



Digital Abuse in ‘When I Hit You’ by Meena Kandasamay

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the different methods of abuse that the abusers use to control and harass their partners at home. There are many forms of abuse like emotional abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, digital abuse that women are facing globally. The paper focuses one of the abstruse forms of abuse: Digital Abuse. Digital abuse, also known as electronic abuse, is a hidden form, where the control is executed in the name of protection or care mostly. The paper aims to show the different tactics used by the characters against their partners in Meena Kandasamy’s ‘When I Hit You’. This paper shows how the abusers use technology to gain and maintain power and control in the relationship in the selected work. It includes controlling behavior like demand for passwords, recording the calls, tracking the location via Smartphone’s, posting wrong information about their partner, keeping a track over the use of social media and so on. The study focuses that how technology has become a source of indirect violence and abuse at home. It also discusses the impact of abuse on women and how women feel depressed, isolated, and vulnerable when someone wants to completely control their lives. This paper delineates the 21st modern women’s plight that how being a feminist, a woman is entrapped in an abusive marriage and aims to determine the effectiveness of technology on protagonist, in which a so called loved one makes her feel that he has a right to be present everywhere and every time in her digital space.

Keywords: Digital Abuse, Power, Control, Marriage, Violence, Technology

Introduction

Women play a prime role in the progress of the society and nation and have dominated each and every field to a certain extent but there are many issues and problems that women are facing in society in spite of all these achievements. One of the most concerns in the nation is domestic violence. Women face various forms of abuse and violence inside the four walls every day. Abuse can also be physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and digital. There is an old age view that ‘Women are by nature weak and irrational, thus in need of protection and guidance. As one of the great examples, the famous philosopher Aristotle had said about women:-

“The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and of a ruler to rule”

As a result, women face discrimination since ages. Men think that they have right over women. They have the right to correct them, discipline them and to beat them. They think that women are their property. They can do everything with them

whatever they want. Now this age is the age of technology. People use technology to comfort their lives, but some use technology to control their partners.

“There are many cyber-crimes such as hacking, identity theft, online fraud, etc. a lot of attention has been given to them, but less focus has been given to the issue of digital abuse or we can say technology-facilitated abuse between current and former partners” (Al –Alosi-Hadeel)

This is the tech-savvy age. People use technology to make life easier but on the other side, some people are using technology as a weapon to control and intimidate their intimate partners. “The term digital abuse refers to repeated abuse committed by one person against a current or former partner through the use of technology. It includes a range of controlling and coercive behaviors like threatening phone calls, location tracking via Smartphone’s, harassment on social media sites, and posting pictures without consent (Al-Alosi –Hadeel).

MeenaKandasamay’s novel ‘When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife’ is a story of a battered wife who is a poet, writer, and a feminist. Being a feminist, she traps in an abusive marriage with a communist. She meets her husband in a campaign and falls in love with him. Her husband who is also a revolutionary takes her away after marriage to Mangalore far from her family and friends where first of all he says to change the mobile number of his wife. Then he checks her e-mails and deletes all the previous e-mails so that she does not communicate to anyone from digital world.

“Kandasamy in “When I Hit You” very strongly shows the gender bias attitude of the society where a husband exercises sexual superiority, by getting it on demand and through any means possible. The writer is treated worse than an animal.”(Dr. Tanu Kashyap)

She doesn’t know the language of the place where they live. She could not communicate with anyone there. Even she changed her mobile number at the behest of her husband. He demands her email password and replies to her emails himself. He tells her to delete her Facebook account so that the writer could not connect to the outside world. If she does not do that, he warns that he will hurt himself. The writer feels lonely and helpless completely. These days everyone is connected with each other digitally. One can talk to anyone even from the far off places. Technology has given us these opportunities that we can communicate easily. We use social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram to talk interact and for few instances the use of such platforms becomes inevitable. In the light of excessive use of digital platforms to communicate, the space for Cyber-Crime, Trolls, Digital Stalking and Digital Violence has increased exponentially.

On 2 Feb 2020, the US Norton Life Lock released the findings from its Online Creeping Survey after interviewing more than 2,000 US adults which revealed the following:

- 46% of Americans admit to ‘stalking’ an ex or current partner online by checking in on them without their knowledge or consent.
- 29% were checking their current or former partner’s phone.
- 21 % admitted to be reviewing their partner’s search history on one of their devices without their knowledge or consent.
- 9% Americans created a fake profile to check on their ex or current partners on social media

- 8% tracked their physical activity via their phone or health app.
- 10% admitted to be using an app to monitor an ex or current partner's text messages, phone calls, direct messages, emails and photos.

In all these observations men with a significant ratio (15% versus 6%) were much more likely than women to engage in this behavior. When we think about the violence and abuse that women are facing around the entire globe, the first thing that comes into our minds is physical abuse. But some forms of abuse do not have bruises or marks but leave women isolated, silenced and traumatized.

Kandasamy's novel depicts the writer's condition when her husband denies her the use internet.

“In the modern era, it is an individual's fundamental right to use social media; to promote his/her work and through it; to get news to keep updated or to become a netizen positively. But the narrator is always dominated or her rights and space is snatched away by her husband. She completely feels isolated in the new place. Here Facebook or mass media was her only lifeline to contact the world outside. But her husband through blackmail by burning himself forces her to deactivate the Facebook account” (Md Kalam AbulSk)

Being a writer she has been offered to write on sex surveys, but her husband does not allow her to write on this topic. He thinks sex is something that she can discuss only with him. Also, he is concerned about her value and sanctity. He says:

“You are a slave of this corporate media. You are selling your body. This is elite prostitution. This is sexual anarchy. This is pandering to the vulgar imperialist culture”

He wants his wife to be a typical housewife, one who only does the household chores, gives birth to a child for him and nothing else. He does not allow her to use the internet for more than three hours a week. He keeps a USB dongle with him saying that he has to prepare some projects for the class so that the writer could not approach the internet in his absence. How a husband can be so brutal, so mean and how can one person takeaway another being's freedom. Freedom of writing, freedom of dressing, freedom of wearing makeup, freedom of living, everything she desires, he wants to take away. If his wife wears makeup and keeps long hair, applies kohl, according to him it only means that she is doing this for the other men. In the 21st century a man who is educated enough, that also a professor, has such opinions is definitely noteworthy. According to Kate Millet,

“Women are controlled physically, psychologically and ideologically by men”

When I Hit You is a story of a husband's brutality and cruelty and how a person gains control of the life of his own counterpart and forgets that besides being his partner, a woman is also a human being. He beats her brutally in the initial days of marriage and it is a great surprise to notice that how can the most important relationship begin with brutality and cruelty instead of love, respect and care. How can a man beat his wife with all his efforts only to show his power that she is

his property and a puppet? In this condition, a woman indeed shatters completely. Particularly in the Indian setting, when a woman leaves her parents' house, she expects her husband to care of her. Also she does everything to please her husband so that she could get respect and love from him. But in most of the cases, due to various factors the disappointment is there. In the novel when there is a quarrel between the protagonist and her husband, it is said that the mobile phone is the root of all problems. The husband starts taking control of her Email account, starts using her social media. It's utter suffocation and seems to be an attempt to sabotage the institution of marriage. Who gives this right to the husband to intrude the digital space of his wife! And if man has this right so should the woman have. It is just the presence of power and control in the marriage where the man is self-proclaimed head of the family.

Studies show that in the cultural context:

“Husbands continued to be viewed as a leader of the home who is entitled to exercise power over wives” (Mshweshwe, 2018, Sikweiya et al., 2020)

Since childhood, there is an image set in the male's mind of a leader, superior man, and a breadwinner that they see in themselves. The male child is also told that he is stronger than a female and hence he has to take charge of her, of the kids and everything that belongs to the family. Simon De Beauvoir contrasts

“A girl's upbringing with a boy's who at age 3 or 4 is told he is a ‘little man’. A girl is taught to be a woman, and society imposes her feminine destiny on her”

In the novel 'When I Hit You' the writer's husband thinks himself superior to his wife. He wants his wife just to do the household chores. He will take the decisions about her choice for writing or using the social media. He wants her to become completely dependent.

“After marriage, the narrator is involved in a marital game of chess where she plays the role of a king who is under constant threat by her husband who plays the role of a drama queen. Again she makes herself a character in a film in which she plays the role of an actress to show her role as a good Indian wife as her husband wants to direct the same as a film director does with his heroine. She has to do the ways her husband wants her to do or to make; like what to wear, what to talk, how to walk etc. In this process, her self-entity is lost “like a house after robbery” and made herself ‘Other’ (KalamAbul SK MD)

Surprisingly in Hindu Mythology, a girl is the incarnation of a goddess, at a particular occasion people worship the young girls as goddesses, but in reality a female feticide ratio is increasing day by day. Many goddesses are a symbol of power,

knowledge, wealth but why a woman has become the symbol of sacrifice, submissiveness, obedience! Why a man is not associated to such attributions which is beyond understanding.

Simon De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* quotes,

“Humanity is male and man defines woman, not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being”

In the novel, the writer’s husband is perfect in the eyes of her parents, ‘husband material’. But within days, it is clear that she has made a monumental error. He insists that she disables her Facebook account, asks for her password as a demonstration of trust, rations access to the eventually deletes her email history, effectively robbing her past and her identity. When she tells about her husband to her parents they always say to ‘keep quiet’. Everything will be normal. Her mother says to have a baby, then her husband will be ‘more gentle’ towards her. The narrator has also hopes that he will change one day. An abusive person will change with time; this feeling makes a man more and more savage. Because he is habitual of this behavior. This hope prevents her from fleeing from an abusive marriage. This hope sometimes seems to be a trap. As the writer writes in the novel:

“Hope prevents me from taking my own life. Hope is the kind voice in my head that prevents me from fleeing. Hope is the traitor that chains me to this marriage”

The narrator’s husband plays a manipulative role. He weeps in front of her parents and friends and begs over the phone to tell her to be obedient. He tells the neighbor that his wife is anti-social and prefers her own company. He evokes sympathy from the other women, by saying that she constantly compares him to other men. To men, he peddles the story that she is jealous and she does not tolerate his female students. Kandasamay writes: “I am the battered woman, but he is the one who is playing the role of the victim” He was taking sympathy for all the people who belonged to them. So that he will keep himself in the good books of the people. He is doing so because he wants that the writer feels completely alone and helpless. If she tells about him and his abuse to someone, no one could believe her.

He is robbing her identity by not giving her internet access or allowing her to post on social media. Despite knowing that she is a writer and use of internet is very important for her he does not allow her to use the internet rather uses the same platforms against her. He is a monster actually in the name of human, he beats her, drags her, uses the MacBook cord and the washing machine hose to hit her, only a systematically trained misogynist can perform such acts. He hates her to be a feminist. He calls her a whore. An educated girl who is a writer, a feminist receiving such words for herself. Why? Just because she thought if she opens up, the issue her family reputation will be challenged in the society. In a patriarchal society, a girl child is always considered a burden for the family. A baby boy is always welcomed with great pomp and show because it is believed that only sons carry forward the lineage. They will support the parents in their old age. How is it fair to a woman?

Every day her husband beats her like an animal or worse than an animal. He also wants that she should bear a child. Despite so much pain, that he gave her, he hopes that she will bear his child. But the writer takes a good decision not to have a child because she does not want a baby being brought up in such a hostile environment.

“This marriage, oppressive and impossible as it is, does not have the power to hold me, hostage, forever. But, if I were to be burdened with a child, I do not know how I could walk away.”

Her husband abuses her physically, mentally, digitally, and verbally. He comments on her that she doesn't want to become a mother because she wants to maintain her zero-size figure. Also, he says that she is a zero.

“You have no responsibility. You have no intention of being either a wife or a mother. You want to keep your size zero frames. You are a zero yourself”

Then, if there is no respect, no love, no understanding in the relationship, why to carry such burden. A relationship formulates with respect and love but in this relationship there is an absence of both. In his opinion, Feminism is the fundamental issue. It gave the voice to women, if they could get their freedom, their rights; it is all because of feminism. Women fought for their rights, their freedom, otherwise, before the feminist movements, women were living their lives like a slave. They had no right to vote, they were discriminated against everywhere. So for her husband, feminism ruins the love between husband and wife. According to him feminism sees men as selfish scoundrels.

“The feminism that makes you an individual, the feminism that refuses to recognize that we are a couple, the feminism that makes you build a barricade all around yourself, the feminism that sows the seeds of distrust in your mind about me.”(Narrator’s Husband 120)

During the pandemic, COVID'19, when the world was at home due to lockdown in order to be safe and sound, there was a rise of 33% cases of domestic violence with women if they were not killed by the pandemic. They were abused financially, physically, sexually and digitally by their intimate partners. A home is a place where one finds peace and solace and if it turns out to be a junction of sufferings, where a poor soul should hope to find a refuge.

Conclusion

Violence cannot be bearable, whether it is emotional, digital, physical, or verbal. It spoils the relationship as well its impact on the women is hazardous. Women are getting the education to become independent but after getting the education, little change is seen in the condition of women on ground. When I Hit You: Or a portrait of the writer as a Young wife is an eye-

opener novel for those women who are facing domestic violence and trapped in an abusive marriage. This novel shows the mirror to society that women are not fragile and they can handle their problems when need arises. If she stays in an abusive marriage, it doesn't mean that they cannot take a step. Every woman can fly high if she wishes. The writer becomes successful to escape this abusive marriage and sets a fine example before the females in the society. She becomes successful in showing how in spite of so many obstacles a woman can lead her own life as per her own choices. There is no need of a man's support.

The paper can be concluded with a sincere thought:

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved”
(Swami Vivekananda)

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