

# FROM VICTIMHOOD TO VENGEANCE: TRANSFORMATIONS OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S LIFE WRITING

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## ABSTRACT

*Using case studies from Meena Kandasamy's books *Exquisite Cadavers* and *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, this essay investigates how female subjectivity evolved over Kandasamy's lifetime writing. With stories, Dalit feminist Kandasamy creates active resistance against patriarchy, caste, and domestic abuse that goes beyond victimhood. The paper investigates how Kandasamy reinterpreted the female subject as a strong figure of vengeance by using language, narrative structure, and literary revolution, hence changing her function from that of a silenced victim. Among the main issues under investigation are trauma, gendered violence, resistance, opposition, and the politics of wrath. Feminist, postcolonial, and trauma theory frames guide the qualitative textual investigation used in this essay. It looks at how Kandasamy subverts patriarchal narratives by using metafiction, poetic intervention, and fragmentation—devices of experimental storytelling. The study emphasises, using Dalit and global feminist discourse as a framework, Kandasamy's special contribution to modern life writing. In the end, this essay contends that her works provide a critical and audacious reinventions of female subjectivity in the postcolonial Indian context by documenting personal suffering and actively reinterpreted as a catalyst for emancipation and social reform.*

**Keywords:** Female subjectivity, victimhood, vengeance, Meena Kandasamy, trauma, feminist life writing, resistance, gender violence.

## INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy thanks modern Indian English writers for their courageous depiction of gender, caste, and systematic violence, which has driven her to the front of the field. As a Dalit-feminist writer, her identity is very central to her lived experience and artistic expression. Kandasamy's art is informed by the gendered violence, linked violences of caste patriarchy, and sociopolitical reality of Dalit subjugation. Kandasamy hailed from Tamil Nadu. Her works in poetry, literature, translations, and activism all aim at prevailing narratives and normalise silences connected to concerns like caste-based exclusion, domestic violence, and marital rape. In her politically charged narrative that she weaves across her life writing, particularly *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* and *Exquisite Cadavers*, she asserts the agency of subaltern women through resistance, anger, and radical reimagining rather than passivity or endurance.

The life writing genre includes autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and other types of introspective narrative covering the author's life events. Life writing transcends basic self-narrative in

feminist literary discourse as a means of reclaiming one's voice, memory, and history—particularly for those whose lives have been historically ignored or misunderstood. In this context, "female subjectivity" describes how women manage power relations and comprehend and convey their identities. It includes both the internal and outside conceptions of women within a given sociopolitical setting. One must examine the lens of victimisation, invisibility, and subordination to build female subjectivity in patriarchal and casteist societies. Still, feminist writers like as Kandasamy intervene in these conversations to turn subjectivity into a dynamic and strong sense of self. Through her life writings, Kandasamy shows a radical reconfiguration of the feminine subject from a situation of quiet suffering to one of vocal reprisals.

The main goal of this study is to examine how Meena Kandasamy's life writings handle the change of female subjectivity. Especially, in Kandasamy's tales taken from her own life, how does the change from helplessness to agency? How does she use books to question conventional wisdom about abused women as docile and compliant? How may her work challenge the dualism of oppression and resistance, victim and actor, voice and silence? The responses to these enquiries will help to clarify the political and aesthetic value of her creations. Kandasamy wants people to act, not make them feel guilty about her characters; so, her work is not therapeutic but rather revolutionary. She is relentless about her characters and her own not objectification. Rather, she creates space in literature for women to recover their agency, challenge patriarchy, and rethink their subjectivity via artistic retaliation and narrative self-assertion.

This study's significance is on its contribution to postcolonial and feminist dialogue. Dalit women authors still find their voices excluded in a worldwide literary scene still dominated by Eurocentric viewpoints. Postcolonial feminist theory acknowledges that gendered oppression cannot be comprehended apart from other kinds of systematic inequalities like caste, colour, and class. Works by Kandasamy show the intersectionality demanded in modern feminist critique. She reveals how caste, language, and regional hierarchies mediate patriarchy in India, therefore exposing the multidimensional character of oppression there rather than monolithic form. Her work also challenges accepted forms of female resistance, suggesting that experimental forms, wrath, fragmentation, and other emotions could be as legitimate—and maybe more successful—than conciliatory stories. Her art gives victims agency, vocabulary, and political clarity, therefore complicating the story of victimhood. By providing a clearly South Asian, Dalit, and militant viewpoint on personal and political development, she thus adds to the worldwide conversation on feminist life writing.

This work aims at numerous main goals. It seeks first to examine the literary devices Kandasamy uses to show the change of female subjectivity. Second, it looks at how pain, violence, and retribution are narrativized to subvert accepted depictions of suffering women. Third, it looks at how experimental narrative shapes—that is, how non-linear storytelling, metafictional commentary, and poetry interjections could challenge conventional autobiographical genres. Ultimately, the essay seeks to place Kandasamy's work within a larger feminist and postcolonial perspective thereby stressing the special contribution of Dalit-feminist writing to modern literature. The main research concerns driving this project are: How does Meena Kandasamy define female subjectivity in her life writing? Which aspects of victimisation and docility do her writings challenge? In what ways could shape and language help to articulate revenge and resistance?

The article is divided into multiple linked parts to help to achieve these goals. After this introduction, the literature review examines Dalit literature, feminist theory, trauma studies, and life writing already in publication. It highlights the theoretical contributions of writers including Judith Butler, bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Cathy Caruth as well as the gaps in present scholarly debates on Kandasamy's work—especially the underexplored theme of vengeance as a feminist narrative strategy. Drawing on feminist theory, trauma theory, and postcolonial viewpoints, the section on theoretical framework then outlines the lenses through which the books will be examined. Emphasising attentive reading and textual analysis of two significant works by Kandasamy, the section on the methodology illustrates the qualitative, interpretative approach used for this research.

The analysis and discussion section of the article consists of four main components. Domestic violence and the constraining effects it has on victims are the central themes of *When I Hit You*. The second part examines how the protagonist finds her narrative voice and subjectivity via storytelling and writing, and how she reclaims her narrative space. Part three delves into the concepts of empowerment and vengeance, with the former arguing that anger is a valid and transformative emotion and the latter arguing that it is an unreasonable extreme. The last section of the research delves into *Exquisite Cadavers*, analysing the work through the lenses of metafiction and fragmented form, specifically looking at how they challenge patriarchal narrative standards. The interplay between Kandasamy's formal innovation and the theme of resistance is shown by this multi-level analysis. The remainder of the publication is devoted to summaries of the findings, conclusions that bring together the paper's arguments, and recommendations for further research. In these passages, we see how pain is not only documented in Kandasamy's autobiography, but also recast as an impetus for female resistance. Her works effectively link personal suffering with collective resistance, making them powerful tools for altering the politics of subjectivity, agency, and voice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the critical discourses that interact with Meena Kandasamy's life writing are feminist literary theory, postcolonial literature, trauma narratives, and Dalit studies. Scholars like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call autobiographical practices that function as acts of self-representation—often challenging accepted societal narratives—life writing. Feminist critics have embraced life writing as a powerful tool for historically suppressed women's resistance. Writings of Kandasamy match this canon as, in writing one's own words, one is reclaiming their narrative and engaging in political engagement. The importance of sharing one's personal pain and engaging in communal conflicts is underlined in the body of current feminist life writing. Scholars like Leigh Gilmore and Nancy K. Miller argue that autobiographical writing by women is naturally political as it questions the restrictive systems of patriarchy. One shining example of this is the work of Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*, which questions the victim narrative and explores the agony of domestic abuse. Feminist writers such as bell hooks have eloquently argued the value of writing as a tool for both exacting retribution for gendered kinds of abuse and survival.

As an independent school of thought within Indian literature, Dalit writing highlights the experience of oppression based on caste. Being a Dalit woman, Kandasamy not only relies on this heritage but also builds upon it by highlighting the way caste and gender intertwine. The distinctive epistemology offered by Dalit women's narratives is often neglected in mainstream feminist and Dalit male narratives, as pointed out by scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru. This intersectional approach is consistent with Kandasamy's literature, which challenges patriarchy and the upper-caste systems that

sustain it. But there isn't a tonne of scholarship that dives deep into her works' subjective shift from victimisation to revenge. Through the use of postmodern and metafictional approaches, Kandasamy explores several narrative forms in *Exquisite Cadavers*. While previous research has pointed out the novel's dual structure and fragmentation, very little has investigated how the author's artistic decisions mirror the deconstruction and reconstruction of female subjectivity. Although scholars like Pramod K. Nayar and Anannya Dasgupta have pointed out Kandasamy's formal experimentation, there has been little research into how these forms are used as instruments of female resistance.

A further essential aspect of this research is the idea of trauma and the ways in which it is portrayed storytelling. One valuable lens through which to examine the ways in which the characters in Kandasamy's work process and resist violence is Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which addresses the delayed and fragmented quality of traumatised memory. In contrast to more conventional accounts of trauma, which tend to focus on recovery and resolution, Kandasamy reimagines trauma in his writings as a site of political awakening and artistic opposition. Autobiographical trauma writing often follows a therapeutic narrative arc, but this presents a challenge to that. When trying to make sense of the narrative actions that Kandasamy's characters engage in to exercise agency, Judith Butler's concept of performative subjectivity is useful. Their identities are continually being reshaped by speech, writing, and struggle; they are not passive victims. Bell hooks' concept of "talking back" provides a useful framework for understanding how the characters in Kandasamy's novel regain their voices despite societal efforts to silence them. Although Kandasamy's literary contributions are being more acknowledged, critical assessments tend to isolate her work's stylistic features or its thematic components (such violence and caste). Scholarly work that takes a comprehensive look at the female subject's development from helpless victim to active vengeance is noticeably lacking. To remedy this, this study integrates feminist, postcolonial, and trauma theory to investigate how Kandasamy's narrative techniques help to reshape women's agency.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Trauma studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial feminist perspectives are used to critically analyse Meena Kandasamy's life writing transformation of female subjectivity. These theoretical frameworks allow us to study Kandasamy's feminine ego in *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers* as it evolves from repressed victimisation to strong retaliation. This research uses feminist theory. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposed performative subjectivity, which holds that gender is a social construct. Kandasamy depicts female subjectivity via language, calm, anguish, and rage. Her heroes demonstrate that gendered identity may vary and even shift if they don't passively accept societal gender conventions. This perspective shows how literary rebellion and retribution are self-definition performances that challenge patriarchal standards.

Bell hooks' *Talking Back* and *Ain't I a Woman?* are essential for understanding Kandasamy's stories' speech, voice, and self-assertion. Hooks says black and downtrodden women are resisting by speaking up after being silenced. By writing tales, Kandasamy's heroes reclaim their life. They speak out against caste discrimination, sexism, and marital cruelty in feminist politics that uses words to empower. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* critiques Western feminism from another perspective. Localised, intersectional feminism recognises how cultural, historical, and social factors affect women's lives, Mohanty says. Postcolonial Indian female Dalit writer Kandasamy illustrates this idea. Caste reality, linguistic marginalisation, and postcolonial trauma underpin her feminism, not an abstract

concept. Thus, Mohanty's intersectionality shapes Kandasamy's subjectivity as female, Dalit, and postcolonial.

Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's, is crucial to this interpretation. Trauma returns hauntingly, fragmentedly, according to Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*. Kandasamy depicts domestic abuse as recurring trauma. Kandasamy's trauma tales focus on resistance rather than healing. Reliving suffering via memory or writing becomes a location of narrative agency, not victimisation. Trauma theory helps this article comprehend how Kandasamy depicts violence as artistic and political power. This study examines wrath as resistance in feminist and postcolonial discourses. Women's rage is often disregarded or pathologised. Modern feminist thinkers contend that wrath may be political. Kandasamy's wrath is valid and transformational in reaction to systematic injustice. Her characters' rage is communicated in harsh writing, piercing sarcasm, and poetic fragmentation. This indignation is personal and communal, channelling generations of women oppressed by patriarchy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study examines Meena Kandasamy's life writing's change of female subjectivity via textual analysis. Close reading is used to analyse narrative structure, language, symbolism, and trauma, gender violence, and agency in *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers*. The interpretative method examines how Kandasamy's fragmentation, metafiction, and lyrical style empower and resist. Feminist, postcolonial, and trauma theories are used to understand texts in their socio-cultural and political settings. Modern feminist life writing explores how narrative voice, literary style, and storytelling represent the movement from victimisation to retribution, empowering female subjectivity.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. Representation of Victimhood**

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* depicts victimisation as personal and political. The protagonist's marital violence is described in harsh, poetic writing that captures and erases the feminine self in patriarchal institutions. Kandasamy shows how the home sphere, frequently idealised as a place of safety and affection, becomes a prison for the narrator, with monitoring, coercion, and violence. Kandasamy suggests that shame and fear normalise gender-based violence in India, keeping women silent. The protagonist is silenced by her violent spouse and a society that promotes male dominance and female subjugation. She is cut off from friends and family, denied contact, and deprived of her writing identity. Internalised patriarchy and social complicity show how victimisation is systemic, as the abuser constantly polices her body and psyche. Kandasamy's visceral and beautiful prose captures the sufferer's everyday misery, anxiety, and numbness. The recurrence of violence and voice elimination create a claustrophobic story that mimics many women's terrible reality.

This setting portrays victimhood as a status that is constantly enforced. Kandasamy asks readers to evaluate gendered violence's intellectual and artistic toll by showing the protagonist's struggle to think and create. She emphasises the psychological and existential aspects of domestic violence rather than its legal or moral aspects.

### **B. Emergence of Voice and Subjectivity**

Kandasamy frees her protagonist from victimhood. Instead, the narrative methodically tracks voice and subjectivity's regeneration. The protagonist resists by telling her tale. She speaks, remembers, and reclaims her identity despite the violence that threatens to destroy her. Writing is revolutionary, not just therapeutic.

The narrative voice of *When I Hit You* changes from fragmented and timid to aggressive and rebellious. Kandasamy utilises metafiction to show how the plot is formed and take control. This is particularly true when the narrator addresses the reader or discusses writing. These moments shatter the fourth wall, producing intensity and immediacy that supports feminist concepts of breaking silence and giving witness.

Kandasamy gives her protagonist agency using this storytelling method. Active narrative replaces passive pain, transforming female subjectivity. From being spoken for to speaking back, from being an object of violence to telling one's own tale. This change is a feminist initiative to recognise marginalised voices.

In the rise of subjectivity, Kandasamy emphasises language politics. Irony, sarcasm, and lyrical flourishes in her writing question gender, love, and marital norms. Narrator's voice expresses and subverts. She challenges cultural scripts for women and crafts her own by owning her narrative.

### **C. Vengeance and Empowerment**

Kandasamy's acceptance of revenge as a feminist reaction is perhaps her most extreme. *When I Hit You* celebrates fury and revenge as transformational energies, unlike other stories. Kandasamy turns these feelings into political reactions to patriarchal aggression. Instead of detrimental, they are seen as necessary for power and agency.

The protagonist's departure from her violent spouse is bold and uncompromising. She reclaims her life and story with her deed. Her wrath is justified, founded on systemic injustice. This depiction makes female fury a strength instead than a shame.

Vengeance in Kandasamy's work also addresses literary form. Writing the book was revenge—a means to recover speech, expose brutality, and defy silent. The narrative's sharp judgement and unwavering honesty prevent romanticising pain. Self-definition and narrative control empower the protagonist.

This focus on retribution follows a feminist tradition that views fury as a social change agent. It recalls Audre Lorde's claim that rage, properly channelled, may be a potent political instrument. Vengeance in Kandasamy's writing is ideological, a literary uprising against female domination.

### **D. Fragmentation and Form in Exquisite Cadavers**

*Exquisite Cadavers* uses experimental storytelling approaches to complicate and deepen female subjectivity beyond autobiography. The novel's dual-column structure mixes fiction with personal pieces, notes, and comments. Fragmentation is a method to oppose narrative closure and authorial control, not a fancy.

Kandasamy questions the idea that women, especially women of colour, must continually reveal and explain their pain for public consumption by merging fiction and autobiography. Fragmented forms symbolise the fragmented self, which defies categorisation and understanding. The broken form reflects

trauma, which frequently resists linear storytelling and reasoning. The work also explores authorial presence and absence. Kandasamy expresses and conceals herself via personal passages. This paradox represents marginalised authors' struggle between prominence and vulnerability. The fragmented shape lets her manage her tale while revealing and resisting.

The fictional-autobiographical dialogue highlights representation politics. Kandasamy emphasises the authenticity required on authors, particularly marginalised ones. She defends her creative independence and narrative intricacy by refusing. *Exquisite Cadavers'* female protagonist is complex, elusive, and unfinished. Kandasamy defies narrative norms and represents female resistance via fragmentation. Resisting social norms is shown in the inability to provide a coherent tale. This formal innovation supports the novel's theme of dynamic, resistive, and ever-changing feminine subjectivity.

Finally, Meena Kandasamy's life writing reimagines female subjectivity. From the heartbreaking victimisation of *When I Hit You* to the experimental defiance of *Exquisite Cadavers*, her works alter via voice, wrath, and narrative creativity. Kandasamy confronts gender, trauma, and resistance paradigms in these writings, presenting a strong, unapologetic image of powerful female.

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### **D. Fragmentation and Form in *Exquisite Cadavers***

Using experimental storytelling strategies that both complicate and deepen the examination of female subjectivity, *Exquisite Cadavers* represents a considerable shift from standard autobiographical form. The work is organised as a dual-column text and has both fictional and nonfictional narratives, notes, and comments. This disjointed style is not an aesthetic flourish but rather an intentional tactic to evade story resolution and authorial dominance. The pressure on women, especially women of colour, to continually explain and expose their pain for public consumption is challenged by Kandasamy, whose work blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography. A disjointed self, one that defies easy categorisation or comprehension, is symbolised by the broken shape. Trauma experiences, like the fragmented structure, often resist logical consistency and linear storytelling.

Furthermore, the concept of authorial presence and absence is subtly manipulated throughout the book. Kandasamy emphasises and obscures her presence by adding personal fragments in the margins. Many

authors from marginalised communities experience this ambivalence, which is a reflection of the struggle between being visible and being vulnerable. She is able to keep command of her narrative and participate in actions of resistance and disclosure because to the form's fragmentation.

The politics of representation are further brought to light by the interaction of the fictional and the personal. The pressures on authors, particularly those from marginalised groups, to seem real are highlighted by Kandasamy. Her defiance of this demand is a declaration of her right to creative autonomy and nuanced storytelling. Rather than being a victim or a heroine, the female protagonist in *Exquisite Cadavers* is complex, evasive, and stubbornly unfinished.

Kandasamy enacts a female resistance via fragmentation, which violates narrative norms. Refusing to comply to cultural norms is reflected in the story's incoherence and difficulty in being digested. The novel's themes are supported by this stylistic innovation, which further emphasises that female subjectivity is ever-evolving, resistive, and dynamic.

## FINDINGS

According to the research, Meena Kandasamy transforms female subjectivity into a fluid and ever-changing form of resistance, rather than a fixed identity associated with victimisation. By reclaiming their voices, embracing their anger, and subverting conventional narrative structures, her characters—who at first personify quiet and servitude—evolve into powerful, independent actors. Empowering women's rage as a fuel for empowerment, vengeance arises as a feminist act of resistance, rather than a reactive feeling. via her works, Kandasamy allows multidimensional expressions of trauma, identity, and agency via language and shape, which are not neutral tools but vehicles of resistance. Redefining resistance as a woman, particularly in a Dalit and postcolonial setting, this shift from passive endurance to literary rebellion challenges patriarchal norms.

## CONCLUSION

In her autobiography, Meena Kandasamy powerfully examines how female subjectivity shifts from victimisations to retribution. She offers writing as a path to political and personal liberation in *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers*, while also criticising the sexism and violence that women experience. Her depiction of rage and revenge subverts stereotypical notions of femininity by reimagining these feelings as potent reactions to tyranny. Her writing's formal experimentation highlights how feminine identity is both malleable and strong. This research finds that Kandasamy's narratives do more than just record pain; they also work as forms of resistance, providing new ways for feminists to express themselves that are based on agency, voice, and rebellion. She has shown via her writing that life writing can shake things up, make you question your assumptions, and change you for the better.

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