



The ‘Post-Truth’ of Toxic Masculinity in Leftist Circles: Reading Meena Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

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Abstract— *Meena Kandasamy’s When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* narrates the story of a wife trapped in an abusive marriage where her abuse is meted out and sustained through a structure of manipulative tactics which her abuser claims as nothing but “leftist truths”. This immaculate description of toxic masculinity and violence upheld by flawed yet historically founded absorptions of leftist political ideals begs the need for a deeper enquiry into how the left conserves toxic masculinity. This paper is a further analysis of the novel with respect to understanding the ways communist and socialist ideologies (or what can broadly be termed as the left in popular political vocabulary) defend and reproduce hegemonic notions of masculinity while at the same time denying its effects or existences. This is also an enquiry into the possibilities how the left has in many ways believed in what can be understood as a post-truth that it is inherently resistant of patriarchy, while upholding it.

Keywords— *Post-truth, Feminism, Toxic Masculinity, Leftism, Patriarchy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Meena Kandasamy’s novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017), is in more ways than one, an account of several manufactured truths that plague our social and political existence, but what stands out is a testimony that unravels the strands of masculinity that pervades the presumably revolutionary rhetoric of left-leaning political activists. In this part autobiographical novel, (which is about a wife trapped in an abusive marriage, with a Communist professor and an ex-Maoist fighter), Kandasamy talks about the ways how seemingly progressive arguments can oftentimes become an alibi for toxic masculinity, sexism and subsequently domestic abuse. The intent of this paper is to understand how these toxic traits that are presented in a progressive rationale, can be understood as a result of the ideals of masculinity or masculine politics that has existed in some manner, pervasively across all leftist or left-leaning political circles. And in doing so, how far do these traits formulate ‘post-truths’ about the supposed absence of toxic masculinity, or

the propagation of a “good and necessary” kind of masculinity in leftist politics, which in this case in the novel, as we will see later, is also a result of multiple other distortions and propagations of “post-truth” about leftist politics that are either misunderstood or manipulated by people in power (in this case, leftist men) to indulge in oppressive behavior. This paper tries to argue that leftist movements can end up perceiving discussions pertaining to gender and toxic masculinity as something circulated as ‘post-truth’ by the privileged, while being comfortably celebratory of the masculinistic idealisms that have been historically handed down to them. In order to do the same, this paper would try to look at the character of the husband vis-à-vis an almost caricaturish representative of the neo-conservative communist patriarch who tries to live up to the ideals of masculinity prevalent in the history of left leaning politics while harbouring feudalistic, misogynist attitudes.

II. THE POST-TRUTH OF THE PATRIARCHY FREE LEFT

In recent times, especially in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement which brought into the forefront countless instances of pervasive harassment of the leftist circles, the validity of a supposedly unproblematic "progressive left" has been brought to question. This can be somewhat determined with an initial response of shock (of whatever degree) that is to be expressed at the slightest encounter of sexist behavior from any faction that to some extent can be determined as the left in popular political vocabulary. In an article talking about the toxic masculinity of the left, Tiffany Diane Tso describes the barrage of sexist hypermasculine behaviour and online harassment that the supporters of Bernie Sanders had unleashed upon women (especially women from the marginalized communities), and how that attack was considered especially unprecedented because "with conservative bigotry, you know what you're going to get, you expect it. With Bernie Bros, you would think some wouldn't be so ugly toward other progressives." This widely prevailing idea that the left will somehow be intrinsically less prone to sexism that emanates from some realm of truth that the larger schema of ethics and commitment to a certain degree of equality that the left claims to propagate. What the novel by Kandasamy tries to come to grips with is the structural fragility of this very "truth". Her novel emphasizes in many ways that the character of the abusive husband can by no means be disregarded as a mere exception to the norms of leftist politics, but points at the possibility of a very structural specificity of how historically the left has tried to shape and influence masculinity which has resulted in a mere by-product in the character of the husband.

While institutional leftist politics, in recent times, has been criticized for its failure to distance itself completely from pervasive patriarchy, if one tries to unpack any populist figure of a communist idol, it would still be that of someone who is necessarily aggressive, militant and somewhat ethically masculine. The awareness of toxic masculinity in leftist politics seems to exist as a necessary mode to enhance political credibility and revolutionary potential. Judith Butler have pointed out that leftist politics often dismisses any kind of social movements critiquing gender hierarchies as "factionalizing, identitarian and particularistic" ('Merely Cultural', pg.1) because certain strands of leftist politics have a tendency to perceive issues pertaining to gender as a result of a populist, relatively unimportant politics of the elite. This also possibly leads to the oftentimes obliteration of all other kinds intersectionality and oppression other than that of class, which further dissolves any possibility of self-reflection and accountability if a leftist man is to be questioned on

his patriarchal actions. In the novel we find that the husband pulls up antics like slut-shaming the protagonist or questioning the alleged inappropriateness of a lipstick colour that the protagonist was wearing or pressurize her for child birth, while being vocal about the militant need to do good for the society is also indicative of the non-importance accorded to destroying patriarchy in the left. As Tiffany Dianne Tso states:

Though the left is the party of reproductive freedom, immigrants' rights, marriage equality and other social justice issues, many within will vocalize their disdain for those who focus on confronting racism, misogyny and other identity-related issues rather than widespread economic restructuring or pursuing rural white swing voters. Many of these same people blame "identity politics" for Trump's election and the Democratic Party's failures. (Tso, p.1)

III. THE AMBIGUOUS HISTORY OF MASCULINITY IN THE LEFT

George L. Mosse in his book *The Image Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* points out that despite attempts to distance themselves from normative forms of masculinity, men in socialist and communist circles have at best, been able to re-fashion highly masculine tendencies or disguise them in an empathetic lingo, mostly because of their valourising of militant, masculine violence and fostering of a sense of brotherhood and solidarity, that consciously or unconsciously excludes women or berates any modes of femininity (p. 108). Sidsel Braaten in *Contested Masculinity* describes the ambiguity of masculinity amongst the leftist men in Turkey as being reminiscent in the ways where even though gender and sexuality norms have underwent certain changes with the ushering of leftist ideology in Turkey, an uncontested militant love for the state has manifested itself in conserving some of the traditional masculinistic ideals. According to Braaten,

For leftist their political identity is their primary identity, the one they present themselves with and through which they identify themselves as different from other groups. Immanent in this political identity is the resistance against the state and the Kemalist ideology but this appears ambiguously linked to masculinity because of the force behind the male habitus embedded in historical context where leftist identity very much has reproduced instead of challenging an idealised version of masculinity. (Braaten, p.22)

When the archetype of the "The New Soviet Man" came into existence in the early twentieth century, it insisted on ideals about practicing selflessness. However this selflessness is also the pre-requisite to become transformed into the figure of the superior political fighter or as Trotsky says, "to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman." (Maja Soboleva, "The Concept of the "New Soviet Man" and its Short History") Moss says that this new archetype, despite having the potentials of deviating from the masculinistic norms previously propagated by more feudalistic archetypes, ended up creating the image of a man who oftentimes goes to the extent of doing the act of valorizing and exotifying his acts of selflessness and sacrifice to forward the cause of being the superhuman savior:

“..the manly ideal deserves to hold the center of the stage as well, for it not only

played a determining role in fashioning ideas of nationhood, respectability, and war, but it was present and influenced almost every aspect of modern history. Examining the manly ideal means dealing not only with nationalism or fascism, usually regarded as "masculine," but also with socialism, communism and, above all, the ideals and functioning of normative society.” (Moss,p.26)

IV. THE 'TRUTH(S)' OF TOXIC MASCULINITY, ITS EFFECTS AND THE (POST) "TRUTHS" THAT SURROUND IT

The sustained presence of various normative ideals of masculinity in leftist politics, which has been conserved and reproduced and has remained thoroughly unexamined has had various aftereffects. The inherent problematic nature of normative masculinity in itself has led to the perpetuation of various exclusionary tropes and by virtue of being denied and excused for, these relied on various faulty ideals to preserve itself. It is the myriad of flawed defenses that the web of surreptitious toxic masculinity in the left has been sustaining on can be determined as a system of post-truths that renews itself to prevent any real possibility of a valid critique. Kandasamy's novel is a testament to these post-truths, the sinister ways they are propagated and the oftentimes violent repercussions that they can have.

In the novel we see the character of the husband inflicts trauma and abuse on his wife only to justify them as a reprimand because of the wife's failure to live up to his dictums of a communist revolutionary in the making. This exclusion of women and other marginal figures to go back to a more homogenous, effective notion of revolution also

ends up resulting in a disdain towards movements which are thought of as "factionalizing", "identitarian", and any kind of politics which does not address the division of labour in homogenizing and reductive terms and thereby does not indulge in the accepted modes of masculinistic protest and struggle, is immediately shunned as irrelevant. Clara Zetkin's *Lenin on the Women's Question* shows the discomfort that Lenin had with political discussions in the communist spheres being dedicated to the inequalities faced by women in sexual and marital relations which according to him holds no merit than mere distractions:

“Your list of sins, Clara, is still longer. I was told that questions of sex and marriage are the main subjects dealt with in the reading and discussion evenings of women comrades. They are the chief subject of interest, of political instruction and education. I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard it. The first country of proletarian dictatorship surrounded by the counter-revolutionaries of the whole world, the situation in Germany itself requires the greatest possible concentration of all proletarian, revolutionary forces to defeat the ever-growing and ever-increasing counter-revolution. But working women comrades discuss sexual problems and the question of forms of marriage in the past, present and future. They think it their most important duty to enlighten proletarian women on these subjects. The most widely read brochure is, I believe, the pamphlet of a young Viennese woman comrade on the sexual problem. What a waste! What truth there is in it the workers have already read in Bebel, long ago. Only not so boringly, not so heavily written as in the pamphlet, but written strongly, bitterly, aggressively, against bourgeois society.” (Zetkin, p. 3)

The husband in the novel, would frequently chastise his wife of being "a petty bourgeois writer who is nothing but just a Feminist" and hence intellectually and politically inferior to him. This urge to make her into having the political knowledge that he deems indispensable, renders him to be a highly patronizing and condescending man who derives ethical validation by imparting knowledge about communism to her. In one part of the novel, the husband takes pride in asking tokenistic questions to his wife about what is the full form of LPG or MLM. When she says that they mean Liquid Petroleum Gas or Multilevel Marketing, he sneers at her that she should know that these mean Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization and Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Kandasamy writes, "I was too caught up in a middle-class

lifestyle to know about issues that were affecting the people, he solemnly informed me. I had to leave all that behind if my writing was going to be for the sake of the people's betterment." (p.20) Gopakumaran Nair writes in his thesis¹,

When EMS Nambuthiripad (hereafter EMS), former general secretary of the Marxist Communist party and the first Chief Minister of Kerala, visit and interaction with the women communists of Kerala, this is how he prides over the 'women comrades' who zealously accepted the tutelage and guidance of their male comrades. He shows a characteristic parental pride that these young women could excel even men in their spirited confidence in answering questions, which was totally unexpected of women having such educational background. EMS with casual innocence also remembers how Joshi reserved all the credit to the men for being excellent mentors." (Gopakumaran Nair, *Constructing a History of Masculinities Reading Prose Narratives of Modern Kerala 1880 1970*, p.202)

This urge to tutor the "ignorant", Moss states, comes from the urge to fashion oneself as the ethically enlightened fighter who accepts the tutelage of the previously enigmatic masculine idols who strives to achieve a mode of politics that believes in an immediacy of political efforts by relying on a conservative mode which tries to end class struggle but by preserving the other normative orders of the society. (p. 24) Butler says that this, in turn, is also done by believing in an "overarching universal good" which relies on a stagnant and stark binary between the material and cultural. Moss says that historically masculinity and the performance of such is presented as an indispensable mode to achieve the goal of the struggle by the creation of an indisputable common good which requires an uncritical indebtedness to some systems of knowledge that each and every person partaking of the politics needs to follow.

The husband in the novel is keen on presenting himself as a political and intellectual superior by preserving his dominance over his wife in a way he can also derive validation of being the ideal communist mentor. The foregrounding of the common good not only comes at the cost of him being subsequently turning a blind eye to (and himself being a perpetrator) of his wife's oppression but also genuinely believing in the ideal that the gradations of oppression that his wife might be facing is a necessary by-product that needs to be conserved for reaching the desired political end. This patronizing attitude which presumes the lack of political knowledge of the wife, emanates from a

¹ The said thesis can be accessed from shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in

masculine superiority which presumes itself to be absolved of all valid critiques on account of being a politically enlightened individual. Instead, this tenet of masculinistic approach is possible because in the domain of such a neo-conservative leftist politics, any political unlearnings that pertain to identities of gender, sexuality or caste are perpetually shunned as being secondary (or even obstructions) of ending class oppression. Butler says, "The nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity is linked to the disparagement of the cultural, and with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left." (p.36)

Masculine political methods as such which sideline other questions of identity also end up forming reductive and tokenistic knowledge of the very politics that it represents. In this case, the husband equates knowing of certain full forms or random factoids to being lacking in potential to be a Communist.

The insistence on the generally accepted masculine modes of performing communist politics, with the negation of any feminist critique also leads to terribly misleading and misogynistic manipulations of the tenets of communism itself. The husband in the novel, having already harbouring manipulative traits of a serial abuser does the same by fraudulently citing political or philosophical knowledge to justify his abusive behavior. He was generally dismissive of his wife's career as a writer because he constantly felt that her profession is that of a sell out where she is constantly pandering to neoliberalization. After repeatedly preventing her from accepting any writing opportunities that might come her way, he would use his thoroughly manipulated and mis-informed ideas about materialism to even write for herself which she has no intention to publish. Whenever she would want to write about her sorrows of being constantly mistreated by her husband, he would coax her away from doing the same by saying,

"You are missing the whole point about materialism...I believe that as long as a material basis exists to remind us of the fights and misunderstandings that we have had, we can never truly transcend these troubles...Do not make the temporary into something permanent. Do not make a passing emotion into an objective reality." (p.47)

At the same time, the husband would not refrain from doing the same when he is the one who is the poet. He would insist that in this case he wants his poetry to exist because that would be a constant reminder to him how he has failed Communism. One of the most jarring instances in the novel comprise of the opening lines of one such poem written by the husband which says, "When I hit you, Comrade Lenin cries." Even in his callous apologia, he

does not cease to reclaim his credentials as a radical communist.

Kandasamy's novel presents several instances of how a constant myth of the selfless and sacrificial warrior caring for the masses is invoked by men who are trying to follow such an archetype, especially in moments where they fail to be a good romantic partner. The narrator talks of one of her ex-lovers, who would refuse to acknowledge her presence in his life lest it jeopardizes his image of being a political leader who prioritizes the needs of the people. The narrator says that this idea of the "bachelor savior" who "flaunts the absence of the family" in Indian politics was first brought into the limelight by Gandhi but later on was also appropriated by politicians of all ideologies. Her lover, who also belonged to a Communist party, partly interpellated himself according to the masculine ideals of traditions such as "the new soviet man" and partly according to the pervasive notion of the bachelor politician. This led him to constantly disregard his relationship with the narrator in public and she subsequently became a victim of various unpleasant public insinuations and rumors. Kandasamy writes:

A woman by your side meant that you were not masculine enough, not man enough to lead the people. So, when they had the chance, the men who could not stick with celibacy (unlike Gandhi) decided to hide the women they were with, so that they could continue to remain bachelor politicians. (Kandasamy, p.67)

The narrator's husband on the other hand, would recall his days of being a Maoist fighter who had once risked his life for the greater good in order to demand sacrifices from his wife which he deemed as a necessary reward for his political prowess. He would make the narrator delete her social media, sever all ties with her friends and family and renounce any kinds of social existence. The justification for such was also the constant reminder that agencies like the CIA or the police are after him and her leaving any trail of her identity would endanger his life. In both these cases, the manufactured truth about how leftist politics should be vis-à-vis the image of the male revolutionary fighter it perpetrates, has been successful in curtailing her freedom, agency and desire.

The narrator's husband's disapproval for his wife being a writer was frequently couched in the arguments that her job was in itself something which benefits from the capitalist media and is not inherently de-classing. This notion got conveniently intensified when the narrator was offered by *Outlook* magazine to write an article on female sexuality, where her husband ends up calling her "a slave of the corporate media" who is "indulging in elite

prostitution". In order to prevent her from being a writer at all costs, (whilst harbouring misogynist notions against the open discussions of female sexuality) he suggests jobs to her which he deems as fairly de-classing and de-sexualized such as working as a salesgirl, working in a candle-making factory or packaging cashews. In doing the same, he says, "You'll learn the language of the people. You'll learn to live the life of working class women. You'll then write out of experience. That will teach you how fake your feminism is. You'll not capitalize on your cunt, you will be labouring with your hands." (p.45)

The figure of the male worker holds immense significance in the history of communism because, "He radiated manly strength that, though it was obviously related to manual labor, had some ties to the aesthetics of modern masculinity" (Moss, p.27) and while fostering the image of the male worker as the revolutionary idol, socialists and communists sometimes ended up preserving conventional roles for women which despite thought of being capable of granting them economic freedom, perceived their role as a worker that was largely derivative of the figure of the male worker and also conserved the allegedly nurturing roles for women. Nair suggests that the communist movement in India was developed adjacent to the movements of Nationalism and strived to foster some sort of relatability for the general Indian middle class which insisted on an accepted "ordinariness" of the Indian family which is not bereft of gender hierarchies. While talking about a love-note written by activist Krishna Pillai to his lover Thakamma, he writes,

In drawing the picture of a wife he wanted, he demands a high degree of endurance, since to be the wife of a communist was a tough game altogether. His prospect of life for the wife of a communist is not ordinary'. He assigns her the part of a wife supporting the leader-husband and his party. Evidently whatever little stretching and transgression possible for her from the usual incarnation of a domesticated wife is only for the benefit of the party and the cause her husband stands for. It might be a case of how for a non-communist woman, her identity and choices get determined by her fiancé and the controlling schemes of matrimony and communist masculinity. (p.205)

Our narrator's husband presumes that the freedom of his wife as a writer is perhaps a threat to his identity as a communist fighter which requires him to preserve his status as the superior man who is insecure of any possibility of his wife's success. The narrator hence wryly remarks,

He is not sincere about any of these suggestions, of course. He is the type of anxious husband who stands outside the door of a toilet in a train carriage afraid that I might seize that opportunity to give him the slip, disappear into another faraway compartment, get down at a random station and vanish without a trace. He is not going to let me go to a workplace unsupervised and risk losing me. These 'declassing jobs' are just thrown in the air to catch me out. Tomorrow, he will bring up my reluctance to pack cashews as evidence of my middle-class life, as proof that I do not want to live by manual labour. Communist ideas are a cover for his own sadism. (p. 47)

The husband not only masks his toxicity and abusive traits in a communist rationale but gives credence to the idea that a lot of such traits exist because of certain accepted truths that have structurally been a part of the history of communist politics. As Nair suggested, there exists the possibility of a peculiar and (not yet completely unsurprising) kind of communist masculinity which needs to be unpacked in the necessary criticism of how leftist politics is performed. Kandasamy's novel paints the picture of a wife who gets continually trapped in the "post-truth" of "toxic masculinity" of her abusive husband who ironically discards her ideas and agencies as the "post-truth of the privileged bourgeoisie writer who is a bad wife." The narrator while thinking of her husband and thereby introspecting about Communist politics at large asks,

Was respect and love something that the radical only reserved for women who were gun-toting rebels, women who attended and applauded at every party meeting, women who distributed pamphlets and designed placards? How did these women survive these violent, aggressive men in their ranks? Did they walk out? Did they fight? Did they leave their sexuality behind or did they barter it to make life in the organization easier? (p.55)

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