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Can a Wife Speak: A Study of Meena Kandsamay's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract: ***This paper examines Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife (2017) as a powerful feminist critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution that systematically silences women. Drawing on feminist theory, subaltern studies, and post-structural analyses of power, the study interrogates how the domestic sphere functions as a site of ideological control, epistemic violence, and bodily discipline. By engaging Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the paper relocates subalternity from colonial and class-based contexts to the intimate space of marriage, demonstrating how the wife's speech is rendered illegitimate despite her education and intellectual capacity. The analysis foregrounds the husband as an embodiment of ideological masculinity, revealing how progressive political rhetoric can coexist with and even mask patriarchal domination. Physical and sexual violence are examined as disciplinary practices that regulate the female body and enforce silence. At the same time, the paper argues that Kandasamy's act of writing constitutes a counter-discursive strategy through which the silenced wife resists erasure. While the novel confirms the structural impossibility of speech within marriage, it affirms writing as a mode of survival, testimony, and feminist resistance. Ultimately, the study highlights the political urgency of listening to women's narratives of domestic violence and recognizes literature as a crucial space for challenging normalized silencing.***

Keywords: Marriage and Patriarchy; Subalternity; Domestic Violence; Feminist Writing

1. Introduction: Marriage, Silence, and the Question of Voice

Marriage has long been idealized as a private institution founded on love, companionship, and mutual trust. However, feminist scholarship has persistently challenged this romanticized narrative by revealing how marriage often functions as a powerful ideological structure that regulates women's bodies, speech, and autonomy. Within patriarchal societies, the domestic space- frequently imagined as apolitical—becomes a crucial site where power is exercised, normalized, and rendered invisible. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) exposes this contradiction by foregrounding the lived experience of a woman whose voice is systematically silenced within the institution of marriage. The novel interrogates not only domestic violence but also the subtle mechanisms through which language, ideology, and intimacy are mobilized to suppress female agency.

Kandasamy's novel is a semi-autobiographical narrative that recounts the traumatic experience of an unnamed woman trapped in an abusive marriage to an educated, left-leaning intellectual. What makes the text particularly unsettling is the absence of conventional markers often associated with patriarchal oppression. The husband is neither illiterate nor traditionally conservative; rather, he is politically radical, well-read, and outwardly progressive. This contradiction allows the novel to challenge the assumption that education, class privilege, or political ideology necessarily dismantle patriarchal power. Instead, *When I Hit You* demonstrates how misogyny can coexist comfortably with revolutionary rhetoric, thereby exposing the persistence of male dominance even within ostensibly egalitarian frameworks.

Central to the novel is the question of speech: who is allowed to speak, under what conditions, and with what consequences. Although the narrator is a writer, a poet, and an intellectual, her ability to speak is consistently curtailed within marriage. Her husband controls her clothing, communication, online presence, friendships, memory, and sexuality. Speech, when exercised, invites punishment; silence, when adopted, is interpreted as provocation. Thus, the novel presents a paradox in which both speech and silence become dangerous for the woman. This predicament resonates strongly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" While Spivak formulates this question in the context of colonial and postcolonial power structures, Kandasamy's narrative relocates it within the domestic sphere, suggesting that marriage itself can produce a form of subalternity.

The wife in *When I Hit You* occupies a deeply marginalized position within her own home. Despite her education and creative talent, she is denied narrative authority over her life. Her suffering is repeatedly dismissed, pathologized, or reframed as personal failure. Violence—both physical and sexual—replaces dialogue, and intimacy becomes a weapon of control rather than connection. The domestic space functions as a closed system where external intervention is nearly impossible, and familial advice often reinforces silence rather than resistance. In this sense, the novel illustrates how patriarchal ideology operates not merely through overt coercion but through normalization, emotional manipulation, and moral blackmail.

At the same time, *When I Hit You* is not simply a testimony of victimhood. The narrative itself becomes an act of defiance. Denied the right to speak within marriage, the narrator writes her way out of erasure. Writing emerges as both survival strategy and political resistance—a space where pain is articulated, memory is reclaimed, and agency is reasserted. The text repeatedly reflects on the power of language, questioning its limits while simultaneously relying on it as the only available weapon against silencing. The narrator's engagement with words—across English and Tamil—underscores the intimate relationship between language and power, particularly in articulating trauma that polite social discourse refuses to acknowledge.

This paper argues that *When I Hit You* dramatizes the impossibility of speech for the wife within the patriarchal

institution of marriage, while simultaneously demonstrating how writing functions as a counter-discursive space through which the subaltern woman negotiates agency. By reading the novel through feminist and subaltern theoretical frameworks, the paper examines how marriage operates as an ideological apparatus that transforms the wife into a domesticated subaltern, stripped of voice, autonomy, and credibility. It further contends that Kandasamy's narrative challenges traditional binaries of speech and silence by revealing how both are regulated under patriarchal control.

This study employs the methodology of close textual analysis supported by feminist theory and postcolonial thought, particularly Spivak's concept of epistemic violence. Rather than treating domestic abuse as an isolated personal tragedy, the paper situates it within broader structures of power, ideology, and representation. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that the question "Can a wife speak?" is not merely rhetorical but deeply political, addressing the systemic conditions that render women unheard even when they speak.

Ultimately, *When I Hit You* compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about marriage, masculinity, and the politics of listening. It insists that violence does not always announce itself loudly and that silence is often produced, enforced, and punished. By transforming private pain into public narrative, Kandasamy's work occupies a crucial position in contemporary Indian feminist literature, demanding not only that women be allowed to speak, but that society learn how to listen.

2. Theoretical Context: Subalternity, Gender, and Epistemic Violence

The question of whether marginalized subjects can articulate their experiences within dominant structures of power has been central to postcolonial and feminist theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) remains a foundational intervention in this debate. Spivak argues that the subaltern- those positioned at the lowest levels of social, political, and discursive hierarchies—cannot "speak" in any meaningful way because their voices are systematically mediated, distorted, or erased by dominant epistemological frameworks (274). Her assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" is not a denial of physical speech but a critique of the structures that render such speech inaudible or unintelligible within institutional power.

Spivak's formulation is particularly relevant to feminist concerns, as women- especially within patriarchal societies—often occupy a doubly marginalized position. They are silenced not only by colonial or class-based hierarchies but also by gendered norms that restrict their agency and credibility. In this context, Spivak's concept of epistemic violence becomes crucial. Epistemic violence refers to the process by which dominant knowledge systems erase or overwrite the subjectivity of marginalized groups, thereby denying them the authority to represent their own experiences. As Spivak explains, epistemic violence is embedded in the "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (307). While her argument emerges from a colonial framework, its implications extend powerfully into the intimate spaces of gender relations and marriage.

Marriage, particularly within patriarchal cultures, functions as a microcosmic site of epistemic violence. The wife's experiences are frequently delegitimized, reinterpreted, or silenced under the guise of familial harmony, moral duty, or social respectability. Feminist theorists have long argued that the private sphere is not separate from politics but deeply enmeshed in ideological power. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is constructed as "the Other" within male-centered social structures resonates strongly with Spivak's framework, as both emphasize relational identity formation rooted in inequality. Within marriage, the wife is expected to subsume her individuality into a collective identity, where obedience and silence are often equated with virtue.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* can be read as a literary enactment of this theoretical dilemma. The unnamed narrator is educated, articulate, and a professional writer, yet her speech within marriage is consistently punished or invalidated. This paradox underscores Spivak's insistence that access to language does not guarantee audibility. The narrator's husband repeatedly reframes her resistance as pathology, ideology, or moral failure, thereby stripping her words of legitimacy. Her anger is diagnosed as "depression," her feminist beliefs as selfishness, and her silence as provocation. The husband's ideological rhetoric functions as a mechanism of epistemic control, ensuring that her voice never attains discursive authority.

One of the most striking moments in the novel occurs when the narrator reflects on the invisibility of domestic abuse:

"Violence is not something that advertises itself. As long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending " (156).

This observation encapsulates the core of Spivak's argument. The inability to be heard perpetuates violence, not merely as physical harm but as structural silencing. The narrator speaks—repeatedly—but her speech circulates within a closed system that refuses recognition.

Spivak's critique of Western intellectuals who claim to "speak for" the oppressed is also relevant here. She warns that representation often reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's suffering is frequently mediated by others- parents, relatives, and even progressive acquaintances—who advise patience, silence, and compromise. Their responses reflect what Spivak identifies as a "logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity," where women are expected to endure suffering in the name of marital stability. The wife's voice is thus appropriated, diluted, or redirected rather than acknowledged on its own terms.

An important dimension of Spivak's theory is her concept of strategic essentialism**,** which allows marginalized groups to temporarily adopt a collective identity for political purposes while remaining aware of internal differences. Kandasamy's narrative can be read as strategically essentialist in its

depiction of the abused wife. While the narrator's experience is specific, the text deliberately aligns her suffering with that of countless women trapped in abusive marriages. The absence of names for central characters reinforces this representational strategy, allowing the narrative to function both as personal testimony and collective critique.

Feminist scholars have emphasized that silence itself is not passive but actively produced through power. In *When I Hit You*, silence is repeatedly imposed and weaponized. The narrator learns that speaking invites violence, yet silence does not guarantee safety. This double bind reflects what Spivak describes as the subaltern's "position without identity," where neither action nor inaction leads to liberation. The husband's insistence on silence mirrors broader patriarchal expectations that equate female speech with disorder. As the narrator observes, "A woman should not moan. That is how history steals her voice." This statement collapses bodily expression and historical silencing into a single gesture, emphasizing how deeply gendered control penetrates the most intimate realms.

At the same time, Spivak does not advocate absolute pessimism. She insists on the necessity of ethical listening and critical self-reflexivity among intellectuals. In this light, Kandasamy's act of writing becomes significant. While the narrator cannot "speak" within marriage, the novel itself constitutes an act of narrative reclamation. Writing becomes a space where epistemic violence is exposed rather than erased. By foregrounding the limits of speech within patriarchal structures, *When I Hit You* does not contradict Spivak's thesis but rather extends it into the domestic sphere, demonstrating how subalternity can be produced within marriage itself.

Thus, the theoretical framework of subalternity, epistemic violence, and feminist critique provides a crucial lens for understanding Kandasamy's novel. The wife in *When I Hit You* occupies a position where speech is continuously denied legitimacy, revealing that subalternity is not confined to colonial or class-based contexts but can emerge within the most intimate social institutions. By situating domestic abuse within this theoretical paradigm, the novel compels readers to reconsider marriage as a deeply political structure—one that governs not only bodies and behavior but also the very possibility of voice.

3. The Husband as Ideology: Power, Control, and Political Masculinity

In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy constructs the husband as more than an individual perpetrator of domestic violence; he emerges as a representative figure of patriarchal ideology sustained through political rhetoric, intellectual authority, and masculine entitlement. The novel dismantles the assumption that progressive politics or education necessarily dismantle gendered power structures. Instead, it demonstrates how patriarchy adapts itself to ideological frameworks, enabling domination to masquerade as discipline, morality, and revolutionary commitment.

Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses provides a crucial framework for understanding the husband's authority. Althusser argues that ideology functions by interpellating individuals as subjects through everyday practices rather than overt coercion (174). Marriage, in this sense, operates as a private ideological apparatus where gendered obedience is normalized. The husband repeatedly positions himself as an ideological mentor, transforming marriage into a site of re-education. The narrator observes that he "did not want a wife, but a project" (Kandasamy 36), a statement that foregrounds how control is framed as ideological improvement rather than abuse.

This ideological authority is reinforced through what R. W. Connell terms hegemonic masculinity, a culturally dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes male power while subordinating women (Connell 77). The husband's masculinity is not expressed solely through physical violence but through moral and intellectual dominance. His Marxist rhetoric and public image as a progressive thinker provide symbolic capital that shields him from scrutiny. As Connell notes, hegemonic masculinity often sustains itself by appearing natural and legitimate rather than overtly coercive (Connell 183). In *When I Hit You*, this legitimacy allows the husband to rationalize violence as discipline and dissent as ideological deviation.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates the punitive logic governing the marriage. Butler argues that gender norms are sustained through repeated performance and enforced through punishment when deviations occur (179). The narrator's refusal to perform submissive femininity—by writing poetry, expressing anger, or asserting independence- provokes violent correction. She reflects with chilling clarity: "Each blow was a lesson. Each bruise, a reminder of where I belonged" (Kandasamy 52). Violence thus functions as a disciplinary mechanism aimed at restoring normative gender roles.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power offers additional insight into the husband's methods of control. According to Foucault, modern power operates through surveillance, normalization, and regulation of bodies, producing what he calls "docile bodies" (138). The domestic space in *When I Hit You* becomes a carceral site where the narrator's clothing, communication, internet access, and movement are monitored. Surveillance is both external and internalized, leading the narrator to self-censor her speech and desires. Violence, when deployed, is calculated rather than impulsive, reinforcing Foucault's assertion that discipline aims at compliance rather than spectacle (170).

Sexual violence in the novel further exposes the ideological foundations of marital power. Feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon argues that heterosexual relations within patriarchy are structured by male entitlement, where consent is often presumed rather than negotiated (MacKinnon 171). In the novel, marital rape is normalized through the cultural fiction that marriage grants sexual access. The narrator challenges this assumption when she states, "Marriage did not grant him my body, but he behaved as if it had" (Kandasamy 64). Sexual coercion thus becomes a means of asserting ownership and punishing resistance, reinforcing patriarchal dominance at the level of the body.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps explain how the husband's authority persists even without constant physical force. Symbolic violence operates through misrecognition, where domination is perceived as legitimate or deserved (1–2). The narrator is repeatedly told that her silence, anger, or independence provokes violence, gradually eroding her confidence in her own perceptions. This psychological manipulation aligns with feminist understandings of gaslighting and demonstrates how epistemic violence accompanies physical abuse.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is constructed as "the Other" within male-dominated structures resonates powerfully in the novel (26). The narrator's subjectivity is denied legitimacy; she exists only in relation to her husband's ideological expectations. Her writing becomes particularly threatening because it asserts autonomous selfhood. As she notes, "He was terrified of my words, even when he beat my mouth shut" (Kandasamy 71). bell hooks argues that naming oppression is a radical act within patriarchal systems because it disrupts symbolic domination (9). Writing, therefore, becomes a site of resistance precisely because it challenges the husband's narrative control.

Significantly, Kandasamy refuses to individualize or psychologize the husband. He remains unnamed, a narrative strategy that transforms him into a structural figure rather than a singular villain. This aligns with feminist materialist criticism, which emphasizes systems over individual pathology. The husband's violence is not presented as exceptional but as symptomatic of a social order that legitimizes male authority within intimacy.

Through this theoretically grounded portrayal of political masculinity, *When I Hit You* exposes the adaptability of patriarchy across ideological contexts. The novel demonstrates that progressive politics do not automatically dismantle gendered power and that marriage can function as a site of subalternization where the woman's voice is systematically denied legitimacy. The husband, as ideology incarnate, embodies the convergence of discipline, domination, and moral authority, reinforcing the central argument of this paper: that the wife's inability to speak is structurally produced rather than individually imposed.

4. The Domestic as a Site of Violence: Body, Sexuality, and Discipline

In *When I Hit You*, the domestic space emerges not as a sanctuary but as a meticulously regulated site of violence where the female body is disciplined, controlled, and punished. Feminist theory has long argued that the private sphere is deeply political, and Kandasamy's narrative powerfully demonstrates how marriage functions as a locus of coercion where violence is normalized through intimacy. By foregrounding the body as the primary terrain of domination, the novel exposes how patriarchy sustains itself not only through ideology and language but through the repeated inscription of pain on the female body.

Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality provides an important framework for understanding the narrator's entrapment within marriage. Rich argues that heterosexual marriage is enforced through social, economic, and physical coercion, ensuring women's sexual and emotional availability to men (637). In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's marriage becomes a mechanism through which sexual access is demanded and enforced, irrespective of consent. The narrator reflects on the inevitability of sexual violence within marriage, noting that refusal itself becomes a provocation: "No did not mean no. No meant more force" (Kandasamy 61). This collapse of consent underscores the structural nature of marital rape within patriarchal systems.

Catharine MacKinnon's feminist critique of sexuality further clarifies the power dynamics at work. MacKinnon argues that under patriarchy, sexuality is structured by male dominance, rendering women's consent secondary or irrelevant (171). In the novel, sexual violence is neither exceptional nor impulsive; it is routinized and justified as a marital right. The husband's entitlement to the narrator's body is normalized through cultural narratives that equate marriage with sexual obligation. The narrator's assertion- "Marriage did not grant him my body, but he behaved as if it had" (Kandasamy 64)- directly challenges this ideological assumption and exposes its violent consequences.

Foucault's analysis of biopower and disciplinary control offers a crucial lens for examining how the body is regulated within the domestic space. Foucault argues that modern power operates through the management and surveillance of bodies, producing obedience through normalization rather than spectacle (138). In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's body is subjected to constant scrutiny—her clothing is policed, her movements restricted, and her sexuality monitored. Violence functions as a corrective mechanism, ensuring conformity to prescribed norms of femininity. As the narrator observes, "My body was no longer mine. It had become the battleground on which his victories were staged" (Kandasamy 58). This articulation aligns with Foucault's notion that power inscribes itself directly onto the body.

The repetitive nature of violence in the novel underscores its disciplinary function. Beatings are not portrayed as isolated eruptions of anger but as systematic responses to perceived transgressions- writing, silence, or resistance. The narrator recognizes this logic when she states, "Each act of defiance was answered with pain" (Kandasamy 53). Violence thus becomes pedagogical, teaching the wife her place within the marital hierarchy. This echoes Foucault's argument that discipline aims to produce "docile bodies" capable of internalizing control (Foucault 170).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence further illuminates how physical abuse is reinforced by psychological domination. Symbolic violence operates through the internalization of norms that legitimize oppression, making domination appear natural or deserved (Bourdieu 1–2). In the novel, the narrator is repeatedly blamed for the violence inflicted upon her. Her silence is interpreted as arrogance, her speech as provocation, and her resistance as moral failure. Over time, this narrative destabilizes her sense of reality, demonstrating how symbolic violence amplifies physical abuse by undermining the victim's capacity to name injustice.

Feminist scholars such as Susan Brownmiller have emphasized that rape functions as a political act of intimidation rather than a sexual impulse (15). In *When I Hit You*, sexual violence serves precisely this function. It reinforces male authority and communicates punishment, reminding the narrator of her vulnerability. The body becomes the site where power is enacted most brutally, bypassing language altogether. The narrator captures this silencing when she observes, "Violence spoke when words failed him" (Kandasamy 69). This moment underscores how physical force replaces dialogue within patriarchal intimacy.

Butler's insights into bodily vulnerability and precarity further deepen this analysis. Butler argues that certain bodies are rendered more vulnerable than others through social and political structures that deny them protection and recognition (33). The narrator's body, as a wife within marriage, is stripped of social protection; her injuries are invisible, her pain privatized. The domestic setting ensures that violence remains hidden, reinforcing what Butler identifies as the unequal distribution of vulnerability.

The novel also highlights how social institutions collude in sustaining domestic violence. Family members advise patience, endurance, and silence, reinforcing what feminist theorists identify as the privatization of suffering. The narrator notes bitterly that "everyone wanted the marriage to survive, even if I did not" (Kandasamy 82). This prioritization of marital stability over female safety reveals how patriarchal values extend beyond the household, embedding violence within cultural norms.

By framing domestic violence as structural rather than exceptional, *When I Hit You* challenges narratives that individualize abuse. The novel insists that violence is not the result of personal failure or incompatibility but a predictable outcome of gendered power relations. The domestic space, far from being apolitical, becomes a key site where patriarchy reproduces itself through bodily discipline.

Ultimately, *When I Hit You* exposes how the female body is transformed into a text upon which power writes itself. Bruises, scars, and sexual violation become modes of communication within a system that denies women the right to speak. In doing so, the novel reinforces the central argument of this paper: that the wife's silencing is achieved not only through ideological control but through the systematic disciplining of the body. By rendering domestic violence visible and narratable, Kandasamy disrupts the cultural silence surrounding marital abuse and reclaims the body as a site of testimony and resistance.

Writing Against Erasure: Language as Survival and Resistance

While *When I Hit You* relentlessly documents the mechanisms of silencing within marriage, it is equally invested in exploring how language- particularly writing- emerges as a counter-discursive space through which the silenced wife negotiates survival and agency. If marriage produces the wife as a subaltern subject incapable of being heard, the act of writing becomes a mode of resistance that does not deny this impossibility but works within and against it. The novel thus transforms literary expression into a political act, foregrounding the relationship between voice, power, and testimony.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that "the subaltern cannot speak" does not imply absolute muteness but rather an inability to be heard within dominant epistemological frameworks (308). In *When I Hit You*, the narrator repeatedly speaks—to her husband, family, and society—yet her words fail to produce recognition or justice. Writing, however, operates differently. It does not seek immediate validation; instead, it archives pain, preserves memory, and resists erasure. The narrator acknowledges this distinction when she observes, "I wrote because silence would have killed me" (Kandasamy 92). Writing here is not catharsis alone but a refusal to disappear.

Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture féminine provides a useful framework for understanding the narrator's insistence on writing the body. Cixous urges women to write themselves into history, insisting that the female body must be reclaimed as a source of knowledge rather than shame (875). Kandasamy's narrative enacts this call by refusing euphemism or decorum in its depiction of violence. Bruises, blood, and violated flesh are rendered in uncompromising detail, challenging the cultural tendency to sanitize or silence women's suffering. Through writing, the narrator reclaims ownership over a body that marriage attempted to control.

Language in the novel is deeply ambivalent. It is both the site of oppression and the means of resistance. The husband fears the narrator's writing precisely because it destabilizes his authority. She notes, "He was terrified of my words, even when he beat my mouth shut" (Kandasamy 71). This fear underscores what Foucault identifies as the subversive potential of discourse: power depends on controlling what can be said, by whom, and in what context (100). Writing disrupts this control by producing an alternative archive of truth that cannot be fully contained.

Butler's reflections on narrativity and recognition further illuminate the political stakes of storytelling. Butler argues that giving an account of oneself is always constrained by available norms of intelligibility, yet narration remains essential for ethical recognition (Butler 22). In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's story exceeds socially acceptable narratives of marriage and womanhood. Her refusal to present herself as patient, forgiving, or silent renders her account uncomfortable and disruptive. Writing becomes a way of insisting on intelligibility without conforming to norms that demand endurance over resistance.

The novel also engages with what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe as testimony, a form of speech that emerges from trauma and seeks a listener capable of ethical engagement (57). Domestic violence, as the text reveals, often lacks such listeners. Family, society, and institutions repeatedly fail the narrator. Writing, therefore, does not presume an immediate audience; it creates one. The text becomes an address to the future, insisting that suffering be witnessed even if justice is delayed.

Language also enables the narrator to reclaim temporal and narrative control. Trauma fractures time, trapping victims in

cycles of repetition and fear. Through writing, the narrator reorganizes memory, transforming chaos into narrative coherence. As she reflects, "I wrote myself out of the marriage" (Kandasamy 104). This act aligns with Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that demands narrative repetition in order to be understood (4). Writing becomes a means of survival, allowing the narrator to re-enter time on her own terms.

When I Hit You resists the redemptive narrative often imposed on survivors of violence. Writing does not heal all wounds nor erase trauma. Instead, it functions as what bell hooks describes as a practice of freedom- a space where marginalized subjects can name oppression without guaranteeing liberation (4). The narrator does not claim triumph; she claims endurance. Her writing acknowledges loss, fear, and rage without resolving them into closure.

The bilingual texture of the novel further reinforces its resistance to linguistic containment. The interplay between English and Tamil gestures toward what postcolonial theorists identify as linguistic hybridity- a refusal to be confined to a single epistemic system. English enables global visibility, while Tamil retains cultural specificity and emotional depth. Writing across languages allows the narrator to occupy multiple discursive spaces, complicating the conditions under which she can be read, understood, or dismissed.

Kandasamy's narrative refuses silence as virtue. Patriarchal culture often celebrates female endurance as moral strength, equating silence with dignity. *When I Hit You* exposes this expectation as a mechanism of control. The narrator declares, "A woman should not moan. That is how history steals her voice" (Kandasamy 88). By moaning, writing, and naming violence, the narrator disrupts historical erasure and asserts the right to speak- even without permission.

In transforming private pain into public text, *When I Hit You* challenges the boundary between the personal and the political. Writing becomes an act of exposure that refuses to protect abusive institutions at the cost of female suffering. The novel does not claim that writing allows the wife to fully "speak" in Spivak's sense; rather, it demonstrates that writing can function as strategic resistance within conditions of silencing.

The positions language as both weapon and refuge. Writing does not dismantle patriarchy on its own, but it interrupts the processes of erasure that sustain it. By narrating violence without apology or embellishment, Kandasamy reclaims narrative authority for the abused wife and demands ethical listening from readers. In doing so, the novel affirms that while the wife may be denied speech within marriage, she can still write herself into history- refusing disappearance, insisting on witness, and transforming silence into testimony.

5. Conclusion: Speaking Through Writing—Limits and Possibilities

This paper set out to examine whether the wife can "speak" within the patriarchal institution of marriage, using Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* as a critical site of inquiry. Drawing upon feminist theory, subaltern studies, and post-structural analyses of power, the discussion has demonstrated that marriage in the novel functions as an ideological apparatus that systematically silences the wife through a convergence of physical violence, symbolic domination, and epistemic control. The wife's muteness is not a consequence of personal weakness or individual failure but the product of structurally enforced power relations that deny legitimacy to female speech within intimacy.

Through a close reading of the husband as an embodiment of ideological masculinity, the paper has shown how patriarchy adapts itself to progressive political frameworks, enabling domination to masquerade as discipline, morality, and intellectual authority. The husband's Marxist rhetoric does not dismantle gendered hierarchy; rather, it provides moral camouflage for its continuation. Violence, both physical and sexual, emerges not as an aberration but as a disciplinary practice designed to regulate the wife's body and behavior. The domestic space thus becomes a carceral site where power operates through surveillance, punishment, and normalization, reaffirming feminist critiques of the private sphere as deeply political.

By situating domestic violence within broader theoretical frameworks, this study has challenged narratives that individualize abuse or frame it as a private tragedy. Instead, *When I Hit You* insists that marital violence is a structural phenomenon sustained by cultural norms, ideological investments, and institutional complicity. The body of the wife becomes the primary terrain upon which power inscribes itself, transforming intimacy into a mechanism of control. In exposing this reality, the novel disrupts the cultural silence that often surrounds marital abuse and forces readers to confront the ethical implications of ignoring violence that occurs behind closed doors.

At the same time, this paper has argued that *When I Hit You* does not reduce the wife to a figure of passive victimhood. While the novel confirms Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant epistemological frameworks, it simultaneously demonstrates how writing functions as a counter-discursive space that resists erasure. Denied audibility within marriage and society, the wife writes herself into existence, transforming silence into testimony. Writing does not guarantee recognition or justice, nor does it resolve trauma; however, it interrupts the processes of disappearance that sustain patriarchal power.

The act of writing in *When I Hit You* emerges as a form of feminist resistance that challenges the binary of speech and silence. By narrating violence without apology, euphemism, or moral accommodation, Kandasamy's text refuses the cultural demand that women endure suffering quietly. The novel insists that naming violence is itself a political act, one that exposes the limitations of institutions invested in preserving marital stability at the cost of female safety. In doing so, it calls attention to the ethics of listening, demanding that readers recognize their responsibility as witnesses rather than passive consumers of trauma narratives.

However, the question "Can a wife speak?" remains unresolved in conventional terms. Within the patriarchal

structure of marriage, the wife's speech is repeatedly invalidated, punished, or ignored. Yet *When I Hit You* suggests that while the wife may not be permitted to speak within marriage, she can still write herself beyond it. Writing becomes a mode of survival, a refusal to vanish, and a means of reclaiming narrative authority in a system that denies her legitimacy. The novel thus expands Spivak's question by relocating subalternity within the domestic sphere and by foregrounding literature as a space where silenced voices can insist on presence, even without guarantees of being heard.

By bringing together feminist theory, subaltern studies, and close textual analysis, this paper has sought to underscore the importance of literary narratives in challenging normalized forms of violence. *When I Hit You* occupies a crucial position in contemporary Indian feminist literature precisely because it refuses consolation and closure. Instead, it demands confrontation—with patriarchy, with ideology, and with the uncomfortable truth that silence is often produced, not chosen. In bearing witness to this reality, Kandasamy's work affirms the enduring political power of feminist writing as an act of resistance against erasure.

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