

A Subaltern Reading of Meena Kandasamy's "When I Hit You"

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Introduction

"When I Hit You: or, A Portrait of a Writer as a Young Wife" is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Meena Kandasamy and published in the year 2020. The story is told by an unnamed narrator who is married to a communist college professor. The novel explores how even a modern educated woman is silenced by patriarchy. It explores how domestic abuse is not just physical but also extends to the total erasure of a woman's identity. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory, subaltern are not people who are quiet but rather they are someone who is denied the space to speak and to be heard by the structures of power and society. This is exactly what happens in the novel as well which will be further looked into in this paper.

This paper will look into how the husband in the novel becomes a domestic colonizer when ironically he uploads the principles and ideologies of Marxism. Furthermore, when the concept of 'mimicry' by Homi Bhabha is also applied, it becomes clear that the husband was his revolutionary ideology as a tool of oppression. By stealing her voice and identity, the narrator is turned into a woman speak. Eventually in the end her act of writing becomes her form of rebellion against patriarchy.

The Husband as 'Domestic Colonizer'

When the husband from the novel is analyzed he seems to be an intellect with a modern outlook from the basis of his profession as a professor and his Marxist ideologies. But in reality he is nothing like that. His ideologies do not really match his actions. It becomes a mask which he cleverly uses in order to justify his actions when he cleverly uses in order to justify his actions when he takes her email id and also asks or even forces to deactivate her facebook account. Marriage as a system already separates the woman from her husband works there. She has to look for a job there which attempt is also looked down upon by her husband but he finally agrees to it.

He justifies his action when he asks her to deactivate Facebook by saying that 'it's a waste of time' and that it is for her own good. This way he also cuts off her connection to the world outside. In

her seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak mentions how the First World intellectuals speak for the third world people and critiques this. In the same way, the narrator’s husband speaks for her because he believes it to be his duty to protect his wife. He prefers her living in the shadow by erasing her own individual identity. This could be seen from the instances when he replies to her mails from her mail id. He is a respected individual in the society but in his private life he is an abuser. He abuses her physically as it is a way that he exerts his power over her. He proves his agency that he has over her body. No matter what he does to her, she should accept it because she knows nothing. He looks and behaves like an individual with a progressive mindset. But he mimics what he aims to overthrow and rebel against. He becomes the oppressor when he rebels against the oppressors.

How the Society Fails to Protect Her

It is especially because of the way he shows himself to the public, like the caring husband, that the society refuses to believe the narrator. When she tells her parents about how he beats and abuses her, they simply tell her to put up with it. Her mother tells her that it is just his way of showing his love. When she tells her parents about how he beats and abuses her, they simply tell her to put up with it. Her mother tells her that is just his way of showing his love. When she says that he does not allow her to write or even use her own mail id, they just say that he is doing that for her own good. This is how the parents fail to provide her the space for her to speak. They force her back into the ‘colony’ i.e the husband’s house because that way they can maintain their social standing. They want to protect the family’s reputation which they value more than their daughter back since a failed marriage means a bad reputation in the society.

Finally she gets an opportunity to teach a class in her husband’s stead. But even there she is mocked for her appearance. Her husband after getting to know about this does not get mad but rather he advises to look and dress in a respectable manner, she is judged by the way she looks and the husband as well the society believe it to be their responsibility to point it out to her. Even the students have internalized the idea that a woman should be looking a certain way in order to be considered ‘respectable’. This is also how the society enforces subalternity on her through beliefs and mockeries.

Speech and Silence

Before looking into how speech and silence is used in the novel, it is important to look into how the narrator used the act of writing as a tool against her husband. It scares her husband to the core when she writes about her married life. Hence begins to write more as it gives her a sense of satisfaction to rebel against her husband. She starts writing to her imaginary lovers and erases it before her husband finds out about these letters and hence he can never stop her from writing. She continues to write without her husband’s knowledge. Then she starts to use silence as a weapon because when she is silent it makes her husband believe that he has won the battle. Her silence does not indicate her passivity instead it is her strategy to not involve herself in a conversation with her husband as that would only put her life in risk. At the end when she speaks out it shocks her husband and she nearly dies. The resulting danger to her life reflects the core tenet of subaltern studies, that the breaking of silence is not merely a linguistic act, it is a confrontation to the power structure.

Conclusion

In conclusion Meena Kandasamy’s “When I Hit You” becomes an example of how domestic abuse can be studied as a form of colonization. A subaltern study of the novel makes it clear that

the narrator's husband was an abuser who also mimicked the colonizer and the oppressor while ironically using the Marxist ideology to hide this part of him. He tried to turn the narrator into a subaltern without a voice, digital voice and identity.

This silencing and the process of turning the narrator into a subaltern was not only attempted by the husband, he was also supported and aided by the society. The parents of the narrator forced her to stay with her husband and the society heavily judged her for everything that she did. Hence, they all worked together in order to keep her a subaltern where her pain was treated as something trivial. However, the narrator's clever use of silence and her secret love letters to her imaginary lovers prove that the mind cannot be fully colonized.

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