

UNCRUMPLING THE CRUMPLED: A TAKE ON MISANTHROPIST, CHAVUNISTIC ELITE REGRESSORS VIS-À-VIS MEENA KANDASAMY'S 'WHEN I HIT YOU'

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Abstract— Meena Kandasamy's 'When I hit you' is a tale of a battered wife who happens to be an aspiring writer. The novel traces the dichotomies of a misogynist husband who uses his profession and his ideologies as a masquerade to abuse his wife. It is a chilling account of the domestic violence and marital rape that the wife undergoes despite being an educated woman of elite class. If such is the scenario of the elite classes then, undoubtedly it is worse in case of a woman who is not economically liberated. The novel also raises issues such as class differentiation, child molestation, social isolation and most unflinchingly about domestic violence and marital rape. It also explores the reasons as to why people cling onto the relationship despite being battered and bruised as evident in the novel. The work of art attacks the diabolical nature of the male ego that is represented by the character of the antagonist professor and how writing acts as a liberating force for the protagonist.

Keywords— Domestic violence, Marital rape, Petite-bourgeois, Atrocities, Social isolation.

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved". – Dr. B. R.

Ambedkar.

Women have an equal or a more pivotal role to play in the progress of a community or a society or a civilization. When we brood over the state of women in the nation, it doesn't reflect a picturesque image. In spite of all the rights and protection that is inherited in our constitution which is regarded as the best in the world, there is a gargantuan bulk of atrocities that are being heaped on the feminine psyche and physique. It is in this light that we have an enormous task of delegating women at par in all the arenas. There are many hindrances in prioritizing the marginalized. Dalit

feminism deals with issues of paramount importance. It is a feminist perspective that includes questioning caste and gender roles among the Dalit population and within feminism and the larger women's movement. Suffering for a Dalit woman is twofold as she suffers on the caste as well as the gender front. Meena Kandasamy being a Dalit feminist brings in the elements that have haunted thousands of people into the canvas of the novel in a subtle way.

Domestic violence is an issue of major concern in a nation like ours wherein the women have been subjugated to various forms of discrimination since ages. On giving a deep thought we realize that the religions of the land have also viewed women under the condescending lens. The despicable treatment meted out to women is seen across the continents and since time immemorable. Not many of us are aware of the fact that a mathematician like Pythagoras had this to say about women,

"There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman".

Ours is a nation wherein the progressive Hindu code bill drafted by Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was not passed as the parliamentarians did not want to see the women bestowed with equal rights and opportunities. No wonder the so called educated, thinking men of our country do indulge in sadistic acts of inflicting pain on their spouses both psychologically and physically. The unnamed professor in the novel is no exception to the creed of such men. As per the data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), not less than 35% of the Indian women are subjected to domestic violence. This is a serious issue to be addressed but, what makes it worse is the fact that this is the recorded data whereas quite a large junk of the incidents of domestic violence go unnoticed or the society has taken

women for granted. If all the incidents of domestic violence are recorded then, am sure that the figures would be a staggering one which would put us to shame. The fact that most of the cases of domestic violence are related to physical atrocities makes the situation bleak as the psychological harassment is hardly taken count of. A human can be devastated even without causing any physical harm on the body is something that the society has to take on a serious note. The mental agony that the married women face puts a civilized society to shame.

The issue of marital rape is still considered a taboo to be spoken about and the majority of the people would laugh at the mention of the word marital rape. Off late, there has been an awareness that has been propagated about the issue. People still believe that the body of the spouse belongs to the husband and makes him fill with an air of proprietorship. In most of the cases, a woman is made to wonder what an opinion means in course of the intercourse. The phallus is at work in full fledged hegemony over a lump of muscles that hardly reciprocates the feelings. The act of copulating which is as psychological as physical is denigrated to a mere physical activity with no emotions attached. There is a quote from the play titled, Pinjra "In the bedroom, he doesn't ask for opinions", which reflects the chauvinistic attitude of men with regard to the bodily cravings. Rape in simpler terms is a sexual act without the consent of a person and in majority of the cases the victim is a female. Marital sex is a sexual act without the consent of the spouse. It is this form of domestic violence that doesn't shock people which has made it awful. The novel with elements of biography begins with the mother of the victim narrating the tale of the thumped daughter. The narration of the parents varies depending on the level of acquaintance of the person to whom it is addressed. It is their versions of the story that prompts the author to narrate her tale of scathing portrait of traditional wedlock in modern India. The contract of marriage has turned into a contract of ownership for her. It has turned to be a bond with trust that is undermined by violence. It talks about the power dynamics that is prevalent in the family and India being majorly a patriarchal society is not sensitive enough to pay heed to it. The mother while narrating the gruesome tale doesn't talk about the monster husband and his violent ways. It reflects the soft attitude as they are apprehensive about the society's reception of her daughter. The victim is battered for four months and eight days in a bond of marriage which has no sense of value for her. "They were the feet of a slave" utters her mother which mirrors the dilapidated state of her daughter.

The aspiring writer was socially isolated and confined to the space of three rooms and a veranda with all her communications cut off. What is interesting are the circumstances that lead to the marriage. She had met him during an online campaign against capital punishment and their intimacy grew in time which leads to their marriage. The husband is a professor who calls himself a communist, an ex revolutionary and so on which assists him to mask his onslaught on his spouse. She is forced to change her phone number, all of her mails are answered by him and he threatens to hurt himself if she doesn't deactivate her facebook account as he fears that he would be traced down. The professor stoops with time and grows in monstrosity. There is a falsely propagated myth that equates women with short hairs to the prostitutes of the British and the professor adheres to it and calls it as an European influence. The act of stereotyping attains a new low and is juxtaposed with the lectures that he delivers. Their marriage becomes a symbol of battered faces and bruised male egos as intellectual and physical cruelty is unleashed upon her. She being a Tamilian finds it hard to live in Mangalore as language acts as a barrier to her which further exasperates her life. There is an absolute failure of communication in her case which only aggravates her isolation.

He finds the physical aspects of beauty as a threat and suspects his wife of adultery which brings to her mind the very iconic dialogue of Gabbar, "Kitne aadmi they?" from the cult movie, Sholay. He feels that his wife must have been into affairs prior to the marriage. It is towards the ending of the novel that we get to know that the professor had a failed marriage under his kitty. Plainness pleased him. He forbade her from wearing kohl as he felt it was worn by screen sirens and seductresses. It is the duplicity of his persona that hits us hard as he renders himself under the guise of a progressive man. He would quarrel if she went out without a dupatta and made her to wear the shapeless monstrosity called the nightie. She was forced to play the role of a dutiful wife as her survival solely depended on how well she played it. She had to gratify him. In her words,

"To consult a man is to make him feel like a King, and to report to him is to make him feel like a God".

The house turns out to a vicious place for her as she is confined within it,

"How the rooms begin to close in on this woman when she is being violated, how the walls chase her into corners... nowhere to run, to hide, to evade his presence". These words sum up her hapless state and the ruthless machismo at work.

She describes her job of a wife as “laboring with my cunt, laboring with my hands”. She opines that marriage brings with it the division of labour. Marriage turns out to be a re-education camp for her as he tries to imbibe the ideologies of the communist movement and very soon the realization is expressed in her words,

“I must learn that a communist woman is treated equally and respectfully by comrades in public but can be slapped and called a whore behind closed doors. This is dialectics”. She recalls the incident when she was molested at the age of eight by the teenage neighbor citing that he was doing it for her good. Child molestation is also a very sensitive issue to which we have to wake up to. The husband though proclaims women empowerment doesn’t want his wife to attain economic independence so that she cannot come out of her status of being an imprisoned wife. He suggests only the odd jobs which are way below her standards from the societal perspectives. It is the emergence of an economically independent woman or as author Shashi Deshpande puts it as “Neo-women” that a dichotomous man fears the most. In the words of Karl Marx, “Economics is a base on which life is a superstructure”.

There are times wherein she contemplates suicide but, decides against it as she realizes that she is more worth alive than dead. There are two options for her, fight or flight. The writer chooses the former than the latter. The husband is in falsity over the concept of feminism,

“Your feminism will drive away all the men who come your way. No man stands a chance”.

Her pathetic state is expressed in her words, “What I see is what I am made to foresee”.

She is cornered by him in her life. An analogy is drawn between the husband and the exorcist as the intensity of the physical violence gets aggravated. She becomes silent as she feels that it is an invincible shield but only to be broken by his brute force. Sex is used as a weapon to tame. He has enough lubricant to slide past her resistance. Her screams become inaudible to his ears.

“A rape is a fight you did not win, you could not win. A rape is defeat, punishment”.

What rubs salt to the injuries of the bruised wife are his words wherein he boasts of killing a comrade for violating a girl.

The situation gets worsened when he threatens to kill her. She is made to dwell under constant fear. An educated person with a criminal mind could be a deadly synthesis. She fears being burnt like the young wives who are charred to death at the rate of a bride for every 90 minutes. Tradition too has a role in demeaning women and she

opines that tradition never goes out of fashion and has rather changed form from sati to dowry. These murders are a test of fire where no wife returns alive.

What comes as a shocker is the callous attitude of the husband in begetting the child. He doesn’t even care to discuss it with her. It makes us to contemplate on the gravity of the situation wherein the woman who is to endure the pain of the progeny for pursuing the lineage has got nothing to say in this crucial factor in most of the cases. The very thought of gestation frightens her and she attempts to avoid pregnancy which results in further abuses and bruises. On a visit to the gynaecologist, it is revealed that the professor was married before this marriage and that girl had managed to escape from his clutches. This sets her with a hope.

There are reasons as to why a woman who aspired to be a writer didn’t raise her voice and suffered in silence. Her voice was subverted and her parents to whom she spoke about the issues asked her to wait and keep mum. Moreover, the husband played the role of a dutiful son-in-law to her parents. He masqueraded as a victim, “I’m the battered woman, but he is the one who is playing the role of the victim”.

As George Eliot expresses in ‘Middlemarch’,

“In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome dubious eggs called possibilities”, hope is another major factor that made her to cling to the bond. In her words,

“Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage”.

It doesn’t take much time for the hopes to turn into despairs and she is finally liberated from the venomous circle of marriage. There is also a take on the red tapism of the judiciary and its intricacies as it takes a long time for the pleas to be settled,

“Sometimes the shame is not the beatings, not the rape. The shaming is in being asked to stand to judgment”.

There is a constant reference made to the term ‘petite-bourgeois’ which stands for the small working class or the middle class. It is nothing but sardonicism of the professor as he mocks at them constantly while wearing the badge of a communist. Communism is an ideology which stresses on the absence of social classes and which stands for the working class. The wife has her share of victories when she accuses him to be a coward as he had eloped leaving his friend to be killed. She jibes him for not being a true revolutionary. This hurts his ego and paves way for their parting.

Writing becomes a metonymy of liberation for the estranged wife. Her previous attempts to write were met

with lot of repressions. When she is to write an article on the sexuality of women for Outlook, she is scoffed at and is called as a slave of corporate media and a part of vulgar imperialist culture. He terms it as elite prostitution to which she replies in a searing manner,

“Is the prostitute not a working woman?” This is echoed in the words of Eric Sprankle, “If you think sex workers sell their bodies, but coal miners do not, your view of labour is clouded by your moralistic view of sexuality”.

She types the article on a Nokia E63 with lot of difficulties and somehow manages to send it by stealing his dongle and the bathroom becomes her domain for the work on the article. Reading is the way towards a revolutionary consciousness. It is the words that allow her to escape. It is the words that give birth to another woman. The restraints on writing applies only to her. While she is barred from writing about the violence on the domestic sphere, he flaunts it in his poems masquerading under the semblance of ideology. For her, writing becomes an act of supreme defiance.

She types letters to unknown lovers as an act of rebellion and erases them before his arrival. She finds joy in often repeating the word lover in her letters. This comes as an act of defiance from someone whose character has been under constant dubiousness. When they part their ways, she finds that around 26,000 of her mails are deleted and she is left to start everything from the scratch. She is determined and finds her way into the world of writing.

“When I hit you,
Comrade Lenin weeps,
I cry, he chronicles”.

These are the lines of a poem written by the professor which sums up the bipolarities of the mind of the misanthropist male psyche.

Interestingly, none of the characters in the novel are named and there is no burden of nomenclature to be carried along. The anonymous characters could be anyone who is suffering from the traits that are conveyed in the novel. Thus, there is an universal appeal in the novel. The novel has its share of raw and hard hitting lingo which only reflects the abusive language a woman is subjected to. It is also a known fact that most of the abuses hurled are directed towards the feminine gender.

This novel with biographical elements is a searing examination of a woman’s place in the contemporary Indian society, especially the so called elite classes in terms of the societal order.

“As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending”

There are a lot of writers who have been forced to numb their nibs and to quit writing. There are more number of women who have been suppressed and are waiting to be liberated. As realized by the author, liberation comes from within and until and unless the sufferers realize their worth and might, they will remain mute spectators to their own disdain. Its time for the era of convalescence and recuperation. Prioritizing the marginalized will go a long way in building a humanist society which is free from all sorts of discrimination. Love is the panacea that the world needs in large dosages and is the only feasible solution for the contentions of the human universe as expressed in the last lines of the novel,

“I am the woman who still believes, broken-heartedly, in Love”.

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