



Ideologies of a Chauvinist: A Study on the Personal vs Social Dichotomy in *When I Hit You, Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

Vinaya Peter

vinayapeter195@gmail.com

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Abstract— This study attempts to read the context that male chauvinist oppression is not only held in the former ages but also exists in contemporary society. *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) is a meditation on love, marriage, violence and how someone who is a feminist gets trapped in an abusive marriage. This book takes the readers through structures of toxic masculinity and patriarchy which allow violence to be perpetuated. The novel portrays the torture inflicted by an ideologically conflicted revolutionary husband to his wife. He is not manifesting the ideology he is boasting off. Ideologies have an explanatory function: they provide explanations for the facts and problems of social life, enabling individuals and groups to orientate themselves in society, but the man in the novel is building traumas in his wife's life.



Keywords— Chauvinism, Dichotomy, Women's Literature, Feminist Literature, Ideology, Trauma, Domestic Violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ideology is a set of beliefs or philosophies attributed to a person or group of persons, especially as held for reasons that are not purely epistemic, in which "practical elements are as prominent as theoretical ones." The term ideology originates from French 'idéologie', itself deriving from combining Greek: idea ('notion, pattern'; close to the Lockean sense of idea) and -logia. The term ideology, and the system of ideas associated with it, was coined in 1796 by Antoine Destutt de Tracy while in prison pending trial during the Reign of Terror, where he read the works of Locke and Condillac. Hoping to form a secure foundation for the moral and political sciences, Tracy devised the term for a "science of ideas", basing such upon two things:

1. The sensations that people experience as they interact with the material world; and
2. The ideas that form in their minds due to those sensations.

Patriarchy is a social structure and legitimating ideology in

which men have more power and privilege than women; according to feminist ideology, patriarchy is the main source of violence such as rape, battering, and murder against women in contemporary society. Patriarchy is associated with a set of ideas, a patriarchal ideology that acts to explain and justify this dominance and attributes it to inherent natural differences between men and women. Historically, patriarchy has manifested itself in the social, legal, political, religious, and economic organization of a range of different cultures. Most contemporary societies are, in practice, patriarchal. The term patriarchy has been used to refer to autocratic rule by the male head of a family; however, since the late 20th century it has also been used to refer to social systems in which power is primarily headed by adult men. Chauvinists are the persons who are seen as strong and virtuous, while others are considered weak, unworthy, or inferior. Dichotomy is a form of logical division consisting of the separation of a class into two subclasses, one of which has and the other has not a certain quality or attribute. The term dichotomy is

from the Greek language, “dividing in two” from “in two, asunder” and “a cutting, incision”.

Ideological conflict is a clash or disagreement of opposing ideas, ideologies, or concepts. Ideology is important to conflict. Shared beliefs create a sense of group identity, specify targets of hostility and enable coordinated action. Understanding ideology is key to effective conflict resolution and management. It is presumed to be something abstract or irrational, therefore best disregarded in the search for concrete explanations and solutions. Those who do pay attention to ideology tend to offer simple explanations for its role, often due to incorrect assumptions about the relationship between ideas and material objects, between mind and body and between individuals and the groups to which they belong.

When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife gives us “a 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”. The book seems like advice to the future selves that they are on their own. It is a warning; that it is easy for a once upon a time feminist to get trapped in an abusive marriage. This is a piece of work which illustrates how gender oppressive ideology and behaviour can be perpetuated, irrespective of people’s education, class, political leanings. It warns people how a seemingly “successful” marriage could be violent, oppressive and abusive without any one around being aware of its brutality. The book demonstrates the systematic patriarchy that exists no matter where people are in his brutal honesty and very real depiction of an abusive marriage. The increasing prominence of the feminist voice around the world today is shown through the book.

The journey towards that assertion is a tough one. It begins with a stripping of the narrator’s autonomy after her marriage to a university lecturer, Marxist and one-time revolutionary in south India who uses communist ideas “as a cover for his own sadism”. When she moves with him to an unfamiliar city, an assault on her tongue, mind and body begins.

II. IDEOLOGIES OF A CHAUVINIST

Shortly after the novel begins, the social and personal dichotomy of the narrator’s husband unveils, “I want the world to know that we are a couple. I want to accept us as a unit” (56)

The story leads us through an emotional journey, from a confident college student to a published writer, “a woman whom no one wants to look at or, more accurately, whom

no one ever sees”. The journey towards the assertion is a tough one which begins with a stripping of the narrator’s autonomy after her marriage to a university lecturer, Marxist and one-time revolutionary in South India, an educated cultured brute who uses his doctrines “as a cover for his own sadism” (80). The ‘dichotomy’ termed in the title “Ideologies of a Chauvinist: A Study on the Personal vs Social Dichotomy” portrays that the writer’s husband as a man with dual nature. The writer says, “he might be a strong, invincible man to the world outside, but to me, he is someone in need of tenderness”(114). The writer’s abusive husband approves of dowdiness. He wants her to be plain without being attractive, nothing eye-catching. This is the plainness that makes him pleased. In his personal life he is a psychopath injecting his ideology to his wife and creating havoc by reacting violently and beating her severely but to the outside world he appears as a happily married college lecturer who is loved by everyone, his students, the writer’s parents and his friends. The ideology he professes is not revealed in his nature which is inclined towards violence and brutality in the household.

The writer’s husband tries to inflict his ideologies through a set of blackmails. His aim is to make her suffer for his pain. The matchstick pyrotechnical performance prompted her to delete her Facebook account, her lifeline to the world outside. In her helpless situation, he wants her to cut herself off from Facebook, it’s an act of career suicide. He wants her email passwords and he opens her inbox and replies to the emails by signing both their names at the end of every message. He finds that her name has been co-signed in letters to students, in emails to his activist friends, in making recommendations to his colleagues, in querying for a postcolonial studies research conference. She feels nauseous, feels robbed of her identity.

The writer’s husband rails at her, slaps her, throws her laptop across the small kitchen, forces her to delete a manuscript, a non-fiction-book-in-progress, because somewhere in its pages there is a mention of the word lover. He accuses her of carrying her past into their present, and this treason is evidence enough that there is no hope or space for the future to flourish. He always corners her. If she stands up to him, if she shouts back at him, he calls her mad. ‘Depression’ is the label that he applies to her state of mind, her sense of life. Sometimes, he does not theorize at all, does not diagnose her anger and develops his conjectures. When it is not depression, when it is not this restless insect flying around in her brain and eating away all the softer parts that programme her to be an obedient wife, he blames it on the demons that have possessed her.

She never understood rape until it happened to her, it was a concept – of savagery, of violence, of disrespect. The man who rapes her is not a stranger who runs away, not the not the silhouette in the carpark, not the masked assaulter, he is not the acquaintance who has spiked her drinks, he is someone who wakes up next to her, he is the husband who can shrug it away and tell her to stop imagining things, he is the husband who can blame his actions on unbridled passion the next day, while she hobbles from room to room.

“The shame of rape is the shame of unspeakable. Women have found it easier to jump into fire, consume poison, blow themselves up as suicide bombers, than tell another soul about what happened. A rape is a fight you did not win. You could not win” (169).

III. SOCIAL VS PERSONAL DICHOTOMY

In the writer’s husband’s rule book- sown by patriarchy, watered by feudalism, manured by a selective interpretation of Communism – a woman should not moan. The man who appeared to carry two inbuilt safeguards: unlike the politician, as a college lecturer, he was perfect husband-material in the eyes of her parents. Unlike the politician, in his secret life as a guerilla, he believed in a revolutionary overthrow of the Indian state, boycotted democratic structures. The man is a courteous person in the society, but actually he happens to be a monster in his home, he doesn’t allow his wife to activate her FB account; he says that it’s a waste of time, it’s narcissism and exhibitionism. He has the defiant eyes of a man who is in no mood to give up by feudalism, manured by a selective interpretation of communism- a woman should not moan. The fear that he seeks to instill in her is never the actual act itself, but the fear of where the act can lead to. He is the drama queen who plays all the roles. The doting husband in the presence of his colleagues acts as the harassed victim of a suspicious wife, the unjustly emasculated man to her female friends, the pleading-son-in-law to her parents. (149-155 & 185)

The writer’s husband narrated and boasted about his guerrilla days, as once he ran a typing institute in the south, at the time he had a decoy operation and he had to provide cover for a senior leader who was undergoing treatment. He says he had to kill a soldier once and raped her against her will and had tortured her little sister who he snatched from the road to school. He disembowelled him.

Not one man in his platoon would have the guts to be inappropriate to women after they saw his corpse. Even the party was angry that he went beyond his brief. The isolation of their marriage feeds his words, he speaks of his exploits unceasingly and in the most graphic language

possible. She cannot rule out if all this is an experiment to control her, having got used to the nightly bedroom violence, she has become less afraid, and so the more menacing his story telling grows and no longer sift fact from fiction. She considers going to the police, but when she contemplates it in the solitude of lonely afternoons, she understands that it is impossible and if he caught scent of her plans, she knows how he would react. For the sake of self-preservation, she knows that the police route – the first port of call for any abused woman – is closed to her.

The only option to her are family and friends but he plays the role of dutiful son-in-law to her parents and weeps over the phone to her father and begs her mother to tell her to be more obedient and he tells his relatives that she do not feed him properly and hints to the only neighbours around that she is anti- social, that she is one of the intellectual types who prefers her own company. The bigger the circle of spectators, the more nuanced his portrait of her becomes and the less inclined people are to believe that there is no substance to his lies. To women, he evokes sympathy by saying that she constantly compares him to other men and to men, he peddles the story that she is jealous, that she does not tolerate his female students. He tries to portray that the writer is the battered woman and he is the one who is playing the role of the victim. Her escape cannot come through these people and he is too effective at giving his version of events; too quick to ask grovelingly for their advice; too good at flattering them with his attention. He pushes her friends and family into the territory of the neutral; he asks them to play fair. No one wants to give a guilty verdict to the man who is prepared to elevate them to the role of judge and jury.

“I will skin your scalp. It will be slow, but I will do a very thorough job of it.” (184).

She searches his eyes for just a glimpse that he recognizes how absurd he sounds, how inhuman he has himself become, but the hollow look he returns is of something that has become extinct.

Finally, she contacted her parents to prepare the way and get the courage to share the shame of how she has been treated, what it means to live in the fear of being killed. She repeats her husband’s threat to scalp her word for word, talk of her death, cradle the menacing words like a militant’s hand grenade and pull the pin. Her mother implores if again he talks of murder, come home, and her father orders if he does it again, run for her life without even turning to look back. ‘We are here’, they say, finally, far too late, but in unison.

For two and a half years, her case at the Metropolitan Magistrate Court fails to be called and runs from pillar to post. She wants him to come to India and face charges – if

he takes citizenship elsewhere, then she can hardly run to Interpol. Then there is the divorce petition, sent by his lawyers, which talks about her ultra-feminism, which blames her parents for her modern upbringing.

The very title of the novel *When I Hit You or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* subtly alludes the patriarchal convention that a woman who is a writer was abused by her monstrous husband. Although the writer succeeds in breaking her abusive marriage – made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. In the course of the novel, she grows to remain silent in order to be a good housewife as told by her parents, and the husband grows more of a male chauvinist day by day as opposed to his social behaviour.

IV. CONCLUSION

When I Hit You Or A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife is a powerful story of ‘modern’ marriage through the art of fiction. It brings out the way violence perpetuates in a seemingly “modern” love marriage and takes us through the structure of toxic masculinity and patriarchy which allows violence to be perpetuated. Kandasamy describes her own experiences as an abused and dehumanised wife in south India and her struggle to both retain and also create her identity. A crucial aspect this book brings out is the way violence perpetuates in a seemingly “modern” love marriage. People are always told when they question the patriarchy of traditional marriages that “modern” marriages are not like that, “love marriages are not like that”, but Kandasamy breaks this myth. The newly-wed narrator experiences extreme violence at her husband’s and finds herself socially isolated. Intellectual and physical cruelty is explored. Yet hope keeps her alive. Writing becomes her salvation, a supreme act of defiance and as the subtitle suggests, the novel is also about the act of writing itself and the way that fiction and stories can help people escape.

An unnamed narrator takes us into her world of a chauvinist husband, a father embarrassed by the shame that a possible divorce would bring, and a mother who tells her this is how things are, to be silent and to accept the situation because the first year of marriage is always hard, a mother who makes a “spectacle” of the narrator’s embarrassment and advises her that time will pass and all her troubles will be forgotten. Her parents’ attitude demonstrates wider society’s systematic support and justification of abuse and reveals the changes that need to happen regardless of location or culture. When the narrator recounts her conversations with her parents, it is nothing new to people as they have heard this time and again.

“Avoid confrontation,” her father tells her while her mother tells her that “Marriage is a give and take “. These token bits of wisdom are nothing new to anyone who has contested marriage and its patriarchal ways of subordinating women. One of the most revealing aspects of the book is Kandasamy’s discussion of the caste system and the excuses that her parents make for her husband’s behaviour.

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