

# PORTRAYAL OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S *WHEN I HIT YOU* AND JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

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## ABSTRACT

*Domestic violence has become a burning issue now-a-days. It does not happen only in our country but it is a global problem. Though it affects people of all cultures, ages and economic and educational backgrounds, but women are the worst sufferer of it. It is a part of patriarchy which occurs between family members and intimate partners when one person tries to control another. In patriarchal society men endeavour to dominate and control women but when women try to break their subordination status, men use domestic violence to keep them under control. This article aims to study how Meena Kandasamy in *When I Hit You* (2017) and John Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* (1956) have woven domestic violence in the texture of these writings. Apart from it, this article also strives to highlight how domestic violence is making women its victim easily and how the victims are suffered from it in the hand of their own intimate partner but the consequences of it are not the same on the victim. The woman in *Look Back in Anger* is completely surrendered to it, but the woman in *When I Hit You* instead of giving in she strongly fights against it.*

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, types, purpose, origin, effects, *When I Hit You*, *Look Back in Anger*

## Introduction

Domestic violence is one of the most burning problems not only in India but throughout the whole world. It is terrorism which basically targets half of the human kind, making all women potential victims, irrespective of their age, nationality, race, religion, ethnic background or education. In patriarchal society men think that they are superior and women are inferior in many levels and in order to keep their superiority they often use violence, especially domestic violence to dominate them or to keep them under control. This present paper is an attempt to highlight that issue in Meena Kandasamy's autobiographical novel *When I Hit You* and the Oscar winning screen writer John Osborne's masterpiece *Look Back in Anger*. Both these writings are replete with domestic violence and the woman in *Look Back in Anger* is the victim of domestic violence for her upper class status, but the woman in *When I Hit you* is the victim of it for her indomitable urge to become a writer. But before entering into the central topic of discussion it is necessary to provide a brief description about domestic violence.

## Domestic violence:-

Domestic violence, also known as domestic abuse, spouse abuse, battering, family violence, intimate partner violence, is defined as a pattern of abusive behaviours by one partner against another in an intimate relationship, such as marriage, dating, family, or cohabitation (*Domestic Violence*, Pankaj, Chhikara). It is a type of violence which happens typically behind closed doors. The purpose of all sorts of domestic violence is to gain and maintain control over the victims and for this purpose the abuser uses many tactics such as physical aggression or assault, threats, sexual abuse, rape, humiliation, domination etc (Ibid).

## Types of domestic violence:-

We can find, basically, four types of domestic violence. These are-1. Physical abuse, 2. Sexual abuse and Marital rape, 3. Emotional abuse (psychological abuse or mental abuse) and 4. Economic abuse. Physical abuse is a type of abuse which intends to create a feeling of intimidation, pain, injury or other physical suffering or bodily harm by means of hitting, slapping, choking, pushing, burning and other types of contact that results in physical injury to the victims. In sexual abuse a person is forced or coerced to participate in sexual activities against their will. Emotional abuse, which is also called psychological abuse or mental abuse, is created by means of humiliating or abusing the victim in private place or publicly. Economic abuse is a form of abuse when intimate partner has control over the other partner's access to economic resources (Ibid).

## Origin of domestic violence:-

Violence against women is a common phenomenon now-a-days. In patriarchal societies around the world, women have been considered as subservient, secondary and marginalised, whereas male held dominant

roles. Patriarchy is like a social organization which viewed women as the property of the male. They are also treated as being inferior to men on many levels: intellectually, emotionally, physically, sexually and spiritually. Domestic violence is rooted in this view of male dominance within families and societies that do not value women's rights (*Domestic Violence*, Karen Latchana). Domestic violence is a social evil which is not the product of modern society but it is originated in the ancient society. It is evident from Greek philosopher Aristotle's view of women at that time:

"The male is by nature superior, and female inferior; and the one rules; and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind.... The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying" (Ibid, p-18).

### Effects of domestic violence:-

Domestic violence may begin small with a push, a slap or a kick but if it escalates, the consequences of it is deadly. It can affect the victim both physically and mentally. It affects the victim to such an extent that the victims suffer from mental illness, depression, ill health etc. It can alienate the victim from her dearest one and what is more in some cases the victim suffers from miscarriage and ultimately dies (Ibid).

After writing down concisely the concept of domestic violence, its purpose, origin and effect, it's now the right time to zero in into the locus classicus of the paper i.e. how Meena Kandasamy and John Osborne have delineated domestic violence in the texture of their writings and the affect of it on the victim.

### Portrayal of domestic violence in *When I Hit You*:-

Meena Kandasamy is a polemical Dalit woman writer, whose *When I Hit You* (2017) is one of the most important books of the decade for its frank and candid depiction of domestic violence. This book is replete with domestic violence but there is no visible marks- no bruises, no blood, no broken bones. Here violence plays like the background scene of a movie, present but not visible. In this novel she is talking about her own story in first person voice. She is not shy of portraying those ignored and untouched areas which are generally considered taboo in the society. She has openly articulated those forbidden themes which she has experienced in her marital life. If we go through the text we can easily find that she is the victim of domestic violence and the main reason behind it is her undaunted spirit to become a writer. If we concentrate into the story we can see that she marries a university professor, who is a communist, with the hope for bright future. But the more the story progresses the more we can understand that her hope for a bright future is gradually dimming. Her main goal in life it to become a writer which she admits:

"... I quit a full-time teaching job so that I could write, write, write.... Writer. Just that, just to myself, just in front of the mirror. I play wife, but the minute my husband walks out, I'm screaming *yes yes yes yes yes yes* in my head, and I obsess about what I need to be writing... What propels me forward is my restless urge to tell a story" (*When I Hit You*, P-80-81).

But in her husband's eyes it is nothing a work and what is more he detests nothing more than her idea of becoming a writer and automatically she becomes a victim of domestic violence. In the beginning she has to put up with abusive words like whore, prostitute. But the more the story progresses the more the degree of torture increases. In one scene of the novel we find that she was asked by the editor of the Outlook to write an essay for their annual issue on sex surveys and her positive reply only gets humiliation from her husband:

"When I share the details with my husband he says I have been asked to write on sexuality because I have the wide ranging experience of having fucked men who are twenty years old, thirty years old, forty years old, fifty years old, sixty years old, seventy years old" (Ibid, P-75).

This is how domestic violence starts in this novel and upto this point she is the victim of verbal violence of shame.

Though domestic violence sets its journey by humiliating and ridiculing the victim in this novel *When I Hit You* but with the progress of the novel the degree of torture escalates and she is no longer a victim of verbal violence but she has to put up with all sorts of physical torture. In the novel the narrator has told that she remained silent, as her father advised her that silence is golden, when her husband accused her of her extramarital affairs or anything else. But her silence does not bring forth fruitful results. Her silence only heightens the degree of torture. In one scene of the novel she is accused of being inhabited a world in her mind, a world where she is cohabiting with ex-lovers, a world where she has left him and asks her to stop leading a double life, but her silence only draws kick from her husband and ultimately she becomes a victim of the extreme form of torture which is evident from the following passage:

"He kicks me in the stomach. 'Prove it!' he yells as I double over. 'Prove it to me that you are my wife. Prove it to me that you are not thinking of another man. Or I will prove it for you'.

My hair is gathered up in a bunch in his hand now. He is lifting me by my hair alone. All the blood is rushing to my head, my thighs fight to feel the hard wood of the chair. I am in pain. He drags me from the table and into the bedroom. I feel the heavy, funereal drumbeats of marriage as he forces my sari up around my waist. They grow louder and faster, restless in their hurry to drown out everything else. I close my eyes now, afraid, the way I did during the wedding ceremony, when rice was flung at us and prayers were chanted. The fire that made our union sacred and eternal now blazes in the parting of my thighs" (*When I Hit You*, P-163).

This is the extreme form of torture that she has to endure. She never expects that she will be raped and tortured brutally even by her own husband. But here the torture does not stop, rather sex, especially rape becomes a regular habit to tame and dominate her. He tells her that he will torture her sexually to such an extent that her cunt will be ruined and her cunt will turn so wasted, so useless that she will no longer be able to offer her to any man. It'll be as wide as a begging bowl. *Koodhi kizhinja paati surukka pai pola iruppadi* (Ibid, P-168).

This is how the narrator has experienced domestic violence in her husband's hands. Apart from it, her husband also intimidates her of killing her.

### **Effects of domestic violence on the victim:-**

Though the domestic violence in this novel *When I Hit You* starts with abusive or humiliating or insulting words, but with the progress of the novel it escalates to the extreme form of torture. The victim has no other means to escape it but has to tolerate it. Even her parents do not show any enthusiasm in her planning to escape the situation by leaving her husband. But when sex, especially rape becomes a continuous process of torture in order to tame her, she suffers mentally. It snatches away her mental peace and what is more it alienates her from dearest one. But she is not like other ordinary helpless women who can easily give in to it. But she says:

"I am rough, gruff, tough. The one who has written these mad and angry and outrageous poems about life and love and sex. I am not afraid of men; I have fashioned myself in the defiant image of its exact, uncompromising opposite- the women men are afraid of. I am anti-fragile. I've been made not to break" (*When I Hit You*, P-219).

She came to realise that if she has to reach her goal i.e. to become a writer, then she must have to fight against such kind of inhuman torture and she takes a bold decision to leave her husband within fourth months of their marriage. Instead of becoming a victim of constant bestial torture she leaves her husband and shut the door for her husband forever and she begins to lead her life by herself in her own way.

### **Portrayal of domestic violence in *Look Back in Anger*:-**

Oscar winning British dramatist John Osborne's masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is also replete with domestic violence. But in this play domestic violence, though, starts with abusive or insulting words like Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, but the degree of torture does not escalate to the apex of torture with the advance of the play. Here the woman namely Alison is the victim of domestic violence for her upper class status. If we go through the story of the play it will be prominent to us.

When the play *Look Back in Anger* opens we find that Jimmy Porter, Cliff and Alison, Jimmy's wife are on the stage. Jimmy is busy in reading a newspaper and so also Cliff. Alison is busy in ironing. Jimmy and Cliff are discussing about the Sunday news and suddenly Jimmy asks Alison whether the paper makes her feel or not. In reply Alison says that she has not read the newspaper yet. But Jimmy tries to make her clear about the question and at that time Cliff interferes and says in support of Alison which only invites mock at Alison's superior social status:

JIMMY: I didn't ask you that. I said--

CLIFF: Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy.

JIMMY: Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think? (*Look Back in Anger*, P-8).

After a while he also mocks Alison's upper class upbringing:

JIMMY: ... Old Porter talks and everyone turns over and goes to sleep. And Mrs. Porter gets' em all going with the first yawn (Ibid, P-8-9).

It becomes a habit to Jimmy to attack Alison through abusive or insulting words and it continues. Even he does not care to call her wife 'sycophantic', 'phlegmatic', and 'pusillanimous'. He not only uses humiliating

words towards Alison but also towards her parents which is prominent from Alison's speech while she was making conversation with her father:

ALISON: Do you know what he (Jimmy) said about Mummy? He said she was an over-fed, over-privileged old bitch. 'A good blow-out for the worms' was his expression, I think (Ibid, P-57).

And when her father wanted to know what Jimmy thinks about him Alison replied:

ALISON: Oh, he does not seem to mind you so much. In fact, I think he rather likes you. He likes you because he can feel sorry for you. (*Conscious that what she says is going to hurt him.*) 'Poor old Daddy- just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore.' (Rather lamely.) Something like that, anyway (Ibid, P,57-58).

In one scene of Act I we find that Jimmy is not ashamed to tell her wife to share bed with their friend Cliff: JIMMY: Why don't you both get into bed, and have done with it? (Ibid, P-26).

This is how Alison has been tortured throughout the play in the hand of her husband by means of verbal violence. Though there is no direct reference to physical violence done towards Alison by her husband, but in one scene of Act I we can see that Alison is ironing and Jimmy and Cliff are moving frantically and at that time Jimmy intentionally pushes Cliff on to the ironing board and consequently the board collapses and Cliff falls against Alison and her arm is burnt by the iron and she cries out in pain. This is the only reference of physical violence that we can find in the play *Look Back in Anger*.

This is how John Osborne has woven domestic violence in the texture of his renowned play *Look Back in Anger*.

#### **Effects of domestic violence on the victim:-**

Though Alison is not the victim of physical violence like the woman in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, but she suffers more than the woman in *When I Hit You*. Alison, instead of protesting, has been enduring all such humiliating and insulting comments for four years, and, as a result of which her mental peace is completely gone and she needs at least a little peace which is clear from her speech- ALISON: (Softly). All I want is a little peace (Ibid, P-50). She undergoes mental suffering to such an extent that her mental condition becomes too weak and she becomes a victim of mental illness. And to escape that mental illness and to get peace she leaves her husband and goes to her parents' home. But it does help her to rescue from mental illness, rather as a result of her suffering she has a miscarriage and she suffers extremely and possesses weak health though ultimately they are reunited in the play.

#### **Conclusion:-**

In view of the aforesaid discussion it becomes conspicuous that both Meena Kandasamy and John Osborne are adept in the art of delineating domestic violence in the texture of their writings. But Meena Kandasamy's uniqueness lies in her open, candid and frank depiction of domestic violence leaving the social shame aside. Here we find two contrasting sides of the same coin. Both women are the victim of domestic violence but the affects are not the same. One has undergone through extreme form of physical violence which only can only disturb her peace of mind and can give her unbearable pain, but nothing more than that. It fails to crush her spirit, her zeal to become a writer. She struggles against it and takes a bold decision to leave her husband to fulfil her dream. The other woman also undergoes through domestic violence. Here she is attacked verbally not physically. But her suffering is more pathetic than the woman in *When I Hit You*. She suffers mentally to such an extent that she has also lost her peace of mind and what is more she has a miscarriage which results in her weakness, though, at the end they are reunited.

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