



## Representation of Women in Perumal Murugan's Pyre and Meena Kandaswamy's When I Hit You

Soumya V S, Assistant Professor of English, T. K. Madhava Memorial College,  
Nangiarkulangara, Haripad, Kerala

Dr. K. Prabha, Research Scholar, Department of English, Kongu Arts and Science  
College, Erode, Tamil Nadu

### Article information

Received: 20<sup>th</sup> September 2024

Received in revised form: 3<sup>th</sup> October 2024

Accepted: 30<sup>th</sup> November 2024

Available online: 7<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 1 January 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14615132>

### Abstract

The artist's impressions of women in Pyre by Perumal Murugan and When I Hit You by Meena Kandaswamy are very poignant comments on women's socio-cultural problems in Indian society today. Pyre presents Murugan with the young Saroja who has broken free from caste and followed her love for life instead of her traditions. The consequences are brutal in terms of women when they question patriarchy and caste; here again, societal changes are resented. Kandaswamy's When I Hit You presents a stark portrayal of a woman's life trapped in an abusive marriage. The narrative through the voice of the protagonist unravels the pervasive nature of domestic violence and the oppressive structures that silence women. Both novels make use of effective and forceful prose to reveal the strength of their female heroines in the face of adversity. It not only critiques the deeply entrenched misogyny within Indian society but also celebrates the strength and agency of women who strive to reclaim their autonomy.

**Keywords:** - Women's representation, Caste norms, Patriarchal structures, Domestic violence, Socio-cultural challenges

### Introduction

Women have been characterizing the scenario of dealing with and defying the gender dynamics within contemporary Indian socio-cultural contexts in Pyre by Perumal Murugan and Kandaswamy's When I Hit You; Pyre takes the life of Saroja-a young woman who marries Kumaresan, even with the caste differences as seen in an urban Tamil Nadu location. The story is about how society tries to contain, and oppress women, especially those who defy the norm (Murugan 45). There is a subtle critique of patriarchy and caste-based discrimination that underscores the intersectional struggles women undergo. On the contrary, When I Hit You is a

face-to-face scrutiny of the marriage aspect of violence and a search for self-identity. The unnamed protagonist experiences such complex forms of domestic violence and tries to understand the cycles on which this condition revolves and the social rules that enable it to go on (Kandaswamy 23). Kandaswamy's lyrical, yet hard prose creates a very strong image of that woman's voice silenced in a system. It very well portrays feminist and raw realities in the protagonist's turmoil and final blowback (Sarkar 112).

*Pyre* and *When I Hit You* form two such fleshly, multi-layered embodiments of women's lives, narrating an agency and survival story in the oppressive patriarchal framework. It is between Saroja's quiet act of defiance and that of Kandaswamy's heroine's strident rebellion that the differences between women's empowerment reside. Together, these tales will necessarily compel readers to interrogate the socio-political formations shaping women's identities and experiences in contemporary India, thus making a vital contribution to feminist literature.

### **Women's representation**

It is quite a daunting task, would rather say it is impossible, to do justice to the voice of women in Indian literature at the highest possible level, for this form has been changing regularly with the changing terrain of the topography of life, culture, and the society that is such a thriving place for which it is. Some of the most notable works such as *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan and *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy seek to incorporate the critical review of the representation of women and their experiences in modern-day India. The study delves into the social and cultural aspects of India to bring out different angles from which women are oppressed and still do not break their indomitable spirit. The given novels show the difficulties of women's self-realization to systemic oppression in the patriarchal and casteist sectors and the struggles where women negotiate their lives through personal relationships, societal expectations, and institutionalized violence, providing a critique of power and gender issues. In the *Pyre*, caste and gender dimensions are exemplified by Saroja the character. She being a lower caste woman is put through a tough time facing threats against her life and also hatred from her society when she marries Kumaresan who is from a higher caste. Murugan captures Saroja's character that exists in silence, possessing such a strong spirit and suffering silently in a caste-oriented society. Her resistance within the group and her strength for the society's being excluded from it while the violence that occurs in this society is the background of the caste, which women suffer from due to their caste presence were her strongholds. The complexity of caste and patriarchy challenged Saroja in the rural Tamil Nadu landscape. With the character of Saroja, Murugan portrays how the female body gets to be a tool of society and how it should be controlled and regulated by societal norms (Pyre, 123). The lady has her natural human rights and her personality is freely expressed by Saroja, which is in contrast to the situation of women who experience marriage across different clans. "The load of shame and honor in the community's body is only on women who are thus the objects of collective punishment" (Pyre, 124) we are shown how completely yoked the male attitude towards the female body is and how they can punish them as a group. Saroja's personal experience would mainly focus on the intersection of caste and patriarchal oppression and how women would be subject to community violence and also lose their voice if such a condition was the case.

Taking a different turn, the novel *When I Hit You* Kandasamy gives us direct criticism of the patriarchal society and an aggressive story of household abuse. The nameless narrator's torturous marriage functions as a smaller version of the bigger societal formations, one that insists misgenders women. Kandaswamy uses her narrative voice as a way to bring out the psychological threat as well as the social compulsion to remain with the abusive husbands even if they are not willing to. In a dialogue, the protagonist reveals a moment of deep introspection, "Every slap is a reminder that my freedom is the greatest threat to him" . Kandasamy also

mentions how through her claiming of authority and exit from the marriage, she protests against the domestic violence practices that are commonly occurring and affirms the strength of the victims. Correspondingly, *When I Hit You* can be considered as the one where Kandasamy delivers a strong story of a woman fighting domestic violence and patriarchal oppression. It is a part of the narrator's path to self-discovery and the final attainment of true power which is a tribute to the dogged endurance of the female species in the face of all possible hurdles (Kandasamy 145).

### **Caste Norms**

In both *Pyre* and *When I Hit You*, the themes of gender and caste oppression are closely linked, illustrating how caste norms influence the depiction of women. In *Pyre*, Murugan examines how inter-caste relationships subject women to severe societal judgment and violence. The main character, Saroja, represents a challenge to the strictures of caste; yet, her freedom is limited as she becomes a victim of the patriarchal caste system. Murugan critiques the oppressive structures that label her marriage as sinful, resulting in tragic outcomes (Murugan 34). The novel underscores how caste serves as a mechanism for undermining women's independence, particularly in personal matters like marriage. In *Pyre*, the love story between Kumaresan and Saroja is marred by the violence and social exclusion that their inter-caste union incurs. Regarding identity, struggles, and belonging, the caste system significantly influences Saroja's social values and freedom. The inflexibility of the caste structure in Murugan's narrative illustrates the dire consequences it has on women's lives and their liberties.

Domestic violence is a bold, raw, and powerful portrayal in Meena Kandaswamy's *When I Hit You*. The brutal mistreatment she suffers at the hands of her husband is not dissimilar from the burdens of societal duty that emphasize male supremacy and casteism. The narrative of a woman by Kandaswamy does more than challenge society and rebels against societal norms to immortalize the poet's strength and defiance in its protagonist. Further, Kandaswamy looks into the complicated relationship of caste, patriarchy, and domestic violence. The marriage of the narrator with a politically progressive man, it brings out contradictions masked by an ideology that exists behind the privilege of caste. Although suffering from patriarchal oppression, subtle dynamics of caste significantly affect power imbalances within their relationship. The narrator in Kandaswamy's work criticizes how society remains silent about violence against women, which germinates from caste and gender issues (Kandaswamy 102). Both books make myriad layers of oppression women face due to the rules of caste. They reveal these systems keep men above and prevent women from ascertaining their own identities and desires. The novels challenge the dominant stories of caste that permit violence against women to be perpetuated. Aniket Jaaware says, "the caste question is not just a matter of social justice, but also a matter of epistemology" (Jaaware 234). Murugan and Kandaswamy center Dalit women's lives to deliver a solid critique of caste norms and their impact on women..

### **Patriarchal Structures**

*Pyre* and *When I Hit You* resonate deeply with the patriarchal structures that have influenced the lives of women profoundly. Saroja in *Pyre* leads a life thoroughly defined by highly patriarchal customs. Married to Kumaresan, her illegal marriage does not only lead to severe ostracism at the hands of his family and the community but there is also constant violence inflicted on her by them all. Murugan's tale also critiques how the incessant pressure of patriarchy on the concept of gender roles eventually strips Saroja of her rights and reduces her to only suffering (Murugan 123). There is indeed an increased oppression as a result of the caste system. Within it, one can gauge how entangled the chains of caste and patriarchy are in confining women (Arunima 210).

When I Hit You, is a ruthless reflection of patriarchal power in Kandasamy's comment on his vague hero's marriage in abuse. Violence and control of a husband imply wider acceptance in society of a man dominating over a woman. The fight is not with just physical abuse from her husband's side, but also with the structural society that approves such behaviors (Kandasamy 145). It explains how patriarchal crimes against women aren't just limited to physical violence; emotional and psychological are included too (Chakravarti 213). Both novels show how women internalized patriarchal norms. Internalization is overburdened by making her an instrument of oppression as navigated or even sometimes unknowingly helping propagate them (Satyanarayana 245). Through such powerfully worded narratives, both reconceptualize rigid and traditional patriarchal norms and advocate emancipation for women.

### **Domestic Violence**

Domestic Violence would serve as a key theme in the representation of women in Perumal Murugan's Pyre and Meena Kandaswamy's When I Hit You: they did capture intersections between gender oppression, society, and systemic inequalities. Both narratives concern how violence against women is extended by patriarchal and casteism-related issues that cause their degradation and absence from society. In Pyre, Murugan depicts the life history of Saroja as a young woman who encounters severe psychological abuse and above that the rest of the petty social ostracization due to her marriage outside caste. Continuous verbal assaults and threatening behavior demonstrated explicitly by her mother-in-law, Marayi, and the villagers have noticeable effects on how caste and gender intersect and perpetuate violence against women. This cruelty is not limited to personal parameters; it gets beyond and becomes public, showing how societal norms and traditions legitimize domestic violence. The loneliness and suffering of Saroja are not just individual but, also, portray the caste prejudices that have pervaded the society, which create what holds gender-based violence to a very high level. According to Suganthi and Deivasigamani, the honor-based violence that Saroja endures emphasizes the collective enforcement of caste hierarchies (3377-3383). In Pyre, the wickedness against women in the countryside of Tamil Nadu is brought out, showing the part played by caste and class in domestic violence (Murugan 123). The novel portrays women in the periphery, rendering them voiceless, with domestic violence claiming its victim in the protagonist's mother. Murugan criticizes how all these social structures use domestic violence—whether psychologically, emotionally, or physically to enforce caste and gender hierarchies. Such violence is depicted as yet another normalization, and thus systemic, of how it operates (Chakraborty 112). Silence and suffering for the wife correspond to the larger silence of agency of women in the oppressive frameworks.

When I Hit You is an inside-out account of domestic violence through its unnamed protagonist. Kandasamy describes the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse meted out by the husband in great detail and how he controls and manipulates her. The novel explores the trauma and the protagonist's struggle to reclaim herself and her agency through writing. It's said that Kandasamy's book exposes the destructive power of patriarchy and the silent suffering of women in abusive marriages. It shows the tactics the abuser uses to maintain power the protagonist's resilience and finally her empowerment. Kandasamy goes into the personal and intimate spaces of domestic violence, showing how abusers manipulate and coerce their victims (Kandasamy 45). Nivedita Sen and Anu Aneja say these works challenge the notion of femininity and domesticity, we need to be more aware and do more to address domestic violence in India (Sen and Aneja 12). Kalpana Kannabiran says these works show us the importance of intersectionality in domestic violence, and how caste, class, and gender intersect to perpetuate abuse (Kannabiran 56). When I Hit You is a brutal and unvarnished look at domestic violence, where the protagonist is physically and psychologically abused within a marriage to a man who is outwardly a progressive. The narrative takes apart the romance of

marriage as a safe space and the complicity of institutions in perpetuating spousal abuse. Kandaswamy's first-person narrative shows the protagonist's strength and resistance and critiques the patriarchal underpinnings of even so-called egalitarian relationships (Roy 87). Through simple language and nonlinear narrative, Kandaswamy exposes the complexity of domestic violence.

### **Socio-cultural Challenges**

Sociocultural Challenges to Women within the Patriarchal and Caste-based Societies by Pyre and *When I Hit You*. In this respect, the Pyre unveils the deep-rooted caste-based prejudices in rural India. Saroja symbolizes the protagonist's struggles that the women go through being trapped in love and the societal norm. Her elopement with Kumaresan attracts ostracism and violence from a casteist community that depicts the stiff structure of society against women and taking away their choices (Anandhi 45). In Murugan's work, the stranglehold of caste over personal choice shows that women's will is usually covered under collective honor. In the case of *When I Hit You*, it speaks against the atrocities of domestic violence and patriarchy. She describes marriage as a site of systemic oppression by creating an image of the protagonist navigating the double violence of the abusive husband and society. Kandaswamy makes personal trauma interact with sharp social critique to depict the silencing of women's intellectual and emotional agency through cultural and marital expectations. Her resistance, both in language and eventual escape, is a challenge to the societal complicity that silences women. In the case of *When I Hit You*, it speaks against the atrocities of domestic violence and patriarchy. She describes marriage as a site of systemic oppression by creating an image of the protagonist navigating the double violence of the abusive husband and society. Both works highlight the intersection of caste, gender, and violence and emphasize the sociocultural challenges that impede women's freedom. They advocate for dismantling oppressive structures through feminist and anti-caste narratives, offering critical insight into the need for systemic change.

### **Conclusion**

Such a summary can be given as a prelude to the analysis of the representation of women in Pyre by Perumal Murugan and *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy. It brings to the fore the harsh truths of the sociocultural realities of women in India. The two novels would engage in a literary representation concerning the crossing of caste, gender, and society in between, encompassing a system of oppression and violence toward women. Pyre articulates in full the psychological trauma of Marayi in intercaste marriage along with other racial and gender discriminations in rural Tamil Nadu. *When I Hit You* is the jarring narrative of marital abuse and the patriarchal machinery behind that violence; she gives voice to the resilience of the unnamed narrator and the quest for autonomy. Very poignant is the fact that they both advocate social change and gender equality through their stories. Their works bring to the forefront of the discourse the need to redress these ills for the development of a society in which women can live free from oppression and violence. Through such rhetoric, the authors are at once critiquing the status quo and prompting readers to reflect on how they can contribute to the broader struggle of the people toward women's rights and empowerment. The representation of these women in the novels will remind any reader about the role of literature in achieving social change and justice in gender.

### Works Cited

- Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Books, 2016.
- Kandaswamy, Meena. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Atlantic Books, 2017.
- Sarkar, Arunima. "Feminist Resistance in Contemporary Indian Literature." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2019, pp. 110-125.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. SAGE Publications, 2018.
- Chakravarti, Uma. "Patriarchy and Violence Against Women." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 25, 2011, pp. 213-216.
- Jaaware, Aniket. "Eating, and Eating with the Dalits." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 39, 2009, pp. 23-25.
- Arunima, G. "Rethinking Caste and Gender: Perumal Murugan's Fiction." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 26, 2013, pp. 208-212.
- Satyanarayana, K. "Internalizing Patriarchy: Women's Experiences in India." *Social Scientist*, vol. 41, no. 9/10, 2013, pp. 245-254.
- Suganthi, S. B., and T. Deivasigamani. "Inter-Caste Marriages End with Honour Killing: A Study of Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*." *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2023.
- Chakraborty, Rina. *Gender and Caste: An Intersectional Analysis*. Routledge, 2018.
- Sen, Nivedita, and Anu Aneja. "Introduction." *Mapping South Asian Masculinities: Men and Boys in Contemporary India*, edited by Sen and Aneja, Rawat Publications, 2017, pp. 1-15.
- Kannabiran, Kalpana. "Introduction." *Violence Studies: Essays in Honour of Jan Breman*, edited by Kannabiran, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1-20.
- Roy, Ania Loomba. *Colonial and Postcolonial Feminism*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Anandhi, S. "Caste and Intimacy in Literature." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, pp. 45-60.