Reclaiming Agency: An Autotheoretical Exploration of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and Spousal Violence in India

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Abstract: *The term "autotheory" has evolved to characterize the practices of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one's lived experiences. It incorporates theory or philosophy with autobiography.* When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife *(2017) by Meena Kandasamy is similar to the work of feminist artists who actively incorporate their bodies and personal experiences into their work. She theorizes the ideas of agency, sexual autonomy, and consent in India through self-writing and self-theorizing. Hence, the narrative presents a discussion where her personal story is used as a primary text and discussed through select feminist theories as an instantiation of a theoretical point. This paper intends to highlight the feminist theoretical contentions used in* When I Hit You *to narrate the personal experiences of intimate partner violence in the Indian context.*

Keywords: *autotheory; spousal violence; marriage; marital rape; feminist; India; Meena Kandasamy;*

Introduction

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) resembles the autotheoretical works of "feminist artists who directly incorporate their bodies and personal experiences into their work" (Carmody para. 7). Kandasamy theorizes the ideas of agency, sexual autonomy, and consent in the Indian context through "self-writing and self-theorizing" (Lévesque-Jalbert 66) and makes extensive use of references from feminist texts. The consolidation of Kandasamy's self-experience and that of the feminist theorists also functions as a critique of gender theories from within. Kandasamy positions herself inside theoretical discourses rather than distancing her self-writing from those that have excluded her (Lévesque-Jalbert 67). Through her autotheoretical work, she discusses selected feminist theories and uses her lived experience as an instantiation of a theoretical point (Carmody para. 12).

Kandasamy uses self-narration as a narrative technique to convey her experiences of abuse. Schmitt (130-33) argues that self-narration is essential in autobiographical writing, offering authors the ability to convey personal experiences authentically while enjoying the creative flexibility of fiction. Sekimoto (239-40) discusses the self-theorizing approach, which underscores

the close relationship between the self and the world, giving special attention to the historical and ideological surroundings as crucial elements in molding one's personal experience of oneself. As the field of autobiography studies, as Pang writes, has expanded to encompass life writing from diverse languages, cultures, and historical periods, scholars have grown increasingly concerned about how to approach and analyze autobiographical texts while avoiding cultural biases (381). Importantly, self-theorization serves as a means to prevent scholars from interpreting texts through a distorted cultural lens, according to Pang. Smith and Watson highlight that the growing interest in women's autobiographical writing as a medium for expressing life experiences and shaping feminist theory had evolved gradually before gaining formal scholarly recognition around 1980 (5). They assert that Germaine Greer and Shulamith Firestone, through works like *The Female Eunuch* (1971) and *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), respectively, merged autobiographical and theoretical components to underscore the intimate link between personal and political realms, while Kate Millett, in works like *Sexual Politics* (1968), *Flying* (1974), and *Sita* (1977) extended this approach by asserting that personal experiences are the fundamental basis of theory (Smith, Watson 3-6). To characterize the practice of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one's lived experiences, the term "autotheory" has evolved. The blurb on the back cover of *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson included the word "autotheory," which soon became popular in autobiography studies (Lévesque-Jalbert 65). Nelson finds autotheory appealing since it allows for experimentation and helps to set her work apart from memoirs (Fournier, "Sick Women" 641).

Autotheory is a "liberatory practice" for the voiceless and coerced self, according to Carmody (para. 1). She defines the function of autotheory as "[d]rawing phenomenologically on the experience of being in the world while transforming that embodied experience into something else, such as art, writing, new relations, or communities of care, this is a form of theorizing with implications outside the text or institution" (Carmody para. 2). As noted by Wiegman, autotheory revives the well-known feminist axiom that "the personal is political" (8). Fournier's definition of autotheory as "the integration of the auto or 'self' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware" (Fournier, *Autotheory* n.p.) establishes the genre as an interdisciplinary one.

Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* serves to fill the void of autotheory in the literary and critical domains of Indian feminist practice. The story takes place in modern-day India and it has an unnamed protagonist who marries a university professor (Chatterjee para. 4). The anonymous wife is trying to convey her sufferings by writing a novel. This "artistic agency" (Fournier, *Autotheory* n.p.) enables her to stay away from the anticipated barrage of

insulting remarks that would otherwise be directed at her if she chose to confront it directly (Bethell para. 7). The protagonist is the self-reflection of Kandasamy herself, who also is trying to reveal the horrendous experiences of physical and sexual abuse through her writing, as it empowers her to become stronger, leave her marriage, and speak for countless abused women (Chatterjee para. 7). Despite Kandasamy basing the book on her marriage hastily ended in 2012 (Kimbofo para. 6), she considers her work a fiction. Like "[m]any artists and writers who work autotheoretically [who] have articulated their desire to differentiate, even distance, what they are doing from memoir or autobiography" (Fournier, *Autotheory* n.p.), Kandasamy also rejects labeling her work as a memoir or autobiography (Maher para. 3). In an interview, she emphasizes that her identity should not be confined to that of an abused woman; she wishes to be acknowledged as a woman writer. And her novel should not be considered a survivor's narrative but a broader commentary on the nation's socio-political discourse (Apperly). The young wife in the book, mirroring Kandasamy's perspective, rejects being solely defined as an "abused woman" and refuses to see herself as a "victim subject" (Kapur 81). Her identity is not solely about surviving rape; she also values her identity as a "woman writer" (Bethell para. 20). Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* is unique and explicit in terms of the portrayal of domestic abuse, regarded as an "intermingling of [the] political and domestic" (Self para. 3). While responding to the question of considering *When I Hit You* as an autobiography or memoir, Kandasamy disapprovingly says,

> But for me the other question is, why is women's writing regarded in this way, which is also a social structural problem, the problem of how much access we are given to public space. How much access are we given to intellectual space? How much commentary are women making on what's happening in the political world? (Goyal, "Meena Kandasamy" para. 8)

She further adds,

> If there was a level playing field, then obviously there would be an equal number of political works, political fiction from women as from men. Even if you write a very political work, and then a man writes a very political work at the same time, his narrative will be the grand narrative, it will be the narrative of the commentary on a country, or a culture, and it would speak to contemporary issues, whereas your narrative will be one woman's experience. (Goyal, "Meena Kandasamy" para. 9)

Though Kandasamy prefers to call her work autofiction, *When I Hit You* presents itself as an autotheory as the result of an interaction between the first-person narration and theory from a recognized corpus of current scholarly thought (Wiegman 1). Hence, the narrative presents a discussion where her personal story is used as a primary text and discussed through multiple feminist theories. At the beginning of each chapter, Kandasamy includes quotes from writers, critics, and poets belonging to different nationalities, such as Pilar Quintana (Colombia), Wislawa Szymborska (Poland), Kamala Das (India), Marge Piercy (The US), Elfriede Jelinek (Austria), Margaret Atwood (Canada), Ntozake Shange (The US), Sandra Cisneros (The US), and more, presenting these writers as examples of women writing women in an attempt to create a world of their own. These quotations serve a dual purpose. First, they confirm that the occurrence of violence against women is a global phenomenon transcending borders. Second, they highlight how writing empowers women to expose and confront these atrocities by bringing them into the public sphere. Moreover, this article contends that Kandasamy's writing employs feminist theories, notably those rooted in Euro-American perspectives, to shed light on instances of domestic violence and critically analyze the patriarchal culture in an Indian context. By incorporating these feminist theories, the text sheds light on the common underlying causes of domestic violence against women, which Kandasamy portrays as a universal issue affecting women worldwide. In addition, this approach also demonstrates that Indian feminists have enthusiastically embraced the ideas of Western feminism, striving to integrate themselves into the Western feminist framework (Tripathi 182-83). Kandasamy's autotheory sets itself apart by displacing the First World Feminists from their position as the "spokesperson for the Indian feminist movement" (Kapur 79). The most pivotal element of her writing revolves around her skillful use of the narrative technique of autotheory. In employing this approach, she positions herself as an empowered writer who authentically voices her concerns and brings her personal struggles into the public discourse independently. Through this strategy, she challenges the conventional representation of women as victimized subjects in both theoretical and literary discussions (Kapur 81).

This article goes beyond just labeling the text as a specific genre (autotheory); it delves into how this narrative technique effectively confronts the problem of normalizing and concealing instances of domestic violence and marital rape within the Indian context. It achieves this by shedding light on the hidden aspects of an Indian married woman's life and by translating personal experiences into the public and political sphere. This literary approach, as this article argues, serves as a means to highlight and provide a discursive political expression to domestic violence, especially marital rape, which are typically "been considered to be a personal matter and not a social crime" (Sharma,

Tripathi, "Colonial Civilizing Mission" 401). Through discourse and textual analysis, this article demonstrates how autotheory can be applied to understand autofictional texts, offering a critical tool for reading and analyzing autotheoretical elements in a novel.

The rights theory

In "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," Fournier defines autotheory as "[i]ncorporating different theoretical turns, including poststructuralism, the affective turn, the queer turn, and the performative turn, autotheory presents the question of whether it constitutes a theoretical turn itself" (642). Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* re-engages with the theme of consent in marital sex to scrutinize women's rights against marital rape through the application of human and constitutional rights. Applying the human rights angle to addressing violence against women is one of the basic features of the contemporary women's rights movement where the "legality" of violence has become the central point replacing social and cultural conformity in assessing crime and justice. The language employed in *When I Hit You* is situated within a rights-based discourse. The Indian Constitution's pledge of "justice," "liberty," and "equality" for every individual remains unattainable for married women, as their conjugal relationships often revolve around control and ownership of their sexuality and identity. The anonymous narrator demonstrates her sufferings as violations of her constitutional rights the right to equality (Article 14), to freedom of expression (Article 19. 1. a), to practicing any profession (Article 19. 1. g), the freedom of conscience to follow any ideology or faith (Article 25) and most importantly her rights to privacy, autonomy, and bodily integrity (Article 21). The gradual curtailment of the rights is used to denote the chronology of the hostilities with the progress of the spousal relationship (Makkar). The torture, battering, and rape within the wedlock that the wife suffers beyond the effective legal protection are shown to be an "insult to the constitutional goals of individual autonomy, dignity, and gender equality" (Chaudhary).

Kandasamy critically assesses the husband's behavior in the story, demonstrating how marital relationship in India has been founded on the wife's subjugation. The narrator emphasizes how the husband's suspicion serves as a means to invade the wife's privacy and exert dominance. He goes so far as to demand her email account password to monitor her conversations, ultimately severing her external communication and deleting all her exchanges. She terms it "a cultural revolution (purge) for a computer age" (Kandasamy 78). As depicted in the story, her concern for privacy extends beyond personal expression; it mirrors the broader privacy discourse in India. This discussion reached its peak in the 2017 *Puttaswamy v. Union of India* verdict, coinciding with the publication of Kandasamy's autotheory. In this ruling, the Indian

Supreme Court affirmed that privacy is an essential component of an individual's right to life and dignity. Privacy demands that the "inner recesses of human personality" must be safeguarded from "unwanted intrusion." In light of this argument, the fiction serves as a literary illustration of how the husband's breach of the wife's privacy also infringes upon her individual right to life and dignity.

The autotheory by Kandasamy conveys that micro violence in the forms of suspicion, slap, verbal abuse, and coercion is often imagined in Indian society. The wife character in the novel *When I Hit You*, through her experiences, helps her readers understand how rape is commonly perceived as "harmless" and "normal" when it's committed by the husband. She highlights that the Indian cultural discourses on marriage portray heterosexual marital sex as a holy act in India. The holiness discourse constructs the perception that marital sex and rape are two different and mutually exclusive phenomena; resulting in the limited recognition of marital rape within the current social and legal understanding of marriage and marital rape. Her "utopic notion about 'marriage' soon gets altered after getting married to a university professor" (Das 8). Exposing this perception regarding the sacredness of marriage, the narrator sarcastically comments: "The fire that made our union sacred and eternal now blazes in the parting of my thighs" (Kandasamy 91). She challenges these socio-cultural constructs which are behind the law (Exception 2 in Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860),[1] which exempts rape within the wedlock from the definition of rape. Section 375 of the IPC (1860) defines any act in the nature of sexual intercourse "against her will" [Section 375 (d, firstly) of the IPC, 1860] and "without her consent" [Section 375 (d, secondly) of the IPC, 1860] as rape. However, the Section also includes an exception that "[s]exual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under eighteen years of age, is not rape" (Exception 2 in Section 375 of the IPC, 1860). In other words, this Exception makes the consent and willingness of the wife to have sexual intercourse with her husband irrelevant and unnecessary (Tribune News Service). Feminist scholars and activists argue that the social and legal sanction of marriage as irrevocable consent for sexual intercourse is against the spirit of the Indian Constitution, which propagates equality, liberty, dignity, and the right to life for all its citizens. Therefore, the exemption of marital rape from the definition of rape must be struck down, and marital rape should be legally acknowledged and included in the definition of rape. When the narrator seeks support from the law of the country against

[1] Indian Penal Code (1860) is a thorough code that aims to cover all important areas of criminal law. The first law commission of India, headed by Thomas Babington Macaulay and constituted in 1834 as a result of the Charter Act of 1833, made suggestions that served as the basis for the creation of the code. Section 375 of this code provides for definition of rape (<https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1860-45.pdf>).

marital rape she is offered divorce as the only remedy. Yet, even the divorce petition blames her "ultra-feminism" (Kandasamy 128) and "modern upbringing" (Kandasamy 128) by her parents as the reason behind the failure of the marriage. Such a response from the justice system shows that legal instruments like divorce, despite being a mechanism in a democratic state that propagates modernity, are not untouched by the orthodox conservative culture of the country.

Kandasamy's depiction of legal inadequacy regarding safeguarding the rights of women in the domestic sphere to a great extent resembles MacKinnon's critique of law as a patriarchal institution. Catharine MacKinnon critiques gender laws from a feminist perspective and provides the scope for using human rights discourse in addressing spousal abuse. She considers that the law is one social institution among many that have promoted inequality between the rights of men and women (Jackson 195). In India, as observed by Kapur and Cossman (1996), the law reinforces the stereotype of treating married women as second-class citizens by prioritizing family and the institution of marriage over the individual rights of women (Kapur, Cossman 39-42). Srimati Basu argues that the complexities of legal institutions and social structures related to marriage are at the core of feminist debates on topics such as sexual agency, sexual victimization, gender equality, and gender differences (Basu 193). In *When I Hit You*, Meena Kandasamy situates herself within recent legal developments in India concerning domestic abuse through the lens of her own abusive marriage.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2005. Initially, the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 defined domestic violence as "cruelty," allowing divorce as a remedy. However, this was insufficient, prompting debates from 1982 to 1986. In 1983, domestic violence was criminalized with Section 498A of the IPC, focusing on dowry-related abuse (Sharma, Tripathi, "Scripting Justice" 7). The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 was amended in 1986 to include "dowry death" (Gangoli 99). Feminists argued for a broader interpretation of "cruelty," leading to *The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act* in 2005, which recognized various forms of abuse, including physical, mental, verbal, emotional, sexual, and economic. *When I Hit You* puts light on the issue of sexual abuse and marital rape which had otherwise received insufficient attention in the domestic violence legislation. It is true that spousal abuse is not a new problem in India, and there have been cultural and societal barriers to legal intervention in what has traditionally been viewed as "private affair" between spouses. These attitudes have contributed to a reluctance to acknowledge and address the issue of domestic violence within the legal system. The limited understanding of serious issue like domestic violence which fails to address marital rape is implicitly critiqued by the novel.

The issue of the criminalization of marital rape has been a controversial and contested topic in India for three decades at least, with many arguing that it is a form of domestic violence and should be recognized as a criminal offense. In 2013, the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act* was passed, which recognized marital rape as a criminal offense under certain circumstances. Yet, this law is limited in scope. It only criminalizes marital rape if the wife is under 18 years of age, or if she is separated from her husband and has obtained a court order prohibiting him from having sexual intercourse with her. The issue of consent is also a critical component of the debate around marital rape in India. In many cases, it is difficult to distinguish between consensual marital sex and marital rape, as cultural and societal norms have historically placed a greater emphasis on the husband's sexual needs and desires, often at the expense of the wife's autonomy and agency.

Feminist liberal theory

Ralph Clare opines that "In autotheory, then, it is not so much that the personal must become political, but that the personal must first become theoretical" (Clare 86). Kandasamy's aim is to shift the traditionally private and personal aspect of female sexuality into the public and political sphere, while also imbuing it with theoretical significance. By emphasizing the theoretical significance of Indian women's experiences, Kandasamy confronts the issue of universalizing solutions that arise from rights discourse. She doesn't merely introduce Indian evidence into a theory as a reaction to First World perspectives regarding Third World women (Kapur 83). Instead, she adopts an autotheoretical approach to gain the authority for self-representation. Through her personal narrative, she embraces the principles of "the personal is political" movement while challenging rights theories that fall short in addressing the distinctive Indian issue of spousal violence emanating from the sacramental theory of marriage, which shields marital abuse from social, legal, and literary scrutiny.

The question of sexual autonomy and agency within marriage that Kandasamy raises also presents a theoretical contention promoted by liberal feminist scholars like Carole Pateman who has persistently criticized the institution of marriage on the grounds that it is not a proper contract because the interests of women are not included in this arrangement (Pateman 154). In the Indian context, the rights of the woman are not protected in the sacramental model of marriage, which is a patriarchal institution. Uniyal's observations in 2022 highlight the evolution of Hindu marriage over time. Initially, it was considered a sacred, dissoluble union between a heterosexual couple. However, this perception shifted towards a contractual arrangement due to various women's rights legislations, a transformation that began during the colonial era and persists today (Uniyal 4). For instance, changes in divorce

provisions eliminated the inherent dissolubility that was once an essential element of the sacred nature of Hindu marriage. Additionally, the introduction of property and inheritance rights for women played a significant role in reshaping marriage into a contract. In contemporary Hindu marriages, the sole sacramental aspect that remains is the performance of religious rites (Uniyal 4). Nevertheless, the case of *Tikait v. Basant Kumar* suggests that, under modern marriage laws, Hindu marriages exhibit elements of both sacrament and contract, indicating a complex blend of sacred and legal considerations (Singh, Singh 336).

Kandasamy argues that her husband's repeated rapes were a means for him to assert control over her as she became more assertive and vocal in standing up for her rights. Her husband's dislike of her profession as a writer can also be traced back to his desire to own and control her as a married woman. He expresses his displeasure with her feminist beliefs, claiming that "the problem is your feminism, the feminism that makes you an individual" (Kandasamy 67). Additionally, he believes that his wife's discussions about female sexuality should be kept private and not shared publicly. He angrily tells his wife that writing about sexuality is a kind of "elite prostitution" (Kandasamy 43). This is not "freedom" (Kandasamy 44), but "sexual anarchy" (Kandasamy 44). Anarchy can be ended through control over female sexuality established through stringent forms of patriarchal marriage (Mitra 42-43). Overall, Kandasamy describes how her husband's actions reflect a larger societal issue of men seeking to control and dominate women, particularly when the latter assert their independence and autonomy.

Kandasamy's self-theorization is in line with the autotheoretical practice of using autobiographical narratives to derive insights and theories from lived experiences. Her personal encounters with sexual violence inflicted by her spouse enable her to formulate and contribute to readers' understanding of marital rape, a concept that remains ambiguous within the Indian social, cultural, and legal context. She does not just recount her experiences of abuse; she goes beyond that by offering a critical examination of the situation. She presents an alternative narrative, metaphorical explanations, and draws comparisons with other forms of coercion and violence, all of which contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue. The text highlights that the violence that she suffers both through rape and assault, is also evident in the abusive, violent, and sexist language used by her husband (McAloon para. 4-5). The wife realizes that "sex, actually rape, becomes his weapon to tame me. Your cunt will be ruined, he tells me" (Kandasamy 93). The husband asserts his sole possession over his wife's sexuality, which he not only forcibly enjoys but can also "ruin" (Kandasamy 93) at his will. He rapes her with the intent to punish her, as he says that "your cunt will turn so wasted, so useless you will never be

able to offer yourself to any man. It'll be as wide as a begging bowl" (Kandasamy 93).

The rape according to the narrator is not only the frustration, anger, and revenge of a man; "rape is a defeat" (Kandasamy 93) for a woman. She adds, "rape is a fight you did not win. You could not win" (Kandasamy 93). The suspicion of her husband about her secret affairs with another man degrades her body into a "polluted" (Kandasamy 93) one that has violated the rituals of the sacred rite of marriage. The wife, who is not chaste and loyal to her husband, becomes "polluted for the life time" (Kandasamy 93) and the "body that is considered polluted can be punished as a man pleases. That is the philosophy of caste, that is the philosophy of my rape" (Kandasamy 93). Kandasamy views marital rape through the lens of individualism, arguing that it is not a violation of family honor, the misuse of conjugal rights, or a result of a failed marriage. Rather, she posits that rape is a crime against an individual's fundamental right to life, autonomy, dignity, and integrity. According to her, rape is an act of violence and a means to assert control and exercise power over the victim, rather than an act of sexual gratification. In essence, she maintains that rape is not about sex but is a violent assault on an individual's rights and well-being (McPhail 1-3).

Kandasamy's autotheoretical writing not only advocates for equality but also emphasizes the freedom to express and control her own sexuality within the confines of marriage. She highlights the importance of obtaining consent from wives within marriage. Pateman, a feminist political theorist, believes that incorporating the principles of an economic contract into the institution of marriage can help address the imbalances in rights and interests that exist within it. In essence, Pateman argues that treating marriage as a contractual agreement would allow for the negotiation and protection of the interests of both partners, leading to greater equality and mutual respect within the relationship. The new model of contract, in line with the economic contract, appears as the solution to the problem of "patriarchal right (status) because a contract is seen as a universal category that can include women" (Pateman 167). She adds that the marital agreement doesn't exist as a written document and that marital affairs are regulated through patriarchal moral codes (Kapur, Cossman 15). Therefore, a better contract with clear-cut negotiation that may include advance provisions for divorce and mutual use of the bodies of the spouses for sex is necessary to ensure the individual ownership and bodily integrity of the wives (Pateman 183-88). Also, to empower her against sexual encounters that can be consensual but have moments of coercion, violence, and lack of agency (Saxena para. 3).

Kandasamy, like Pateman (1997), distinguishes between the agreements to ensure civil and political rights for married women and those rights over their bodily integrity and desire. She observes that several reforms

in marriage laws, such as widow remarriage, child marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance rights, may have accomplished her social and economic autonomy, however, without challenging the ownership of the husband over the wife's sexuality. There is no provision in these social agreements to restore sexual autonomy and integrity to women. Hence, she argues for a separate contract in marriage other than divorce, property, or compensation, which she has termed a sexual contract (Pateman 182). In her opinion, the absence of a sexual contract in marriage is the biggest lacuna in the contract of marriage that persists. Therefore, the marriage contract should be changed to become a private contract law from the current status of the public marital policy (Pateman 185).

Dominance feminism theory

Kandasamy's critical narration of spousal violence within her autotheoretical work underscores a fundamental aspect of this genre. In doing so it engages in a "discursive politics" to construct her own art as a "counter discourse" and an "embodiment of discursive type of political action" (Fournier, *Autotheory* n.p.). Her critique of the institution of marriage and spousal relationships foregrounding the inequality and patriarchal dominance within conjugality, reflects MacKinnon's "dominance approach" (MacKinnon 40). MacKinnon's theory of dominance feminism critiques marital abuse as a structural and systematic problem that is political and based on male supremacy (MacKinnon 40). Owing to the same contention, Kandasamy highlights how marriage remains an unchallenged and uncontested domain in India when it comes to the criminalization of heinous crimes such as marital rape (Hasday 1380-81).

Section 375 of the IPC, which defines rape, exempts rape by the husband from the definition through an exception clause (Exception 2 in Section 375 of the IPC). The exception according to her discussion is rooted in the traditional understanding of marriage as a sacramental union. It is a common consideration that the criminalization of marital rape is unnecessary in India given the sacred status of marriage in Indian society. Indian policymakers like Menaka Gandhi[2] believe that given the religious beliefs and the sacred status of marriage, marital rape is not applicable in India (Roy para. 1). Saptarshi Mandal notes Sumitra Mahajan[3] as saying during a parliamentary debate in the Lower House of Parliament that Indian society has a unique family system and family affairs. The spousal disputes should be resolved within the family instead of being politicized and publicized in courts (Mandal

[2] Maneka Sanjay Gandhi is an Indian politician, animal rights campaigner, and environmentalist. She is a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member and serves in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament.

[3] Sumitra Mahajan is a politician from India who served as Speaker of the Lok Sabha, the Indian Parliament's lower house, from 2014 to 2019. She is a Bharatiya Janata Party member.

263). Kandasamy considers the theory which portrays marriage as a sacred relationship as central to the invisibility of the violence within marriage as it is often ignored. Here, "the argument assumes that a wife's interests, like her husband's, are fully and consistently served in a marital relationship (Hasday 1380).

One of the primary functions of autotheory is to offer a counter discourse. The novel's narrative introduces a counter-narrative to question the prevailing belief that marriage is a sacred institution. As observed by Srimati Basu, a feminist approach aimed at addressing and combating rape necessitates the creation of a discourse regarding rape (Basu 191). Kandasamy develops a language to discuss rape within marriage and highlights the irony of the husband's role as both the guardian and the protector of his wife's sexuality in the Indian family system. In *When I Hit You* the wife character narrates her experience of marital rape, which she considers a brutal assault on her mind, body, and soul. Her commitment to feminist ideals revolves around achieving equality and agency for women. She argues that marital rape can be even more damaging to a woman's mental and physical well-being than rape by a stranger. For her, the experience is so strange and emotionally devastating that she doesn't find words or metaphors to explain the "savage rite" (Kandasamy 93). She expresses her inability, "how do I let another person know how it feels to be raped within a marriage?" (Kandasamy 93). The text highlights the fact that the oppression and exploitation of wives within marriage go beyond the denial of economic, social, and civil rights. This control extends to their sexuality and is explained by MacKinnon's concept of dominance feminism. In India, marriage demands that women give up not only their identity and sense of security but also their right to give or withhold consent to sexual relations with their husbands. This surrender is absolute, unconditional, and cannot be revoked (Kapur, Cossman 122). There is no difference between consent to marriage and consent to sexual intercourse because there is no concept or criteria to differentiate between marital sex and marital rape. The narrator in *When I Hit You* says that "I was raped within a marriage, on a bed where my 'no' held no meaning" (Kandasamy 108). She is not only deprived of the right to say "no", but rather she finds "there is no way in which I can make an offering of voluntary sex to prevent myself from getting raped afterwards" (Kandasamy 94). Therefore, non-consensual sexual intercourse which is rape when committed by a stranger becomes a conjugal right of the husband in marriage and the consent of the wife becomes irrelevant. The wife regrets that "I never understood rape until it happened to me. It was a concept of savagery, of violence, of violation, of disrespect" (Kandasamy 93). She considers marital rape the most degenerated form of all rapes because, in this case, the victim has to live with the rapist to get raped again and again without any support from family or the law. The horror of marital rape is that:

> [T]he man who rapes me is not a stranger who runs away. He is not the silhouette in the car park, he is not the masked assaulter, he is not the acquaintance who has spiked my drinks. He is someone who wakes up next to me. (Kandasamy 93)

In the autotheory, the portrayal of the indignity that a woman endures in an abusive marriage is ironic. Despite living with her abuser and rapist, the relationship is still considered "sacred." The institution of marriage gives the husband a sense of impunity, enabling him to "blame his actions on unbridled passion the next day" (Kandasamy 93), while the wife is left to suffer the physical and emotional consequences.

The text argues that the notion of sanctity attached to the institution of marriage has never allowed for the possibility that it could be a site of disharmony, abuse, or danger in which wives may need and deserve protection from their husbands (Hasday 1380). When the narrator informs her family members regarding the psychological suffering due to suspicion, her mother says that "suspicion is the nature of a man" (Kandasamy 33), and that this nature is "out of love" (Kandasamy 33). By highlighting these socio-cultural beliefs Kandasamy theorizes spousal violence and the institution of marriage in a way that reiterates radical feminist thought. For instance, the anonymous wife realizes that the lack of rights in marriage makes a woman a legitimate part of the "political circus" (Kandasamy 66), where she performs to entertain her husband. The marriage, which provides a social status to women, "would be read as ambition rather than love" (Kandasamy 66), hence it's not a union of two individuals out of love but a ticket through which a woman joins "a new tribe" (Kandasamy 66). Unfortunately, in this new "tribe," she is not treated equally to her husband. Here, Kandasamy refuses to accept the sacredness of marital relations as true. Again, the narrator puts forth MacKinnon's critique of inequality in marriage in her dominance feminism theory through the metaphor of the game of chess. She metaphorically conveys the dominating position of a husband over his wife and family through the game of chess between two adversaries, where she is the king "constantly under threat" (Kandasamy 83) who can move only one step at a time and is always cornered by her husband, whereas her husband is the drama queen who is free to make any move in any direction of his choice and will. In another instance, the narrator discusses a prevalent and accepted norm in India of planning a baby after marriage to illustrate how such norms exclude women from decision-making, thereby depriving them of agency. She points out how, in this process, women have no say, and the decision-making power lies solely with the doctor and the husband. Any resistance to this cultural norm is met with violent reactions. The author portrays how the non-conformity of the wife leads to

abuse, violence, and ultimately rape in every confrontation. When she seeks support from her family, her father suggests "hold your tongue, he is your husband, not your enemy" (Kandasamy 89) and "don't talk too much . . . silence is golden" (Kandasamy 89).

Conclusion

When I Hit You utilizes the author's personal experiences to examine India's social, cultural, and political discourse regarding attaining justice, freedom, and equality for women in cases of spousal abuse and marital rape. The narrative style takes an analytical approach to critically examine the individual experience of violence as the primary source material. Using the anonymous narrator, Kandasamy continually uses her story to theorize and depict it not only as an individual experience but as a prevalent and widespread phenomenon in India. The autotheory is not just a story of survival, but also one about self-preservation. Kandasamy claims, "I am already transferring what I see and experience in the privacy of our home into art" (qtd. in Maher). She presents her story of marital rape as autotheory incorporating a larger framework of feminist theories and legal history as she believes, "because if you speak for many people, and you are seen as speaking for many people… but as long as people reduce you to this one personality, then you are only standing for yourself. Everything you are saying gets reduced to this mirror of your personal life" (Goyal, "Meena Kandasamy" para 10).

The autotheoretical work by Kandasamy regrets that despite marital rape being a Nirbhaya-like[4] brutality that enraged the whole of India and the world, it does not enrage anyone when the same brutality is committed by a husband (Kandasamy 114). The lack of discussion surrounding the issue of marital rape is likely due to the absence of a widely accepted theory to comprehend it. In law, marriage, and family are still considered private institutions, and the oppression and subordination of women within these institutions go unchallenged (Nigam). *When I Hit You* provides a necessary literary method to decode the problem and makes the invisible private domain more visible to the readers. The autotheoretical approach contributes towards finding and highlighting the nuances of the complex and complicated space of the spousal relationship.

[4] The Nirbhaya case, a 2012 gang rape and murder in Delhi, featured a rape and fatal attack that happened on December 16, 2012, in South West Delhi. Jyoti Singh was assaulted, gang-raped, and tortured. Eleven days after the assault, she was flown to Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi for medical attention. Two days later, she passed away from her injuries in Singapore.

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