

Marital Rape, Digital Erasure, and Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines Meena Kandasamy's autofictional novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) as a feminist critique of marital rape and coercive control within contemporary Indian marriage. Existing scholarship on the novel has read it through liberal feminism (Sangeetha et al., 2022), social constructionism and performativity (Priyadharsini et al., 2026), the psychology of abuse (Rashed & Rasheed, 2024), and trauma and rape-narrative theory (Montheil, 2025), but none has drawn on the domestic-violence literature's concept of technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC) to account for the novel's sustained attention to the erasure of the protagonist's digital and intellectual identity. This paper addresses that gap, arguing that the husband's deletion of the narrator's email correspondence, social media presence, and record of authorship functions as a literary anticipation of what domestic-violence scholars now call digital coercive control: control exercised over a woman's public and professional record, not only over her body. Reading the novel alongside Evan Stark's coercive control framework and subsequent TFCC scholarship (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Woodlock et al., 2020), alongside feminist theorists including Beauvoir, Butler, Millett, Brownmiller, and hooks, the paper traces how social conditioning and victim-blaming sustain this violence, how marital rape functions as an assertion of ownership, and how writing becomes the narrator's principal instrument of resistance. The paper concludes that Kandasamy's novel offers literary and gender studies a case through which to extend TFCC scholarship — developed almost entirely from Western empirical contexts — into South Asian literary representation.

Keywords: Digital Patriarchy, Marital Rape, Coercive Control, Technology-Facilitated Abuse, Feminist Resistance, Kandasamy

Introduction

Marriage is widely regarded as a sacred and binding partnership, carrying both legal and moral obligations for the parties involved (Kwong & Yin, 2000). In South Asia this

expectation falls disproportionately on women: marriage is treated as essential to social status and family honour, and a woman's worth is frequently measured by her success within it (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008, p. 5). The romanticized promise of the institution often gives way to a different

reality that husband and wife experience, communication breakdown, financial strain, and rigid gender roles that can turn marriage into a site of confinement, and in its most severe forms, a site of violence.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, widely read as autofictional, disrupts the romanticized narrative of marriage by presenting an unflinching account of a young wife's experience of marital rape and domestic abuse. The novel has, understandably, generated a small but growing body of scholarship treating it as testimony to patriarchal and sexual violence. This paper takes a different point of entry. It argues that one of the novel's most striking and least-examined features is its attention to a form of control that operates through information and connectivity rather than the body alone, the husband's methodical deletion of the narrator's email history, her deactivated social media accounts, her erased digital footprint, and his dismissal of her writing as illegitimate. Read against recent domestic-violence scholarship on technology-facilitated coercive control, this dimension of the novel is not incidental detail but the mechanism through which the more familiar forms of physical and sexual violence are made possible and sustained.

Literature Review

Scholarship specifically on *When I Hit You* has grown steadily since the novel's publication and has approached it through several distinct theoretical lenses. Kashyap (2018) offers an early feminist reading that identifies the novel's central concern as the husband's assertion of sexual and domestic superiority. Sangeetha, Mohan, and Kannan (2022) read the protagonist's journey through the lens of liberal feminism, charting her transition from a submissive to a self-liberated identity via the frameworks of Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Friedan; a companion study by the same authors (Sangeetha et al., 2022b) more generally explores the linguistic and narrative devices of the novel. Paul (2021) approaches the text through the idiom of performance, arguing that the protagonist enacts and then dismantles a series of socially scripted roles. Rashed and

Rasheed (2024) offer a psychological reading, describing the protagonist's prolonged compliance in terms of Stockholm syndrome and the cyclical dynamics of abuse. Sridevi (2024) reiterates the novel's status as an indictment of patriarchal oppression and a portrait of the struggle for female autonomy. Most recently, Priyadharsini, Mahadevan, Sheik Hameed, UmaMaheswari, and Karthikumar (2026) apply Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism alongside Judith Butler's performativity to argue that the protagonist's roles as wife, cultural custodian, and symbol of family honour are socially fabricated performances that her writing ultimately dismantles. Working from a different national-comparative angle, Montheil (2025) reads *When I Hit You* alongside Arundhati Roy's fiction as an instance of intimate rape narrative, arguing that Kandasamy's attention to embodied sensation allows the text to function as trauma-processing and catharsis rather than mere testimony.

This body of work is theoretically varied but shares a common object of analysis: the protagonist's psychological and social confinement, read primarily through categories of performance, socialization, or trauma. What is largely absent from this literature and from the broader literature on marital rape in South Asian fiction, which has tended to focus on embodiment, silence, and legal non-recognition, (Khan, n.d.; *The Creative Launcher*, 2023, on Jaishree Misra's *Afterwards*) is sustained attention to the specific mechanics of the husband's control over the narrator's digital and professional life: her email, her Facebook account, her authorship, her online record. This is a substantial omission, because the novel devotes considerable narrative attention to precisely this material, and because a well-developed body of domestic-violence scholarship now exists to theorize it.

Outside literary studies, the concept of coercive control has become central to how domestic-violence scholars and practitioners understand abuse. Stark's (2007) foundational framework reconceives domestic violence not as episodes of physical assault but as a sustained "liberty crime"

in which abusers isolate victims, undermine their social support, and deprive them of autonomy and equality. Building on this, Dragiewicz et al. (2018) coined the term “technology facilitated coercive control” (TFCC) to describe how digital platforms have become central tools through which abusers extend exactly this pattern of control like monitoring, restricting, and erasing a partner’s digital presence as a continuation, rather than a new form, of coercive abuse. Woodlock et al. (2020) similarly document how perpetrators use digital coercive control to track, restrict, and isolate partners, intensifying the reach and persistence of abuse beyond the household. This literature gives a precise vocabulary for a phenomenon Kandasamy’s novel depicts in detail nearly a decade before the term “digital coercive control” entered widespread use, the husband’s confiscation of the narrator’s phone, his deletion of her email correspondence and Wikipedia references, and his demand that she deactivate Facebook are not stylistic flourishes but a textbook enactment of what this scholarship would later formalize.

Positioning the novel against this literature clarifies precisely what this paper contributes. It is not a claim that Kandasamy’s novel is simply “about” technology, nor that digital control replaces the novel’s central concerns with physical and sexual violence. It is instead a claim that the novel’s account of coercive control is incomplete without attention to its digital dimension, and that literary scholarship on South Asian domestic fiction, much of which still frames such novels solely in terms of embodiment, silence, and law. South Asian scholarship has a body of applicable theory sitting largely unused in an adjacent field. Extending TFCC scholarship, developed almost entirely from Western empirical case studies of contemporary intimate partner violence, into a literary and South Asian context is this paper’s specific contribution.

Theoretical Framework and Method

The analysis draws on two bodies of theory read together. The first is a feminist theoretical lineage: Simone de Beauvoir’s account of gender

as social construction, Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative and regulated, Kate Millett’s and Susan Brownmiller’s analyses of male control over women’s bodies, and bell hooks’ writing on patriarchy, violence, and solidarity. The second is the domestic-violence literature on coercive control, principally Stark’s (2007) foundational concept and its extension into technology-facilitated coercive control by Dragiewicz et al. (2018) and Woodlock et al. (2020). The method is close textual analysis of the novel, read against both bodies of theory and positioned relative to existing literary criticism of the novel (Kashyap, 2018; Sangeetha et al., 2022; Paul, 2021; Rashed & Rasheed, 2024; Sridevi, 2024; Priyadharsini et al., 2026; Montheil, 2025), to trace how coercive control like verbal, physical, sexual, and digital is exercised, sustained, and ultimately resisted within the text.

Patriarchy and Power Dynamics

Women in India are often called ‘Ghar ki Lakshmi’ (Lakshmi of house), Lakshmi a deity in Hinduism, known as the goddess of wealth, fortune, and prosperity. But this portrayal contrasts sharply with the reality faced by many women in Indian society. Aristotle’s foundational claim that “the relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and of a ruler to rule” (Aristotle, trans. 1905) captures a logic that still structures many marriages: women are cast as needing male protection and, in turn, male control. Patriarchy, in feminist theory, names this social arrangement, one that extends from the public sphere into the family, governing decisions, bodies, and even dreams. What Stark’s (2007) coercive control framework adds to this is specificity: patriarchal control in an individual marriage is rarely a single act of violence but a sustained campaign across multiple domains of a woman’s life — a description that maps closely onto the structure of Kandasamy’s narrative, which moves systematically through the narrator’s loss of movement, language, correspondence, and finally bodily autonomy.

Sudhir Kakar describes the culturally sanctioned ideal of the pativrata, “the ‘good’ woman... subordinating her life to the husband’s welfare

and needs in a way demanded of no other women in any part of the world” (Kakar, 1990, p. 66). This ideal is now increasingly rejected by educated, contemporary women who expect equality and mutual respect rather than submission, a dialogue Sangeetha et al. (2022) trace through liberal feminism. This is what happens in the novel as well, her journey from compliance to self-assertion. Kandasamy’s novel, however, complicates any simple liberation narrative: the protagonist is already educated, professionally accomplished, and politically engaged before her marriage, which suggests that education and prior autonomy are not, by themselves, protection against coercive control. Kandasamy herself, an Indian writer and activist from Chennai known for her work on caste abolition, feminism, and linguistic identity, drew directly on her own account of her 2012 marriage in creating the novel’s unnamed narrator. Of this fictionalizing, she writes: “I am the woman at whom society cannot spit or throw stones, because this me is a she who is made up only of words on a page, and the lines she speaks are those that everyone hears in their own voice” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 246). This line signals the centrality that writing will hold as the novel’s counter-force to control, and that anticipates Priyadharsini et al. ’s (2026) reading of the narrator’s authorship as “epistemic resistance.”

The novel’s husband is introduced as a university English professor with a liberal, even revolutionary, public persona — a disguise that makes his eventual violence more insidious and that Paul (2021) reads as itself a performance calibrated for different audiences. After marriage, the narrator relocates from Chennai to Mangalore, losing her friends, her professional community, and, gradually, her name and sense of self. Confined to housework in a home that “had a long way to go before becoming a home” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 23), and cut off by an unfamiliar language from the world outside, she becomes entirely dependent on her husband for contact with the outside world. This dependency is the precondition, in Stark’s (2007) terms, for the more targeted forms of control that follow: once the avenues by which she might seek

outside help are narrowed to those her husband permits, her digital and professional identity becomes the last front to be dismantled.

Technological Isolation and Digital Erasure

It is here that the novel’s critique of patriarchy takes on a form the existing scholarship on the novel has not yet fully addressed. The husband does not simply restrict the narrator’s movement; he dismantles her digital and professional identity piece by piece, in a sequence that closely tracks what Dragiewicz et al. (2018) and Woodlock et al. (2020) describe as digital coercive control like account restriction, communication surveillance, and the erasure of a partner’s independent digital record. He forces her to deactivate her Facebook account — an act she experiences as “career suicide” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 80) — confiscates her phone, and eventually blocks her access to email. Each of these acts targets a distinct channel through which she might otherwise reach outside help or maintain a professional identity independent of him; taken together, they replicate almost exactly the three domains like communication, information, and professional visibility — that TFCC scholarship identifies as the primary targets of technology-facilitated abuse.

The husband’s erasure goes further than restriction, however, into active deletion. He dismisses her writing outright, calling women’s writing the work of “a petit bourgeois woman writer” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 80), and meticulously erases her digital footprint from email histories, ongoing projects, Wikipedia references, and Bluetooth connections. This distinction matters. Where restriction limits what a victim can do going forward, deletion attacks the historical record of who she has already been before her marriage, her prior publications, her prior correspondence, her prior professional relationships. In Stark’s (2007) vocabulary, this is control exercised not only over liberty but over identity itself: the husband is not simply preventing future contact but retroactively unmaking the evidence of her independent existence. Where older patriarchal control confined women physically, this iteration also

confines them informationally, severing the professional and social networks through which a woman might otherwise seek help or be recognized as a person with a public history. Read this way, the novel does not merely illustrate contemporary TFCC scholarship after the fact; it dramatizes, a decade in advance of the term's wide currency, the exact logic that scholarship would later formalize — evidence that literary narrative can register emergent patterns of abuse before the empirical and clinical literature has named them.

Kate Millett's observation that “women are controlled physically, psychologically and ideologically by men” (Millett, 1970) captures the totality of this project: the narrator loses not just her freedom of movement but her freedom to dress, to write, to think aloud, and to be recognized as an author in her own right. The digital erasure documented here is thus best understood not as a subplot alongside the novel's physical and sexual violence but as the informational counterpart to it — the means by which the husband ensures that, even if the narrator eventually escapes, no public record exists of who she was before she was made to disappear into the role of wife.

The Violence of Silence and Isolation

Social Conditioning and Victim Blaming

Simone de Beauvoir's claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 1953) frames how social conditioning, rather than nature, teaches women to accept subordination. In *When I Hit You*, this conditioning is most evident when the narrator goes to her parents for help and is met with blame and torture as her father warns her that “if you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 158), even after she has told him of rape, beatings with belts and cords, and isolation. The exchange is brief in the text but structurally significant: it forecloses the one channel of unmediated, non-digital support the narrator might otherwise have retained, confirming that her isolation is not solely the husband's doing but is reinforced by a wider

social reflex to protect the institution of marriage over the woman inside it.

Judith Butler's account of gender as “a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler, 1990) helps explain why the narrator's compliance is not simply personal weakness but the product of lifelong social rehearsal — a reading Priyadharsini et al. (2026) develop at length, suggesting that the narrator's identity as wife and “symbol of familial honor” are performances systematized through repetition rather than chosen dispositions. Rashed and Rasheed (2024) extend this further, characterising the narrator's prolonged compliance in terms of Stockholm syndrome, in which a victim's psychological survival strategy becomes attachment to, and identification with, her abuser. Read alongside this diagnosis, the husband's control over her correspondence and digital record takes on additional weight: by cutting off outside contact and outside affirmation, he does not merely isolate her physically but removes the external reference points against which she might otherwise measure and challenge the version of reality he constructs for her. Her husband exploits this conditioning directly, insisting that her behaviour provokes his violence and that obedience would end it — a manipulation that leads her to internalize blame: “I began to think that perhaps it was true: that I was not good enough, that I had failed as a wife” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 100). As bell hooks writes, “to end male violence we have to end patriarchy. The root cause of this violence is not biology but sexism” (hooks, 2014). This is a claim the novel dramatizes in the slow, deliberate way the narrator is taught to doubt herself rather than her husband.

Marital Rape as a Tool of Patriarchy

The novel's most severe indictment concerns marital rape as an act still widely unrecognized as a crime within Indian marriage, where sex is often assumed to be a husband's entitlement rather than subject to consent. The narrator describes her husband's understanding of their relationship in stark terms, “He didn't understand consent, or

the lack of it. He thought sex was a marital right, a property he owned, and my body was the place he exercised his rights” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 101). Susan Brownmiller’s argument that rape functions as “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 1975) is borne out in the novel’s account of assault as a means of asserting ownership and enforcing silence rather than an isolated act of violence. Crucially, this assault does not occur in isolation from the digital and social erasure already discussed: it is precisely because the narrator has been stripped of outside contact, professional identity, and a documented public self that the assault can occur without immediate external witness or consequence. The physical violence and the informational control are, in this sense, mutually reinforcing rather than separate strands of the narrative.

The institutional response the narrator encounters compounds the harm, when she goes to the police, officers laugh at her wedding photograph, and a female officer lectures her mother for providing an insufficient dowry, remarking that “men who marry a girl for a dowry treat her nicely. Men who marry for other reasons, well, this is how it ends” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 230). The weakness of legal recourse for marital rape in India is thus shown to be not incidental but structurally supportive of patriarchal power, a point consistent with broader scholarship on marital rape in South Asian fiction, which repeatedly identifies legal non-recognition as a central mechanism sustaining such violence (Khan, n.d.). One of the novel’s starkest passages captures the physical and psychological toll of this violence:

He is lifting me by my hair alone. All the blood is rushing to my head. I can imagine my vagina falling out of me like spare change... Rape is a fight you did not win. You could not win. Death is all that I can think about when I lie there. (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 151)

The narrator’s own reflection “in his eyes, my refusal was not an option. Consent was irrelevant. It was his entitlement as a husband” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 151). This is precisely the ideology

Brownmiller and Millett describe as a conflation of marriage with ownership that renders consent, in the husband’s eyes, beside the point. Montheil’s (2025) reading of the novel alongside Arundhati Roy’s fiction argues that Kandasamy’s emphasis on embodied, physical sensation in passages such as this allows rape to be narrated as lived experience rather than as a legal category. And this a literary strategy that this paper would extend by noting that the same embodied specificity extends, in the novel’s earlier chapters, to the narrator’s account of her deleted emails and erased Wikipedia page: the loss of digital selfhood is rendered with the same granular, sensory precision as the loss of bodily autonomy, suggesting that Kandasamy treats the two forms of erasure as continuous rather than distinct.

Resistance and Reclamation

The Role of Writing and Self-Expression

Against this near-total erasure, the narrator’s writing becomes her decisive act of resistance. She recounts “I wrote because it was the only way to keep my sanity. My words became my weapon, my way of fighting back, reclaiming my voice” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 228). This is the point at which the novel’s engagement with digital and textual erasure comes full circle: the husband’s earlier deletion of her published work, her email correspondence, and her online presence sought to make her authorship disappear; her subsequent writing of the very novel the reader holds is a direct reversal of that erasure, restoring in permanent, public, textual form exactly what he worked to delete. Paul’s (2021) reading of the novel as a study in performance is useful here: if the narrator’s married life was a performance scripted by her husband and by social convention, her writing is a counter-performance she authors herself, staged for a public audience rather than a private, controlling one.

Anticipating that neither her family nor the police will fully believe or support her, she plans her escape deliberately rather than impulsively, reflecting bitterly that “in the eyes of the world, a woman who runs away from death is more dignified than a woman who runs away from her man” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 187). Her husband

may control her body and her digital footprint, but the novel insists that he cannot ultimately control her mind — the one domain writing allows her to reclaim, and the one domain that, once published, cannot be deleted in the way her Facebook account or Wikipedia page once were.

Feminist Solidarity and Empowerment

The novel closes not on isolation but on collective support. The narrator's mother, who initially urged compromise, eventually becomes her strongest advocate: “my mother was the one who finally got through to me, calling me every day, urging me to leave him, reminding me that I deserved better” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 223). Friends, a women's shelter, and a support group offer further solidarity, “in the support group, we shared our stories, our pain, and our triumphs. We found strength in each other, and that solidarity became a lifeline” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 215). bell hooks distinguishes this kind of solidarity from mere support, describing it as requiring “a community of interests, shared beliefs, and goals around which to unite” (hooks, 2014); Audre Lorde makes a similar point, writing that “without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (Lorde, 2022). Read against the TFCC framework, this final turn to community is significant, where the husband's coercive control worked by severing the narrator's channels of contact and support, her escape is enabled by the deliberate reconstruction of exactly those channels that support network that functions, in effect, as the inverse of the isolation he engineered. The narrator's eventual escape is made possible precisely by this community, the collective counterweight to the isolation her husband worked so deliberately to construct.

Conclusion

When I Hit You is a stark indictment of the patriarchal structures that sustain marital rape and domestic violence. This paper has argued that it is also something existing scholarship on the novel has not yet fully registered: an early and detailed literary account of technology-facilitated coercive control, in which the erasure of a

woman's digital and professional identity operates as both precondition and complement to her physical and sexual subjugation. Reading the novel against Stark's (2007) coercive control framework and its extension into TFCC scholarship (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Woodlock et al., 2020) does not replace existing readings of the novel through liberal feminism, performativity, or trauma theory; it adds a dimension those readings have not addressed, and one the novel itself treats with considerable narrative weight.

Beyond this single text, the case suggests a broader opportunity for literary and gender studies: TFCC scholarship has been developed almost entirely from Western empirical case studies of contemporary intimate-partner violence, while South Asian domestic fiction — a substantial and long-standing archive concerned with marriage, silence, and the body (Khan, n.d.; The Creative Launcher, 2023) — has rarely been read through it. Kandasamy, herself an activist, uses her own experience to expose how patriarchy adapts to new technologies of communication and self-representation even as its underlying logic of ownership, silence, and control remains unchanged. Against this, the novel affirms writing and feminist solidarity as the means by which a woman reclaims a self her marriage was built to erase: “the struggle to break free from the chains of domestic violence is not just a personal battle; it is a collective one, fought by every woman who refuses to be silent” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 211).

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