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Research Article

The Red Dot and the Red Flag: Digital Surveillance and the Marxist-Patriarchal Paradox in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the connection between digital surveillance, domestic violence, and ideological farce in Meena Kandasamy's autofiction *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. This paper will show that her husband instrumentalizes his political knowledge as a die-hard Marxist revolutionary to impose his patriarchal will over her and make her household a laboratory of instrumentarian power. The theoretical framework for this paper combines Shoshana Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism, Post-Feminist Marxist theories of social reproduction, and Foucauldian theory of the docile body. To this end, this paper will show that her husband extracts surplus value from her literary and reproductive labour and attempts to perform archival violence on her by erasing her digital history. In the reading that follows, the husband is seen as the Big Other to his wife's data as the 'red dot' that he attempts to track and tame. In conclusion, the protagonist's deployment of l'écriture féminine can be seen as her rebellion against the surveillance performed by her husband, the Comrade.

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INTRODUCTION

If one were to look up the meaning of “autofiction” in a dictionary, the definition might read something like a form of fictional writing which shrouds factual experience with a mask of literariness. In other words, a story which purports to be non-fiction is suddenly elevated into fiction by dint of the fact that the person telling it is a Writer, as opposed to a mere victim or survivor or witness. If an unnamed female were to write down the story of her life in prison, for instance, a memoir in its truest sense, it would be true crime, not autofiction; but if a male novelist calls a prison memoir autofiction, it is suddenly literary criticism. In the words of the journalist Sandra Hoffman, “the line between autofiction and memoir is a ‘racialized hierarchy of literary value,’ as Grace Lavery writes in a remarkable new book.”

Meena Kandasamy, in *When I Hit You*, does not claim autofiction for herself. She uses all the techniques of the literary artifice—the framing, the citation, the interpolations of fact and fiction, the punctuation like a calligram—but she does not make the particular classist or racist leap of calling her story autofiction.

The first chapter of *When I Hit You* is a smorgasbord of cultural and historical references. In it, the author lists every traumatic experience she has lived through, and manages to turn even this catalog of grief into a site of aesthetic play. The text is a montage of sutured fragments; the entire opening section of the novel is lifted from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The novel, by its author’s admission, is written entirely in a language lifted from her husband.

The epigraphs from Kafka and Fanon and Hindi film song manuals will not have escaped the reader’s notice; they stack up to form a dense language texture at the edge of the page. “Everyone has a choice” is printed in English, in Hindi, in Tamil, in Bangla, in French, in Spanish, in Portuguese, in German, in Hungarian. Everyone has a choice in the text, and in the performance of the text, at the level of the book as artifact; but when it comes to the life of the autobiographical subject, agency is always conditional.

What unites autofiction with writing like *When I Hit You* is the invocation of the body as a site of digital performance. In autofiction, as in *When I Hit You*, the writing subject is insistently textualized. Kandasamy the autobiographical protagonist in *When I Hit You* does not describe herself as a woman, or as a writer, or as a wife. She describes herself, first, as a pixel, “blinking red dot[s]” on the husband’s screen:

I’m a blinking red dot lying flat at the bottom left of a large, flat-screen monitor. The screen is blank except for a red star at the top right. Every time my husband gives me an orientation course about the revolution or a lesson in declassing, this red dot inches diagonally up the screen. This is my cunt moving closer to Maoism. (Kandasamy 82)

If a woman is expected to wear the bindi, the pottu, the sindoor of marriage as a badge of domestic auspiciousness, the red dot of *When I Hit You* is the surveillance camera’s recording light. A signal that says, I am being recorded, I am a digital sample, my voice and my body and my name have become data. These

two traditions—the bride’s dot and the red recording light—meet and meld in Kandasamy’s prose, just as the traditional and the capitalist collide and cohere in the matrimonial violence at the center of her novel.

Autofiction, and texts like *When I Hit You*, perform a textual capture of the self in which the body is folded into the digital archive. They hoard, record, suture, witness, scream, italicize, archive the self in language as an answer to the question: if I am a target, what is my weapon?

Marxist Masquerades: Simulating Surplus Value

The novel takes place in Bangalore and New Delhi over the course of a year of wedlock. The husband is an Indian university professor of literature and former Maoist guerrilla fighter. He teaches the unnamed protagonist, a young woman who came to Delhi to write a novel, to embrace Marxism, “like a new mother tongue.” She, an enthusiastic young leftist, signs up for classes.

The husband “proposes a new assignment.” He makes her his domestic slave. She becomes “an unpaid machine of revolution,” cooped up in the apartment, chopping vegetables and buttering his chapatis. In exchange for domestic service, the husband educates her in Marxism:

When I need soap or toothpaste I go to the local kirana store and buy what I want. Everything comes from factories. A worker is someone who works in a factory. Only factories count in Marxism. You are not declassing yourself by doing household chores. What matters is the site of labour... Unpaid work is not in any way revolutionary. You are only a machine of revolution as far as the work you do can be recognized as labor within Marxism. (Kandasamy 47)

The housework the protagonist is made to do is traditional work; sweeping, cooking, cleaning, washing, the sex work of forced marriage. There is no recognized value to this work. As the Post-Feminist Marxist theorist Nora Räthzel and her co-authors write in *Marxist Feminist Theories and Struggles Today*:

The separation between production and social reproduction... rendered the latter invisible. This invisibility was not a natural given but the result of a specific historical process and set of struggles... capitalist production relies on the production of life, on social reproduction, but it treats it as a free natural resource. (Räthzel et al. 3)

The husband in *When I Hit You* uses language like a true capitalist. He wages the rhetoric of liberation as a high-tech panopticon in the service of feudal patriarchy. He knows the worthlessness of the wife’s intellectual or reproductive labor—her poetry, her social media profiles, her history, her womanhood—because he is trained to evaluate labor on the same market principles that valorize him as a skilled worker while dispensing with her as “sex worker” or housewife or college dropout.

Her Marxist curriculum amounts to three things: (1) daily lessons in revolutionary oratory, (2) declassing lessons [manual labor in the name of class humiliation], and (3) instruction in Hindi filmsong theory. The wife is declassed in two ways: first,

by scrubbing the husband's feet and toilet, and second by repeated instances of marital rape, which the husband euphemizes as "the rape that tames" (Kandasamy 106). The protagonist's husband designs his domestic labor as a labor extraction machine, but only in the capitalist language of Marxism can this feudal arrangement be articulated as a liberation movement. A moment from *When I Hit You* reads as if directly cited from Rätzel, Mulinari, and Fakier:

Is there really no way in which we can say that housework contributes to value production in the way other forms of work do? After all, domestic work is still work and not just any type of work but extremely intensive, often exploitative work. (Kandasamy 48)

When the protagonist in *When I Hit You* says the work she is forced to perform "helps make the world around us go round," what she means by this is that she makes chapatis and prepares chai for her husband in lieu of the manual work she is also expected to do:

The type of labour you are doing right now – cooking, cleaning, washing, sex work – is a form of unpaid work. This unpaid work is not considered labour because there is no exchange of wages. What you call revolution by declassing is a reformulation of what we already do. Its unpaid work being directed to serve a man. (Kandasamy 47)

Here, the husband is telling the wife, but he could just as easily be a husband addressed by Rätzel, Mulinari, and Fakier, in a feminist Marxist dialectic that has nothing to do with his politics and everything to do with how the market values his labor and disvalues hers.

In the eponymous 1977 play by Jean Genet, *Scene of the Following Crime* opens with a bickering couple and their two houseguests involved in a free-for-all fight which ends in one of them murdering the other. The audience has no way of knowing who will be the predator and who the prey until the very end; in fact, the one "safe" space in the entire play is the one space off-stage, in the dark bedroom, where the next action is about to take place. In *Scene of the Following Crime*, violence is not revealed but deferred, predicated but not predicted.

The New Delhi of *When I Hit You* is also the scene of a following crime. The novel-within-the-novel is both a record and a prophecy. Kandasamy the author knows what will happen, which is one of the reasons the novel is autofiction and not memoir; she will get out, and he will be destroyed. Her job, as the literary artist of *When I Hit You*, is to show the gradual process by which one person becomes, in Foucauldian terms, a subject of violence, while the other is the potential source of danger.

As stated above, the central enabler in the husband's arsenal is the language of Marxist orthodoxy and the simulated liberation struggle he carries on inside the home. The second is what we may call instrumentarian power – he will use every trick in the book to delete, reformat, archive, weaponize his wife's data in the home. The husband in *When I Hit You* is a proximate subject for the surveillance state of twenty-first century India. He uses its tools – its lockers, its passwords, its intermediaries

like WhatsApp, Gmail – not as a subservient go-between. He wields his access like Big Brother's iron fist in a velvet glove, pious about his socialist orthodoxy in a way that hides the feudal fundamentalism of his methods.

The house in *When I Hit You* is a double-bind. It is both surveilled and surveillant. For the wife, marriage is digital bondage; for the husband, marriage is a high-tech extraction zone. His means of control include instrumentarian power – he abuses his social capital as a digital subject with access to the tools of modern life to manipulate and surveil his wife. He holds the passwords to her virtual life. If she does not provide them, he will "prove [himself]" with "blackmail," exploiting the most vulnerable aspects of her online presence, her ex-lover, her father, her Facebook friends:

I trust you. Okay. Do you trust me? I do. So? Do you trust me enough to share your passwords? "I do," she says... The camel's nose has just entered the tent... At the moment, the only way of proving myself means writing down all my passwords... My hot tears burn my cheeks, but I resolutely buy myself an uneasy peace. I write down my passwords. (Kandasamy 36)

With this information, the husband enacts what the Surveillance Studies academic Shoshana Zuboff terms "instrumentarian power":

Instrumentarian power is the power to modify behavior – not the power to crush the soul with terror or pain but the power to nudge, to alter, to harness, to shape what people will do by watching everything they do... Instrumentarian power is not a coup d'état but a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty... the Big Other is the sovereign power of the near future, and it annihilates the freedom to will. (Zuboff 21, 376)

The husband becomes the Big Other in *When I Hit You*. Zuboff's critique of "surveillance capitalism" is entirely instantiated in this one text. His violence against his wife's data is a form of digital disenfranchisement – he will hand-pick and curate the subject to his liking. In one of the more chilling sequences of the novel, the husband takes to "answering" his wife's emails. He signs them *both our names*, effecting a form of identity capture.

This surveillance operates at a basic level. Kandasamy the autobiographical protagonist in *When I Hit You* does not live in an Orwellian future where one's whole life can be taken over remotely. She lives, like the rest of us, with the real-time terror of passwords; when the husband exerts this sovereignty over the wife, he assumes the position of Sovereign Subject, of Big Other. He erases her Facebook, disables her "likes," shuts her out of the support network of artists and writers and readers who sustained her pre-marriage.

When the wife in *When I Hit You* finally manages to report her husband to the police, they send her to a shelter. There, as she recuperates, the officers take her to the hospital to examine her body, collect a blood sample, and register an injury report. In another universe, this might be the scene in a science fiction film noir where she finally gets her victory shot of the rapist caught red-handed in the act. In the film of *When I Hit You*,

this moment will take place not in the courtroom but in a medical facility, the police and social worker in tow, the blood sample and swabs in evidence.

In *When I Hit You*, the home is a space of accelerated trauma, where private surveillance and interrogation techniques are augmented to a point of absolute capture. The scene in the clinic, however, illustrates what feminist bioethicists term epistemic injustice.

Wendy A. Rogers and Jackie Leach Scully, in *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Bioethics*, define epistemic injustice as a harm done to someone in their capacity as a knower (Rogers and Scully 12-13). Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker receives a credibility deficit as a result of prejudice (Rogers and Scully 13). In the case of the protagonist in *When I Hit You*, her speech is effectively overridden by the speech of her abuser. In the clinic, the bioethic is reduced to a listener. She is allowed to witness, but not to say.

Let us compare the speech acts of husband and doctor:

The doctor compliments me on having such a loving husband; on being married to such a devoted, doting man... At no time does he give me an opportunity to talk to him. At no time does he ask me how I am. (Kandasamy 121)

Note the conflation of character: the husband is commended for “loving” his wife, despite the evidence before the doctor’s eyes: The doctor pats my husband’s shoulders. He says, “I hope this couple will be blessed with a child very soon.” “Husband,” he says. “Wife.” He turns to me and asks, “Are you trying to get pregnant?” I nod. “Are you on your periods now?” he asks... He pats my husband’s shoulders again. “This is such a nice family, such a wonderful couple,” he says. (Kandasamy 120)

By attending only to the husband’s version of the story, the doctor is guilty of what could be called bioethical complicity. He “participates” in the wife’s abuse by assuming the reality of the husband’s speech acts as empirical fact. The husband will use his epistemic privilege as a patient to hold the clinic to ransom. He demands the presence of the doctor at their next appointment; once there, he weaves an entire novel of doctor-approved romance out of the surveillance, monitoring his wife’s cycles as a form of counter-surveillance.

If in the home, the violence of *When I Hit You* is indirect, scattered, simulated through speech and argument, in the clinic, it is enforced by recourse to the body. The husband manages to turn procreation itself into a potential act of violence, monitoring and observing his wife’s periods with an eye to whether or not her ovulation is “good.” Once their arguments turn to childbearing, the husband institutes a regime of digital reportage:

He demands that I show him when I come on my periods, when I have completed my menstruation... He tells me to update him daily on my discharge and the rate and quantity of my periods... All I have to do is text him “UP” or “DOWN” for upsurge or downswing, and “CALM” if I have a moment of respite. (Kandasamy 123)

His is bioethics of battery – the use of the violence of the home against the body at large. The husband in *When I Hit You* has bioethical privilege in a way that the wife does not. Once their

“injury” has been documented, his power over her increases tenfold.

The Promise and Peril of Silence: The Price of Story

In *When I Hit You*, the battle for the wife’s story is waged on many levels. The struggle for narrative power is the novel’s subtext, and when she is stripped of every weapon, even that which cannot be taken away from her, this is the final confrontation between the wife and the husband. The last weapon the husband tries to wrest from her is language itself.

The assault is multi-pronged. Her parents-in-law advise her to save her money, save her words, because they, not the husband, are the more oppressive force. A private conversation with the father-in-law, in which the wife’s pain is reduced to an epigram, is illustrative:

“How did it happen?” he asks in his exacting way.

“I went to your son’s room and he refused to let me in.”

“How will you know that such a thing has happened in the first place if you go into his room?”

“I just felt he might have come in and gone out.”

“How will you know? How can you know?”

“Tsunami?”

“It’s not me, Your Honour, it’s him.”

“The sea speaks through me.”

“Silence is a shield and it is also a weapon. Learn how to use it... If you open your mouth, you will die,” my father-in-law says. (Kandasamy 95-96)

By far the most powerful weapon in the husband’s arsenal is silence itself. The husband explicitly demands silence as a condition of safety in the house. In their first arguments, she offers to fight back with her words, at which he pauses, as if to consider the proposition. He explicitly frames the idea as potential treason:

I am telling you to change, but you are resisting. I am willing to do everything to help you; but you want to hurt me with words, with humiliation. You would sell your own mother for ten pages of written insult. (Kandasamy 67)

The battle for speech is also waged at the level of language politics. The violence of the text of *When I Hit You* is perhaps most palpable at the level of mother tongue debates. The husband’s imposition of Hindi on the wife as a “disciplinary technique” amount to linguistic imperialism. In a moment that almost reads like Fanon in reverse, the husband demands that the wife “study” her mother tongue:

This is how you behave towards your own language. So, tell me, which is your mother tongue? Hindi, of course, is our mother tongue. But then you write in English. You write in English, you’re going to write in English, and you always will write in English... You will start reading more of your mother tongue. You will not write in English till you finish reading your entire Desi Kavita collection. (Kandasamy 98)

The husband will demand that she erase not just her digital archive but her own knowledge of English as a subversive force.

If you have never been the target of a forced marriage, of home-based domestic surveillance, or of marital battery in the digital age, the abuses of the husband in *When I Hit You* may

seem overblown, overly melodramatic, the self-indulgence of a professional writer dealing with a private conflict through public literary criticism. The memoir of an unknown woman is bad crime, but the autofiction of a well-known Indian woman leftist is a site of cultural performance.

But as the recent headlines around the New India rape gang in Bengaluru have shown us, we are all Kandasamys now. In the 2022 to come, maybe this is the book our sons and daughters and brothers and sisters will pick up to read about the life of the writer, who in twenty-first century India is, simply, a target.

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