusers. The societal expectations of gender roles place Meena in a position where her autonomy and emotional well-being are constantly undermined by her husband's desire for control and dominance, characteristics emblematic of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity manifests in the novel through Meena's husband's need to assert power over her, using psychological and physical abuse to maintain control. This behavior not only deprives Meena of emotional support but also creates an environment where her anxiety flourishes. The interplay between gender and toxic masculinity highlights the systemic nature of her distress, where societal norms sanction male dominance and female subordination, leaving women like Meena vulnerable to abuse. Toxic masculinity severely undermines narrator's autonomy and emotional well-being. Her husband embodies the traits of toxic masculinity through his relentless pursuit of control and dominance. His actions, driven by an ingrained belief in male superiority, manifest in both psychological and physical abuse. This abuse is not merely a personal failing but a reflection of broader societal expectations that endorse male authority and female subordination. By imposing stringent control over Meena's life, including monitoring her social media and restricting her communication, her husband enforces a toxic masculine ideal that reduces her to a passive role, deprived of autonomy and self-expression. As a result of isolation, the narrator experiences a psychological struggle which leads to anxiety and fear. Her anxiety stems from the lack of fulfilment in her emotional needs, a deficiency largely influenced by the oppressive gender norms and toxic masculine behaviors of her husband.

The novel portrays the protagonist's journey from hopeful beginnings to a state of entrapment and fear, illustrating how her psychological state is shaped by the threat of violence and control exerted by her husband, as well as the societal norms dictating her role as a wife. This dynamic can be examined through Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which identifies anxiety as a crucial element of psychological struggle, serving both as a warning signal and a coping mechanism in response to perceived threats. Freud identifies three primary forms of anxiety: realistic, neurotic, and moral. In the novel, realistic anxiety is evident as the protagonist confronts genuine threats from her husband, leading to persistent feelings of fear and uncertainty. Neurotic anxiety arises from the internal conflict between her desires for freedom and the constraints imposed by her husband and societal expectations, reflecting Freud's concept of the ego clashing with the id. This internal struggle is further intensified by moral anxiety, where the protagonist wrestles with feelings of guilt and shame for not adhering to the traditional role of a submissive wife, reflecting a conflict within the superego regarding her moral beliefs and values. Collectively, these forms of anxiety illustrate the profound psychological impact of the protagonist's oppressive environment. Anxiety, whether conscious or unconscious, encompasses intense feelings of fear and worry stemming from unknown threats or dangers.

The domestic violence and torture she endure shatter her expectations of married life, making her acutely aware of her situation as a threat. The emotional void in her marriage is a significant factor contributing to her anxiety. Meena's fear and helplessness are further exacerbated by her husband's oppressive conduct and the lack of love and support in her marriage. Her psychological struggle aligns with Freud's categories of anxiety. She experiences realistic anxiety due to her abusive husband's constant threats, living in fear of his unpredictable and violent outbursts. This anxiety is heightened by the isolation and control he enforces, deepening her sense of vulnerability and entrapment. Neurotic anxiety is evident as Meena struggles with the internal conflict between her yearning for freedom and the oppressive forces that seek to dominate her. The psychological impact of her husband's abuse also generates moral anxiety, as she grapples with feelings of shame and guilt for not fulfilling the traditional role of a submissive wife, thus questioning her own worth and agency.

In conclusion, Meena Kandasamy effectively illustrates the systemic nature of domestic violence through the interplay between gender expectations and toxic masculinity. The novel reveals how societal norms perpetuate male dominance, enabling abusive behaviors to thrive unchecked. Meena's distress is amplified by an environment that not only condones but actively supports her husband's abusive actions. This societal framework fosters a relentless cycle of abuse and emotional deprivation, demonstrating that toxic masculinity is not merely a personal failing but a deeply entrenched systemic issue that exposes women like Meena to ongoing suffering and control. Narrator's exploration of psychological manipulation within the narrative offers a critical commentary on the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse. The novel goes beyond physical violence to address the profound mental and emotional impact of psychological abuse. By depicting the protagonist's psychological torment, the story challenges the common perception that abuse is exclusively physical, highlighting how emotional and psychological violence can be equally, if not more, damaging. This portrayal highlights the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the full spectrum of abuse. Finally, the novel calls for a broader societal understanding of domestic violence, advocating for comprehensive change that addresses both visible and invisible forms of violence against women. By drawing attention to the psychological and systemic dimensions of abuse, the narrative urges a reevaluation of how society responds to domestic violence. It emphasizes the need for systemic reforms that challenge toxic masculinity and create environments where women can escape cycles of abuse and achieve genuine empowerment.

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