

Toxic Relationships and the Crisis of Female Identity in Contemporary Literature: A Comparative Study of Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract: *Contemporary literature has increasingly moved away from the idealised representation of romantic relationships and has begun to examine the psychological complexities that emerge when intimacy becomes associated with domination, manipulation and violence. The representation of toxic relationships has consequently become an important concern in contemporary fiction because it exposes the fragile boundary between love and possession, companionship and control, and emotional attachment and psychological suffering. Colleen Hoover's It Ends with Us (2016) and Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife (2017) provide two significant representations of women confronting destructive intimate relationships. Although the novels emerge from different cultural and literary contexts, both reveal the gradual erosion of female autonomy within relationships governed by patriarchal power. Hoover presents Lily Bloom's struggle to recognise and resist domestic violence within a contemporary romantic relationship, whereas Kandasamy transforms an autobiographical experience of marital abuse into a powerful narrative of psychological resistance and self-reclamation. The present study comparatively examines the representation of toxic relationships in the two novels with particular reference to domestic violence, emotional manipulation, patriarchal control, psychological trauma, silence, female identity and resistance. It argues that both writers challenge the romantic idealisation of suffering and demonstrate that love cannot be regarded as a justification for the destruction of individual freedom. The study further observes that while Hoover foregrounds the emotional dilemma involved in breaking the cycle of abuse, Kandasamy places greater emphasis on language, writing and narrative authority as instruments of survival.*

Keywords: toxic relationships, domestic violence, psychological trauma, patriarchy, female identity, resistance, intimate partner violence, Colleen Hoover, Meena Kandasamy

1. Introduction

The representation of human relationships has remained one of the central concerns of literature. Love, marriage, family and companionship provide writers with a powerful framework through which the psychological and social dimensions of human existence can be examined. Traditionally, romantic literature has frequently associated love with fulfilment, sacrifice and emotional security. Contemporary literature, however, has increasingly questioned this idealised understanding of intimacy. The relationship that promises companionship may become a source of fear; affection may gradually develop into possession; and the domestic space that should provide security may become a site of psychological and physical violence.

The increasing literary attention given to toxic relationships reflects a broader cultural recognition that abuse within intimate relationships cannot be understood solely through visible acts of physical violence. Contemporary scholarship identifies psychological manipulation, isolation, intimidation, humiliation and control as important dimensions of intimate partner violence. In her study of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, Santwana Dwivedy, for instance, examines psychological tactics such as gaslighting, isolation, intimidation, humiliation and control as forms of violence that enable more visible forms of abuse to flourish within intimate spaces.

Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* are particularly relevant to this discussion. Hoover's novel centres upon Lily Bloom and Ryle Kincaid and gradually reveals the violent dimension of their romantic relationship. Scholarly criticism has examined the novel through domestic violence, interpersonal violence, gender stereotyping, emotional manipulation and power as domination.

Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, on the other hand, presents an unnamed woman's experience of an abusive marriage. The novel was published by Atlantic Books in 2017 and presents the transformation of what the narrator understands as a relationship of love into a relationship structured by ownership, isolation and violence.

The two novels therefore provide an especially productive comparative framework. Both deal with women whose intimate relationships become destructive, but the writers employ different narrative strategies and cultural perspectives. Hoover writes within the contemporary romantic tradition and places emphasis upon emotional recognition and the decision to break the cycle of abuse. Kandasamy employs an autobiographical and intensely personal mode through which domestic violence becomes inseparable from questions of patriarchy, female creativity and narrative authority.

The present paper argues that the two novels represent toxic relationships not merely as failed romantic partnerships but as structures of power that progressively threaten female identity.

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At the same time, both narratives move towards resistance and demonstrate that the recovery of the self begins with recognising the difference between love and domination.

2. Review of Literature

The critical study of toxic relationships in contemporary literature has expanded considerably because literary narratives provide a means of examining the psychological dimensions of abuse that may remain invisible within conventional social discussions.

Sangeetha, Mohan, Hariharasudan and Nawaz examine *When I Hit You* through the framework of intimate partner violence and Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence theory. Their study analyses physical, psychological and social forms of abuse and argues that the novel provides a significant representation of the mechanisms through which women become trapped within violent relationships.

Joy Das focuses on the relationship between marital rape, the female body and self-sustainability in Kandasamy's novel. The study argues that reclaiming the body becomes an important aspect of the narrator's struggle to sustain the self within a patriarchal domestic environment.

Recent scholarship has also moved towards examining psychological violence. Dwivedy's study is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that gaslighting, isolation, humiliation and control should not be regarded as secondary concerns but as significant forms of intimate violence.

The scholarship on Hoover's *It Ends with Us* has similarly examined domestic violence and its representation in popular fiction. Dwiastuti and Yamin argue that the novel's treatment of domestic violence is connected with internalised patriarchal norms and attitudes towards marriage. More recently, Biljana Oklopčić's 2026 study approaches the novel through the concept of interpersonal violence and examines how emotional manipulation, gender stereotyping and domestic violence function as instruments of power and domination.

Although these studies provide valuable individual readings of the two novels, a comparative examination of how Hoover and Kandasamy differently construct female identity, narrative voice and resistance offer further scope for investigation. The present study attempts to address this area by bringing the two texts together within a comparative literary framework.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the representation of toxic relationships in *It Ends with Us* and *When I Hit You*.
- 2) To analyse the psychological consequences of emotional and physical abuse.
- 3) To investigate the relationship between patriarchy and intimate partner violence.
- 4) To examine the loss and reconstruction of female identity in the two novels.

- 5) To compare the narrative techniques employed by Hoover and Kandasamy.
- 6) To analyse the movement from silence and victimhood towards resistance and agency.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and comparative literary methodology. The primary texts are Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. The analysis is based upon close reading of characterisation, narrative voice, imagery, memory, domestic space and representations of violence.

The study also makes use of secondary scholarship concerning intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, psychological control, patriarchy and feminist literary criticism. Walker's Cycle of Violence theory provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding repeated patterns of tension, violence and reconciliation, particularly in relation to *When I Hit You*. The paper also draws upon recent literary criticism that approaches interpersonal violence as a structure of power and domination in *It Ends with Us*.

The Illusion of Love and the Emergence of Toxicity

One of the most significant characteristics of toxic relationships represented in contemporary literature is their gradual development. The destructive relationship rarely begins with violence. It may begin with attraction, admiration, emotional intensity and the promise of companionship. The danger consequently remains hidden beneath the surface of affection.

In *It Ends with Us*, Lily initially experiences Ryle as attractive, ambitious and emotionally compelling. His professional success and apparent vulnerability contribute to the intensity of their relationship. The violence that subsequently emerges therefore creates an emotional contradiction. Lily does not simply hate an abusive man. She continues to possess feelings for the man she initially loved.

This contradiction is crucial to understanding the psychological complexity of the novel. The victim is not necessarily unaware of the violence. Rather, she struggles to reconcile the violent individual with the loving partner whom she has known. Recent criticism of the novel has similarly examined the ways in which interpersonal violence operates through emotional manipulation and power within the relationship.

Kandasamy's novel presents a more sustained and systematic process of domination. The unnamed narrator enters marriage with the expectation of intellectual companionship and shared political ideals. Instead, she gradually discovers that the man she has married seeks to reshape her into his idealised image of a wife. The publisher's description of the novel itself emphasises the transformation of a relationship understood by the narrator as a bond of love into a relationship understood by the husband as ownership.

Thus, both novels reveal the dangerous transformation of intimacy into possession. Love initially provides the justification for entering the relationship, but power eventually determines its structure.

Psychological Violence and the Loss of Self

Physical violence is only one dimension of a toxic relationship. Psychological violence may be less visible, yet its consequences can be equally destructive. It can gradually alter the victim's confidence, judgement and sense of identity.

Lily's experience in *It Ends with Us* demonstrates this psychological conflict. She repeatedly attempts to understand Ryle's behaviour and to determine whether his violent actions are isolated incidents or evidence of a deeper pattern. The emotional uncertainty makes the decision to leave difficult.

The narrative therefore demonstrates that leaving an abusive relationship is not simply a physical act. It is also an intellectual and emotional process. Lily must reconstruct her understanding of love and determine whether forgiveness can coexist with safety.

In *When I Hit You*, psychological domination becomes more comprehensive. The narrator is isolated from her professional and social world, and her identity as a writer becomes threatened by her husband's desire to control her. Contemporary scholarship has specifically identified isolation, humiliation, intimidation, gaslighting and other psychological tactics within the novel.

The difference between the novels is revealing. Hoover concentrates upon the emotional confusion created when affection coexists with violence. Kandasamy moves further into the psychology of domination by showing how the abusive partner attempts to control the woman's intellectual, social and creative identity.

Patriarchy and the Politics of Possession

The toxic relationship in contemporary literature frequently reveals the operation of patriarchal power at the level of everyday intimacy. The abusive partner attempts to determine not merely whether the woman loves him but how she should behave, speak, dress, work and organise her life.

In *It Ends with Us*, Ryle's behaviour increasingly reveals his desire to control the emotional and physical boundaries of his relationship with Lily. His violence becomes an assertion of power rather than merely an expression of uncontrolled anger.

Recent scholarship interprets interpersonal violence in Hoover's novel as a mechanism through which power is exercised over others. The analysis includes emotional manipulation, prescriptive gender stereotyping and domestic violence as manifestations of domination.

Kandasamy makes the patriarchal dimension more explicit. The husband attempts to transform the narrator into an obedient wife and regards her intellectual and professional independence as a threat. The marriage therefore becomes a struggle between the woman's individual identity and the patriarchal identity imposed upon her.

The domestic relationship consequently becomes political. The private sphere is not separate from the structures of power operating in society. Instead, patriarchal ideology enters the home and determines how intimacy is experienced.

The Female Body as a Site of Control

The representation of the female body occupies an important position in both novels. In a toxic relationship, the body becomes a site upon which domination is physically expressed.

In *It Ends with Us*, physical violence transforms Lily's understanding of Ryle. The violent incidents cannot be treated as isolated events because they change the meaning of the relationship itself.

In *When I Hit You*, the connection between the female body and patriarchal control is even more explicit. Physical and sexual violence become mechanisms through which the husband attempts to establish ownership over the narrator.

Joy Das's study of Kandasamy's novel specifically examines marital rape and the reclamation of the female body. The study argues that reclaiming bodily autonomy contributes to the narrator's struggle for self-sustainability within a patriarchal domestic structure.

The body therefore becomes more than a physical entity. It becomes a symbol of identity. Violence against the body becomes violence against autonomy, and the recovery of bodily freedom becomes part of the recovery of the self.

The Cycle of Violence

Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence theory provides a useful framework for understanding the repeated pattern of abuse represented in the two novels. The theory draws attention to the recurring movement from tension to violent incident and subsequently towards reconciliation or apparent calm.

In *It Ends with Us*, Lily experiences the emotional difficulty created by this cycle. Violence is followed by remorse, affection or promises of change, allowing hope to survive even within an increasingly dangerous relationship.

The literary importance of this pattern lies in its ability to challenge the simplistic question of why a victim does not simply leave. The emotional structure of the abusive relationship itself can make departure extremely difficult.

In *When I Hit You*, the cycle becomes embedded within a broader system of psychological control. The scholarly analysis by Sangeetha and others explicitly applies Walker's Cycle of Violence framework to the novel and identifies physical, psychological and social dimensions of intimate partner violence.

Both novels therefore demonstrate that toxicity is sustained not by one violent incident but by a pattern that gradually normalises fear and dependence.

Silence and Narrative Authority

Silence is another major concern in both texts. The victim of abuse may remain silent because of fear, shame, emotional

dependence or uncertainty. The inability to articulate suffering becomes part of the mechanism of control.

In *It Ends with Us*, Lily's silence is connected with her emotional struggle. She must understand the violence before she can make a decisive break with it. Her eventual decision therefore represents not only physical separation but also the recovery of moral and emotional authority.

Kandasamy's treatment of silence is more explicitly literary. The narrator transforms her experience into writing. The act of narration itself becomes a form of resistance.

This is one of the most significant differences between the two novels. Hoover presents the movement from silence to decision, whereas Kandasamy presents the movement from silence to literary testimony.

The narrator of *When I Hit You* is not simply telling the reader what happened. She is controlling how the experience will be remembered. Her husband may have attempted to control her life, but he cannot ultimately control the story she tells about that life.

The literary text consequently becomes a space of recovered agency.

Memory and Trauma

Memory functions as an important narrative device in representing toxic relationships. Trauma does not remain confined to the moment in which violence occurs. It continues through recollection, fear and the interpretation of subsequent experiences.

In *It Ends with Us*, Lily's memories of her childhood and her parents' relationship influence her understanding of domestic violence. The past therefore becomes an important psychological context for the present.

The novel suggests that exposure to violence during childhood can shape an individual's later understanding of love and family. Lily's eventual decision acquires greater significance because she refuses to allow the pattern she witnessed to continue into another generation.

Kandasamy's narrative similarly relies upon retrospective reconstruction. The narrator looks back upon her marriage and examines the gradual development of control and violence. Memory becomes a method through which traumatic experience can be organised into a coherent narrative.

Both novels therefore demonstrate that trauma is not simply an event. It is a continuing psychological presence.

Female Identity and the Crisis of Selfhood

The deepest impact of a toxic relationship is perhaps the gradual erosion of identity. The victim begins to organise her life around the expectations, emotions and behaviour of the abusive partner.

Lily's identity is threatened because her relationship with Ryle requires her to negotiate constantly between emotional

attachment and self-preservation. Her decision to leave consequently becomes an attempt to protect not only her physical safety but also her understanding of herself.

In *When I Hit You*, the crisis of identity is more explicitly connected with writing. The narrator is an intellectual and writer whose husband attempts to undermine the very activity through which she constructs her identity.

The conflict therefore exists between the woman she understands herself to be and the woman her husband expects her to become.

The struggle for identity becomes the central struggle of the novel. The narrator's resistance is not simply resistance to physical violence; it is resistance to being transformed into someone else's creation.

The Domestic Space as a Site of Oppression

The home traditionally signifies safety, belonging and emotional security. In both novels, however, the domestic space gradually becomes associated with fear.

In *It Ends with Us*, the intimate space shared by Lily and Ryle becomes psychologically unstable because the reader understands that violence may occur within it. The home therefore loses its symbolic connection with safety.

In *When I Hit You*, the domestic environment becomes even more explicitly associated with surveillance and isolation. The narrator's movement is restricted, her relationships are controlled and her intellectual independence is threatened.

The transformation of the home is therefore symbolic. A space that should protect the individual becomes the very space in which the individual's freedom is restricted.

Contemporary literature consequently challenges the assumption that domesticity is inherently protective. The home can become a structure of power when relationships within it are governed by domination.

From Victimhood to Resistance

Both novels ultimately move towards the question of resistance. The important point is that resistance does not occur suddenly. It develops through recognition.

Lily gradually understands that Ryle's violence is not something that love can cure. Her eventual decision to end the relationship becomes an attempt to break the cycle of abuse.

The title *It Ends with Us* is therefore particularly significant. The decision to leave is connected with the desire to prevent violence from being reproduced in the next generation.

Kandasamy's narrator takes another form of resistance. She writes.

Writing becomes an act of self-recovery. The woman whose voice has been suppressed within marriage becomes the author of the narrative through which that experience is represented.

The distinction between the two forms of resistance is important. Lily's resistance is primarily relational and familial; Kandasamy's is simultaneously personal, literary and political.

Narrative Technique and Literary Representation

The narrative techniques employed by the two writers contribute significantly to the representation of toxic relationships.

Hoover employs first-person narration and memory to create emotional proximity between Lily and the reader. The reader experiences the relationship largely through Lily's perceptions, uncertainties and decisions.

This technique enables the reader to understand the psychological contradiction of loving someone who causes harm.

Kandasamy's first-person narrative is more explicitly confessional and metafictional. The narrator repeatedly reflects upon writing, memory and the construction of her own story.

The difference in narrative technique reflects the difference in literary purpose. Hoover's narrative seeks to make the emotional experience of domestic violence accessible within a contemporary romantic framework. Kandasamy's narrative transforms personal trauma into literary testimony.

Recent scholarship on *When I Hit You* also emphasises the importance of narrative voice and agency in representing domestic violence and resistance.

Thus, in both novels, narrative authority becomes connected with female agency.

5. Comparative Analysis

Critical Aspect	Colleen Hoover's <i>It Ends with Us</i>	Meena Kandasamy's <i>When I Hit You</i>
Publication	2016	2017
Literary context	Contemporary romantic fiction	Autobiographical literary fiction
Central female character	Lily Bloom	Unnamed narrator
Nature of relationship	Romantic partnership	Marriage
Major conflict	Love versus domestic violence	Marriage versus patriarchal ownership
Major forms of abuse	Physical and emotional violence	Physical, psychological, sexual and intellectual violence
Psychological concern	Emotional confusion and trauma	Identity erosion, isolation and psychological domination
Role of memory	Childhood experience of domestic violence	Retrospective reconstruction of marital trauma
Major symbolic space	Home as unsafe domestic environment	Home as site of surveillance and imprisonment
Resistance	Ending the cycle of violence	Writing, narration and separation
Narrative emphasis	Emotional recognition	Testimony and self-reclamation
Central female struggle	Protecting herself and the next generation	Reclaiming body, voice and identity

The comparison demonstrates that the two novels share a concern with violence but differ in their literary emphasis. Hoover focuses on the emotional contradictions that keep a woman within an abusive relationship, whereas Kandasamy examines the deeper structures of patriarchal control that attempt to reshape the woman's identity.

The comparison of the two novels demonstrates that toxic relationships should not be reduced to physical violence. Both writers show that the most damaging aspects of abuse may occur through manipulation, emotional dependence, isolation and the destruction of self-confidence.

Hoover's novel is particularly effective in showing the contradiction between affection and violence. Lily does not simply move from love to hatred. She must negotiate the difficult recognition that love cannot erase violence.

Kandasamy goes further by demonstrating how the patriarchal relationship attempts to appropriate the woman's entire identity. The narrator's body, intellectual life, friendships and writing are all treated as areas that can be controlled.

The difference may partly be understood through the cultural contexts of the two works. Hoover's narrative belongs to a contemporary Western popular-fiction environment, while Kandasamy's narrative is deeply connected with the Indian context of marriage, patriarchy and intellectual politics. Yet the two texts arrive at a common conclusion: intimacy

becomes destructive when one person's freedom depends upon the surrender of another's autonomy.

The novels consequently challenge the romantic belief that patience, forgiveness and emotional attachment are sufficient to sustain a relationship. Instead, they establish autonomy and dignity as essential conditions of healthy intimacy.

6. Research Findings

The comparative study produces several significant findings.

First, toxic relationships in contemporary literature are represented as gradual structures of domination rather than isolated incidents of violence.

Second, psychological abuse is shown to be as important as physical violence. Manipulation, isolation, humiliation and emotional dependency contribute significantly to the victim's loss of autonomy.

Third, both novels establish a close relationship between patriarchy and intimate violence. The abusive relationship becomes a private manifestation of larger cultural assumptions concerning gender and authority.

Fourth, female identity becomes a major site of conflict. The victim is not merely physically harmed; she is pressured to surrender her independent sense of self.

Fifth, memory functions as an important literary device through which trauma is represented. The past continues to shape the individual's understanding of the present.

Finally, both novels move beyond victimhood. Resistance emerges through recognition, separation and the recovery of narrative authority.

7. Conclusion

The comparative study of Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* demonstrates that contemporary literature has significantly complicated the traditional representation of love and intimate relationships. Both novels expose the destructive potential of relationships in which affection becomes inseparable from control, violence and psychological domination.

Hoover presents Lily's experience as a gradual recognition of the difference between loving someone and remaining safe with that person. Her eventual decision to leave becomes an attempt to interrupt the cycle of violence and prevent its continuation.

Kandasamy, by contrast, presents an unnamed narrator whose marriage becomes a comprehensive structure of patriarchal control. Her resistance is not confined to leaving the relationship. Through writing, she reclaims her voice, body and intellectual identity. Contemporary scholarship similarly identifies psychological tactics, intimate partner violence and the reclamation of the female body as central concerns in the novel.

The two novels consequently reveal different dimensions of the same problem. Hoover explores the emotional complexity of an abusive romantic relationship, whereas Kandasamy exposes the ideological and patriarchal structures underlying marital domination. Their literary methods are different, but their central insight is similar: love cannot be measured by its intensity when that intensity demands the surrender of freedom.

The most important movement in both narratives is therefore the movement from silence to recognition, from recognition to resistance, and from resistance to the recovery of identity. The woman who initially experiences herself through the relationship gradually understands that she must recover an identity beyond it.

Contemporary literature thus performs more than a representational function. It provides a language through which hidden experiences of abuse can be recognised and discussed. By placing toxic relationships at the centre of literary attention, Hoover and Kandasamy challenge the romanticisation of suffering and insist upon a more demanding understanding of intimacy- one based not merely upon affection, but upon dignity, autonomy, safety and mutual respect.

The significance of these narratives ultimately lies in their refusal to treat violence as an inevitable component of love or marriage. Their women do not remain permanently defined by what has been done to them. They become narrators of

their own experiences. In this transformation from victim to speaking subject lies the strongest form of resistance represented by contemporary literature.

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