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**A DALIT WOMAN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND SOCIETY TO BE A
WRITER: A STUDY OF MEENA KANDASAMY'S WHEN I HIT YOU**

ABSTRACT

Meena Kandasamy (1984-), a radical feminist, is one of the most influential Dalit woman writers in postcolonial Indian English Literature. Unlike other Indian women writers, she does not bow down to patriarchy and society which prevent her from making her a writer. She came to realize that if one, especially woman, wants to be a writer than she must have to fight against the age old, stereotyped, hackneyed and obsolete ideas and concepts and, therefore, like Kamala Das she has depicted previously forbidden and ignored emotions frankly and candidly. This paper aims to highlight the struggle of a Dalit woman, who neither gets the father's encouragement nor her husband's and what is more, she was beaten and raped even by her own husband. But she never loses her hope and confronts all courageously. Apart from it, society's norms and casteism are also not a bed full of roses to move on but in each and every step, these prevent her to become a writer. But nothing can stop her from achieving her goal.

Key words: Meena Kandasamy, Patriarchy, Domestic violence, Society, Casteism.

Introduction:-

Meena Kandasamy (1984-), one of the most influential and ingenious fiction writers of postcolonial Indian English Literature, is also a notable poetess, translator and activist. Regarding her lineage Meena Kandasamy, an angry voice of the oppressed, says in an interview in iDiva: "I come from a very mixed background- almost four different backward

castes including a Dalit” (Raji Narasimhan, Language in India). Being come of in a Dalit family she has to put up with the atrocities of the upper caste and patriarchy. But unlike other Dalit women she neither surrender to patriarchy nor tolerate torture and oppression rather she bravely and courageously struggles against such kinds of injustices done towards Dalit women throughout the ages. This paper is an attempt to study the struggle of a Dalit woman, whose sole aim in life is to be writer, but society and patriarchy stand like hard wall in her life through which nothing can penetrate. But nothing was able to crush her spirit as she was determined to reach the goal.

Women have been treated as marginalised, secondary and other and whose position are always at the periphery of patriarchal social order. And if she is a Dalit then she is doubly marginalized, first by caste and then by gender. And the woman, whose struggle this article is going to articulate is also a Dalit by birth but she is not bothered by her birth rather she is longing after to write her story. If we zero in into the story line of the novel *When I Hit You*, we find that the unnamed narrator is talking in first person about story of a young girl, who falls in love with a university lecturer. But after getting married, she swiftly learns that what for her is a bond of love is for him a contract of ownership. As he sets about reducing her to his idealized version of an obedient wife, bullying her and devouring her ambition of being a writer in the process, she attempts to push back- a resistance but he resolves to break with violence and rape. When this brutal torture reaches to the culmination, it was completely unbearable to her and she shuts the door for her husband forever and concentrates into writing to make her a writer. As the main objective of this article is to highlight the struggle of a Dalit woman against society’s patriarchal system, therefore, first it is necessary to discuss the nomenclature ‘Dalit’- who are Dalits?

Dalits:-

The word “Dalit” means broken or downtrodden. Actually the untouchables and the outcastes, who were segregated from the mainstream of society called themselves Dalits under Dr.B.R. Ambedkar’s leadership. According to Manu, the most despised group were chandala (offspring of a Sudra man and a Brahmin woman) and sapaka (offspring of a chandala man and a pukkasā female) and the fate was a cruel one. Thus Manu writes,

“The dwelling of chandala and sapaka should be outside of the village, this should be depriving of dishes, and their property consists of dogs and asses. Their clothes should be the garments of the dead, and their ornaments should be broken dishes and they must constantly wander about.”

The chandala and the sapaka are supposed to be the forefathers of contemporary Dalits (Kottaparamban, Musadhique; Emergence of Dalit). The Dalits are the most underprivileged class who have been humiliated and tortured by the upper caste people from time immemorial. And so far the Dalit women are concerned it is a matter of great worry. They are doubly marginalized; they are forced to face the double bondage; firstly by their own family members and secondly, by the upper caste people. They are exploited physically and psychologically. And what is more, they are even discriminated and segregated from the mainstream of society (Dalits in India, Sukhadeo Thorat). Though this is the condition of Dalit women, but, somehow, the Dalit women are now fighting against such kind of injustices and they are trying to resist such kind of domination.

After describing briefly the concept and conditions of Dalits, it's now the time to focus light on the locus classicus of the paper which strives to explore a Dalit woman's struggle against society's patriarchal system to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer.

Struggle against Patriarchy:-

Patriarchy is dangerous to Dalit women because it does not allow her to evince her mind freely and stands as an obstacle in their way. It neither allows the women to flourish full fledgedly nor help her to break the bondage of patriarchy. It always tries to keep them under control. The same thing happens to the girl, who is Dalit by birth, in the novel *When I Hit You* (2017). The girl's sole aim in life is to be a writer and it always propels her to write something whenever she gets free time. It is prominent from her speech:

“...I quit a full time teaching job so that I could write, write, write. There was nothing else I wanted to do....Writer. Just that, just to myself, just in front of the mirror. I play wife, but the minute my husband walks out, I'm screaming *yes yes yes yes yes yes* in my head, and I obsess

about what I need to be writing... What propels me forward is my restless urge to tell a story” (*When I Hit You*, P-80-81).

This is the urge of a young Dalit girl to be a writer. But it is not easy for her to become a writer because the path she has to move on is not a bed full of roses through which she can easily move on, but a bed full of thorns.

If we concentrate into the story of the novel *When I Hit You* it will be conspicuous to us that neither the girl’s father nor her husband allows her freedom to become a writer. Virginia Woolf in her widely esteemed fiction “*A Room of One’s Own*” has pointed out that a girl needs ‘privacy’ and ‘freedom’ if she wants to write something. If she is not provided freedom then it is unthinkable that a valuable work will be produced from her pen. Before marriage the girl would think that that university lecturer, who impresses her through his argument on some current topics, is her real hero. They had even discussed about their future planning, but after marriage she came to realize that what for her is a bond of love is for him a contract of ownership. She also understood that her husband actually tries to make her an idealized version of an obedient wife by confining and restricting her from social media like facebook and thus devouring her ambition of becoming a writer. To her, facebook was a great means to update her. She acknowledges the role of facebook in her growing up as a writer:

“...Facebook helps me promote my work, gives me news, keeps me news, keeps me in the loop of the literary scene, allows me to have an online presence which is pivotal if I do not want to be forgotten in a freelance world”(*When I Hit You*,P-52).

Her husband is aware of fact that her being a writer involves at the mercy of others, and, therefore, he always wants her to cut herself from facebook. He even tries to intimidate her by saying the consequences of her continuous remaining online in facebook:

“There’s a reward on my head. Two lakhs, last heard. They are this close, my dear, this fucking close to finding me.... They do not know that the so-called underground, dangerous, armed guerrilla they are looking for is a happily married college lecturer now. Don’t play with fire. You will be throwing us in jail. Torture. A staged “encounter”(*When I Hit You*, P-58).

But nothing can restrain her as she is determined to reach her goal, and, therefore, she tells her husband that she will never betray him but he is not in a mood to hear and his voice drowns out all her arguments with one sentence: “*You are addicted. You are*

addicted. You are addicted.” And then he, abruptly, takes a decision that he will allow her to access internet three hours a week and it is only his presence that she can access internet because he carries a Huawei USB dongle with him all times. When she pleads this to her parents that it is killing her as a writer and that she will go mad, but her parents’ reply is that your husband is doing this for your own good. By supporting her husband, they are also forcing her to leave the idea of becoming a writer. But this stubborn girl does not care about this.

Her idea of becoming a writer always invites constant ridicule from her husband. To him, the act of writing is someone doing nothing. Writing is not a work in his dictionary and, therefore, he always abuses her. He detests nothing more than her idea of becoming a writer. He never minds to call her a whore or a prostitute. It is prominent from one scene of the novel where the girl shares details with her husband about the email sent to her by the editor of *Outlook* to write an essay for their annual issue on sex surveys. After knowing this her husband uses such abusive words which are completely unbearable to her:

“When I share the details with my husband he says I have been asked to write on sexuality because I have the wide ranging experience of having fucked men who are twenty years old, thirty years old, forty years old, fifty years old, sixty years old, seventy years old”(When I Hit You,P-75).

This is how he attacks her verbally. It is not the end of his attack, but in the next hour he has the suggestion that she has also slept with the entire editorial team at *Outlook*. He is not satisfied only abusing her, but he takes her laptop also so that she cannot write. But her robust optimism or zeal to write helps her to type the whole essay in her phone, a clunky Nokia E63. It was not easy for others to snatch time in the way in which she snatches every free second:

“I snatch every free second I can get over the next two days. I type while I catch water to fill the pots in the house, when I enter the bathroom to wash my hair, when I am asked to clean the moringa leaves for a soup, when I watch the goat stew simmer over a firewood stove and the smoke sets me coughing, when I babysit my niece and nephew” (When I Hit You, P-76-77).

This is how she struggles to snatch time from her busy life or from her restriction and ultimately she succeeds to write the essay and to send it. When she read the message-‘Got it.

Brilliant.' - sent to her by the editor of *Outlook*, she was the happiest woman in the world. She realizes that her endeavour is producing fruitful results.

(I)Tolerance and Struggle against Domestic Violence,a part of Patriarchy:-

When all his attempts end in smoke one by one, he takes recourse of domestic violence to dominate and to tame his wife. Domestic violence is one of the most important parts of patriarchy which very often the husbands use towards their wives to keep them under control or to convince them that they are living at the mercy of their husbands. It is terrorism which makes all women its victims irrespective of their caste, class, age, religion, education. Apart from it, it also alienates us from society and even from our beloved ones. This is what the young girl has also to experience but she never subdue under it. In one chapter of the novel *When I Hit You* we find that the girl's husband accuses her of inhabiting a world in her mind, a world where she is cohabiting with ex-lovers, a world where she has left him and asks her to stop leading a double life. But she remains silent as she knows that to talk to him is only to heighten his anger. But her silence does not work and she is kicked in her stomach by her husband and asks her to prove that she is only his wife. But her silence only increases the torture:

"My hair is gathered up in a bunch in his hand now. He is lifting me by my hair alone. All the blood is rushing to my head, my thighs fight to feel the hard wood of the chair. I am in pain. He drags me from the table and into the bedroom. I feel the heavy, funeral drumbeats of marriage as he forces my sari up around my waist. They grow louder and faster. Restless in their hurry to drown everything else. I close my eyes now, afraid, the way I did during the wedding ceremony, when rice was flung at us and prayers were chanted. The fire that made our union sacred and eternal now blazes in the parting of my thighs"(When I Hit You, P-163).

This is the extreme form of torture that she has to endure and when she screams in pain and asks him to stop, her husband's words are too shameful to hear for a girl:

"If you wanted to be fucked like a bitch, you could have asked me. See, you have got your speech back. See, you have been cured. Now keep your mouth shut and don't wake the neighbours. You are a whore"(When I Hit You, P-163-64).

Nothing can be more insulting than this to a girl. To him, rape is a punishment for saying no and for having a long ago love story and sex, especially rape becomes his weapon to tame his wife. He says that through his continuous torture her cunt will be ruined, it will turn so wasted, so useless that she will never be able to offer her to any man. It'll be as wide as a begging bowl. What is more he insults her in an infinite number of ways. As rapes, especially rough sex becomes a regular occurrence in her life, so she also learns how to normalize this violence. The purpose of raping her is to tame her, to make her a good housewife, to inspire regret in her and above all to get an ownership over her. Apart from it, his main intention of raping her is that she will never be able to carry her cunt into another man's bed and that after him, she will have nothing left in her to love, to make love, to give pleasure(Ibid).

When this process of torture reaches to the apex, it is completely unbearable to her and she walks out from that bad marriage within four months of marriage. She comes to realize that if the process continues then her dream of becoming a writer will be nipped in the bud and so she takes a bold decision. Unlike other Dalit women, who tolerate everything, she protests and struggles against such kind of bestial torture. She says:

"I am not the damsel-in-distress. I am not the picture of virginal innocence, someone whose parents hitched her to a man in an arrange marriage.... But I am not that. I am rough, gruff, tough. The one who has written these mad and angry and outrageous poems about life and love and sex"(When I Hit You,P-219).

She is neither afraid of men nor of violence. She is anti-fragile and unbreakable. Torture can only give her pain but cannot crush her spirit. Torture is nothing but a hindrance in her way of becoming a writer. It completely fails to dominate her and to subdue her and to keep her under control. Rather it produces negative result. She walks out from the marriage and shuts the door for her husband forever. This is how she struggles against patriarchy to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer.

Struggle against Society:-

Society, especially patriarchal society is not an abode of peace and prosperity for the women to live in rather it is a place of torture, suppression, exploitation and oppression. In order to

oppress or to exploit or to suppress the women society has created various factors like caste, class, gender, sex and race. Nicholas B Dirks points out in his seminal work *Caste of Mind: Colonization and the Making of Modern India* that the concept of caste system was the invention of Brahmins in the Vedic period for their own benefit in the name of purity and pollution (K, Rajesha H, *Delineation of Marginalized in M.R.Anand's "Untouchable"*). Manusmriti, a book of Hindu religious scripture, also talks:

“Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes, and women are worthy of being beaten”(Ibid).

From this statement it is clear that low castes and the women are the victims of torture from the time immemorial and the young girl of the novel *When I Hit You* being a Dalit has to face such kind of inhuman torture. When torture to the girl increases day by day, she decides to break off the marriage. But she could not do it as her father emotionally pressurizes her to stay with her husband in fear of society or better to say the people of society. He tries to convince her that if she leaves the marriage then society will question about her upbringing and we will have to pay for this. This is society which does not look after the sufferings of the women.

This girl is also the victim of Tamil culture in which even the kindest Tamil doctor also believes that to cast out the demon, a possessed girl must be whipped. It believes that the demon leaves her through her mouth and, so, the act of whipping continues until she is silent, and no longer able to screams. Sometimes the whipping goes on all night, until the woman collapses, unconscious. Unless the woman is beaten the demon in her does not enter into a discussion, it does not answer questions, it evades revealing its identity (*When I Hit You*, P-154). This is a superstition of Tamil culture and her husband being a Tamil believes that her wife has been possessed by a demon and, therefore, he tortures her physically. His torture only creates a kind of fear in her mind that this torture will continue so long and the degree of torture will increase time after time. His whipping can only creates a kind of fear of dying, nothing more than that. It fails to subdue her spirit, her zeal to become a writer.

Conclusion:-

In the conclusion it can be said that like the 'new woman' (*Projection of New Woman*, Anitha J. Mattam) this young girl wages a war against the prevalent strong patriarchal system in which caste, class, gender, sex and race are simultaneous factors of oppression. She came to realize, even in her early age, that it is patriarchal society which prevents a woman from articulating or expressing her mind and her sufferings and, therefore, she utilizes her pen as a sword to fight against the monster i.e. patriarchal society, which is less a bliss, but great a boon for the women to live in. To her writing is breathing for the women who suffer and choose to suffer courageously and, so her writings are the outcomes from her oppression. She strongly protests against society's ill-treatment towards women and what is more she, leaving the social shame aside, has shown her boldness by depicting frankly and candidly those untouched and forbidden areas, which are considered taboo in the society. When she realizes that her aim of becoming a writer will remain unfulfilled if she stays in the marriage, then she does not look back, rather she takes a bold decision and leaves her husband only to assert and to articulate her. This is how she struggles against patriarchal society to become a writer.

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