



Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Curs 2022-2023

TÍTOL:

Mind the Social Gap: Women's Status and Narrative Strategies Against Patriarchal Violence in Tamil Nadu

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Barcelona, 5 de setembre de 2023





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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those friends who have contributed to improving this paper with their questions, views and suggestions.

And a very special thanks goes to my tutor, Isabel: your bright ideas, key recommendations, and careful supervision have been crucial for the elaboration of this research.



Abstract

This paper examines patriarchal violence against women in Tamil Nadu, South India, by comparing the cases of two women of substantially different social and educational backgrounds: one is the urbanite protagonist of Meena Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You* (2017); the second, a woman from a small village in a rural area near Chennai. Critical discussions, relevant findings and my own experience as an observer are combined in order to establish if social status plays a role in determining the chances of overcoming abuse. To discuss this idea, the research contextualises the abuse within the frame of subalternity, patriarchy and caste. Then it analyses the forms and actors of violence, outlines the resources available for the victims and proposes one technique of expressive writing as a healing tool. Results suggest that higher status does not necessarily provide protection from being abused but certainly contributes to overcoming the abuse and possessing more solid tools for healing.

Keywords: patriarchal violence, Tamil Nadu, Meena Kandasamy, expressive writing as healing

Resumen

Este artículo examina la violencia patriarcal contra las mujeres en Tamil Nadu, en el sur de la India, comparando los casos de dos mujeres de estatus y bagajes educativos sustancialmente distintos: una es la protagonista de la novela de Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit You* (2017); la otra, una mujer de una pequeña localidad en una zona rural cerca de Chennai. Se combinan discusiones críticas con estadísticas y mi propia experiencia como observador para estudiar si el estatus social tiene un papel determinante en las probabilidades de salir de una situación de



maltrato. Para corroborar esta idea, se contextualiza la violencia contra la mujer en el marco de la subalternidad, el patriarcado y el sistema de castas. A continuación, se describen recursos para las víctimas y se propone una técnica de escritura expresiva como herramienta curativa. Los resultados sugieren que un estatus más alto no evita necesariamente ser víctima de maltrato pero sí contribuye a superarlo y a tener herramientas más sólidas para la sanación.

Palabras clave: violencia patriarcal, Tamil Nadu, Meena Kandasamy, escritura expresiva para la curación

Contribution to the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Gender and social disparities in Tamil society today leave women, especially those of lower status and living in rural areas, in a vulnerable position. This paper exposes and denounces the linkage among acutely patriarchal values, a highly hierarchical social organisation and violence against women. By contributing to a better understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate the forced submission of women in Tamil Nadu, outlining the resources available to assist the victims and proposing a tool to heal from the abuse suffered, this paper contributes to:

1) Eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access to all levels of education for the vulnerable (based on Target 4.5 of SDG: Quality Education).

2) Empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all (based on Target 10.2 of SDG: Reduced Inequalities).

3) Eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres (based on Target 5.2 of SDG: Gender Equality).

4) Ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (Target 5.5 of SDG: Gender equality).





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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Motivation

Most Tamil Dalit women have been given very few opportunities to have a say in decisions that affect their own lives.¹ A considerable number of them also experience violence. My several stays in a village to the rural south of Chennai, linked with my involvement in the educational and women empowerment projects run by a non-governmental organisation, has brought me to work closely with many of them. This has given me the chance to hear many accounts of abuse and become well acquainted with the story of a particular woman from the village. She experiences different forms of oppression and abuse; she has been a subject with practically no agency since she was born, and her voice has always been silenced merely because of her gender. Her situation resembles that encountered in the figure of the subaltern as described in postcolonial theory, as her views are mostly ignored, silenced and suppressed.²

When I read the novel *When I Hit You*, by Meena Kandasamy, I was struck by the number of similarities to be found between the protagonist's experience and the stories related by the women in the village. The book is based on Meena's own experiences of marital abuse. Her social status and educational level is certainly higher than the Dalit women I have worked with, yet she has suffered violence all the same. All these similarities not only have led me to ponder over the nature of violence against women in Tamil Nadu, but also over the way these women cope with it. This has brought me to focus on what has become the topic and main research question of this paper: does the difference in social status play a role in determining the chances of overcoming violence against women in Tamil Nadu?

1.2. Thesis and Methodology

In light of the above, this paper will begin by naming and contextualising violence against women in Tamil Nadu today. It will do so by identifying, critically discussing and comparing the

¹ Dalit is the name given to Indian citizens at the lowest stratum of the caste system (see section 2.1 in this paper for further information).

² In Post-colonial studies, subalternity is understood as the cultural hegemony imposed by colonists that displaces the native population to the margins of society from a socio-economic point of view.



forms of oppression imposed on two different women: one of low social status and poor educational background from a small village in Tamil Nadu, and the other, the protagonist of *When I Hit You*. Then it will study the different actors that both seize and exert control of the agency of both rural and urban female victims by perpetrating violence. Finally, it will focus on different resources that can contribute to overcoming it and will highlight the power of building and owning the narrative of the abuse through writing as a healing force for the victims.

My departure thesis is that although violence against women in Tamil culture may well be exerted over all social classes, the different degrees of subalternity of the victims, which depend on their social status and educational background, can be the determining factors for the victims to be able to regain their lost – or simply inexistent – agency and become survivors.

This paper will be using the term “victims” to refer to those who are still within reach of the violence perpetrated by their abuser(s), such as the woman from the village mentioned before. In contrast, “survivors” will be the term used to refer to those who have managed to put distance between themselves and their tormentor(s), such as the protagonist of the novel.

Thus, this research will focus on two case studies, as announced before: the first one is the woman from a rural area who will be referred to under the pseudonym of Sandhya (which means Twilight in Tamil) in order to keep her anonymity. Sandhya represents the stories of many women in the village. Like many others, Sandhya left school shortly before starting secondary education and her family looked for a suitable husband for her to marry. After that, she left the village to join her husband’s family household. A year later she had a child, and weeks later her husband started to inflict violence on her. When the situation aggravated and she felt her life was in danger, her family came to her rescue: her brothers rented a van and drove in the middle of the night to take her and her son back to her family home in the village, far from her beating husband. Abuse, however, was not over. Shortly after her arrival, her father, brothers and sisters-in-law started to become uncomfortable with her presence, as her escape was seen as an evasion of her role as a good wife and thereby as a motive for shame for the whole family, as developed in this paper later on.



The second case studied in this research is the protagonist of Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You*, published in 2017 and shortlisted for the Women's Prize For Fiction 2018. The book has been widely commented on for its poignant depiction of brutality against, in the eyes of the public, a fully empowered woman. The author is well-known for her translations, her poetry and her social activism especially against caste and gender stereotypes, poverty and violence in India. She has also published two other novels: *The Gipsy Goddess* (2014) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2018). In *When i Hit You*, the narrator is anonymised in order to, according to the author, universalise her experience. As she makes it clear in a TV interview following the publication of the novel, before her abusive marriage she had never imagined that a woman like her, acclaimed for her poetry and admired by many for her social activism, could become a victim of violence exerted by her partner (New Delhi Television Ltd, 2017). Then she explains that, while writing the book, she realised that despite the privileged position she occupied in a strongly hierarchical society, her story was very similar to the stories of other millions of women in India; hence she felt that she had both a personal and a political duty to tell the story. Taking her point even further, she denounces that people in India keep talking about cow protection but nobody is talking about the protection of women from violence of any kind. Both her personal need for putting distance from the abuse and her political need for denouncing the universality of the issue explains the anonymity of the protagonist of the novel, as cleverly put in another interview for a British newspaper: what is recounted in the novel is "not what happened to me, it's a representation of what happened to me" (Self, 2019, para. 9).

In this sense, neither Sandhya nor the protagonist of the novel are real: they are representations of realities that aim to symbolise the situation of many women in the State of Tamil Nadu: Sandhya embodies an archetypal rural Tamil woman of low social, educational and financial status. Kandasamy's narrator, in contrast, typifies an urban Tamil woman of higher social, educational and financial status.

Regarding methodology, as one of the goals of this paper is to contextualise the violence exerted upon women in Tamil Nadu and the different factors that intervene in the equation, the sources used beyond the novel *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy are critical papers



produced so far about Meena Kandasamy's text and on violence against women.³ This has been complemented by relevant findings published by institutions on the matter – including quantitative data concerning Tamil Nadu extracted from the most recent surveys published both by Indian authorities and international Human Rights organisations. Tackling violence against women exclusively from a literary perspective would not only be difficult but also reductionist. As this paper revolves around the nature of violence in a particular cultural context and focuses on its potential differences according to the social status of the victims, it necessarily weaves together sociological, cultural, and postcolonial theoretical threads, as well as literary criticism. Besides, it also adopts an autoethnographic approach as it reflects my experience as an observer as a regular visitor of rural Tamil Nadu. The critical discussion of the two stories to be compared, Sandhya's and Kandasamy's, will be integrated within the theoretical sources deployed as indicated above.

1.3. Ethical considerations: about legitimacy

I am aware that my legitimacy in presenting myself, a white man living in the West, as an accredited observer of such a sensitive issue may easily be questioned. Especially so when considering that anybody who knows rural Tamil Nadu will be cognizant of the difficulties any man may have in having an open conversation with a woman; perhaps even more so if the man is white and represents a foreign institution that provides support to the local community. Most women in the rural area in question rarely make eye contact or engage in verbal interaction with me if they can avoid it. However, in most of my visits I have been in company with the woman who founded and runs the organisation that I volunteer for; she has been visiting the area over the last 20 years, has a closer relationship with the women there and a solid friendship with one of them, which has contributed to recording the stories of abuse presented in this paper. My position as a distant observer has allowed me to detach myself from the front line this woman is in and subsequently from the emotional charge carried by her dramatic accounts. I have also

³ Most scholars have written about the novel in relation to violence against women, such as Sangheeta et al. in "Strategic Analysis of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Cycle of Violence in the Autobiographical Text—When I Hit You," which is quoted later on. Other papers that also discuss the novel under this light are: "Surviving Marital Violence in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You", by B. Sasipriya. And also: "Marital Rape and Self-Sustainability in Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You," by J. Das. See full bibliographical details in References.



personally evaluated my legitimacy to reveal her story without explicit permission from her. She lives under permanent threat and is pressured to stay silent. For reasons that will be developed later, I suspect she perceives the violence she suffers as something understandable or even as something justifiable, and perhaps would not see why her story is considered worth being aired. If I have decided to reveal it is because I believe her ordeal needs to be heard, as it is by disclosing the stories of abuse that victims can reach the status of survivors.

Leaving aside for the time being how difficult it may be to transition from victim to survivor, it seems only sensible to acknowledge that not all sufferers can talk about the abuse they have taken, since physical and sexual violence are very traumatic matters. Both its intimate nature and the social stigma around it often make the sufferers feel ashamed, as Meena Kandasamy remarks in her novel *When I Hit You*, a story of endurance and survival of domestic violence: “women have found it easier to jump into fire, consume poison, blow themselves up as suicide bombers, than tell another soul about what happened” to them (217, p. 169). Thus, this paper will avoid dwelling on the brutality of the explicit physical and sexual acts of violence described both by the narrator of the novel and Sandhya as a gesture of respect towards their intimacy.

2. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

2.1. Naming the violence

The first issue when attempting to describe the forms of violence against women is to find a name for the phenomenon. It may seem a superfluous matter, but by using terms such as *male, gender or domestic violence* one might miss what many consider a fundamental factor when it comes to understanding the roots of violence against women: patriarchy, understood as “social arrangements that privilege males, where men as a group dominate women as a group, both structurally and ideologically” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 557). Barker suggests that *male or gender violence* are rather descriptive terms as they refer to demographic characteristics – men are the main perpetrators of physical and sexual violence against women –⁴ but they ignore its structural

⁴ According to the *Global status report on violence prevention* published by the World Health Organisation in 2014. See full bibliographical details in References.



dimensions. As for *domestic*, it not only overlooks these dimensions but also neglects the importance of male domination in the hierarchical system that patriarchal societies have established (Barker, 2016, p. 316). In line with conflict theories, “humans are engaged in a constant struggle for status and are continually working to maximise their advantage” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 558). In this context of domination encouraged by patriarchy, violence against women perpetrated by men can be seen as a tool to secure their position of power over women instead of as an anomaly. Although this paper focuses on analysing two specific cases of violence against women within the same cultural context but of different social status, it is based on the premise that “every act of violence against women is embedded in a larger social organisation” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 556). This is the case in Tamil Nadu, an acutely patriarchal society where women, especially those of lower status, suffer from many forms of violence from a very early age in life and are often not allowed and very rarely encouraged to make decisions for themselves, which results in them not having a (public) voice. Since the violence studied here, whether it is perpetrated by family members and/or the victim’s partner, is considered structural rather than individual, this paper is going to refer to it as patriarchal violence.

In *When I Hit You*, the protagonist, raised by an urban family of Communist beliefs, moves to a different state (Kerala) to study a Master’s, falls in love with a man, breaks up, moves back to Chennai, meets another man and marries him. All these actions were planned and taken by her and, even if they were occasionally frowned upon by her parents and their “intermittent grumbling” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 37); Her freedom in choosing her own path is undeniable. Sandhya, however, was instructed from a very early age to be out of public sight as much as possible and was forbidden to play outside the house; when older, she was given house chores that would prevent her from spending time with her friends. She was never encouraged to study and never considered working outside her family home. Her parents arranged her marriage,⁵ and she was only allowed to see a picture of her husband-to-be and meet him once in company of the

⁵ Statistics about arranged marriages in Tamil Nadu are hard to find. According to a poll published by the Indian media company New Delhi Television Ltd, 59% of Tamils prefer arranged marriages. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ndtv-mid-term-poll-does-india-still-want-arranged-marriages-498043>. See full bibliographical details in References.



two families involved in the marriage before the ceremony. Sandhya was never asked about what she wanted for her life. Her will was always silenced; her agency was always denied. In this section, it has become obvious that the difference of status between the protagonist of the novel and Sandhya has had an effect on the amount of autonomy they have had since they were children. The nameless narrator has had more agency than Sandhya since she has had more voice and visibility. As we know, however, this agency and subsequent sense of self-empowerment did not prevent her from suffering abuse. In order to discuss to what extent this initial advantage in relation to Sandhya may have contributed to overcoming abuse and becoming a survivor, it is necessary to contextualise this violence, as it must be understood as a structural phenomenon.

2.2. Contextualising patriarchal violence

2.2.1. Subalternity and Patriarchy

Interestingly, a parallel can be drawn between the situation of women in Tamil Nadu even today and the figure of the subaltern in colonised India. According to Smith, Antonio Gramsci, when he coined the term subalternity, was not only referring to the proletariat but to all those who lacked autonomous political power, thus including “people from different religions or cultures, or those existing at the margins of society” (Smith, 2010, p. 39). This extended reading of subalternity was taken further by Chakrabarti and Spivak, who problematized the concept and claimed that “it would be difficult quickly to claim a subaltern in First World space” (1990, p. 143), thus recontextualising it within the frame of colonial and postcolonial territories and including women in the equation: “if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1998, p. 83).

Tamil culture, one of many in multicultural India, does not escape the patriarchal nature of Indian societies, which perpetuate strong gender stereotypes that lead many to assume that male domination is a matter of duty, and violence, simply a tool for control:

India exemplifies the patriarchal system in which women and men are expected to fulfil distinctly different roles from birth. Women are trained, from a young age, to submit and



acquiesce to the desires of their valued male counterparts while men are trained to dominate and guide their female counterparts who are often viewed as childlike, vulnerable, and easily led astray. (Tichy et al, 2009, p. 546)

This system, by no means exclusive to India, applies to Tamil Nadu too and would certainly resonate with both Sandhya and Kandasamy's narrator. Sandhya has always been instructed by her father and her brothers on what to do and particularly not to do: since her childhood she was asked to wash the clothes of the whole family and help with the cleaning and the cooking, which consequently prevented her from having enough time for her interests and personal relationships with anyone outside the family household. The nameless protagonist of the novel has had more freedom in her life but has also been instilled with the patriarchal values of a society that tends to reduce the role of women to that of a meek companion compliant to the desires of the men around them, no matter how unreasonable they might be: "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. 209). Patriarchal attitudes are well entrenched within society, and, in this context, women are made to believe themselves incapable of making the right decisions:

Throughout the lifetime, an Indian woman is guided and supervised by the male head of the family, whether it is her father, guardian, or husband. This moray is based on a common perception that women are ruled by emotions and irrational thoughts and, thus, in need of guidance by a more rational being in order to thrive. (Mahalingham et al, 2007, p. 599; quoted in Tichy et al, 2009, p. 558)

This alleged weak nature of women, portrayed incessantly in literary and scientific texts throughout history worldwide, is not the only prejudice with which women have to fight against: in Tamil culture, the existence of a caste system encourages the idea that those at the bottom of the social scale – if not out of it, as explained below – are impure because their "jobs put them in contact with dirt and death and make them polluted" (García Rodríguez, 2022, p. 8). Women, relegated to the very bottom in a patriarchal society, are considered even more polluted because of their very nature. In this respect, Kandasamy's narrator explains the following:



In Tamil culture, menstruation pollutes the body for a period of three days. After childbirth, the body remains polluted for eleven days; and for the death of a blood relative, we [women] are considered soiled for sixteen days. For sex with another man before marriage, a husband considers his wife polluted for a lifetime. (2017, p. 170)

In a society where women are considered weak and polluted, violence against them seems inevitable: “research on domestic violence (...) shows that essentialist beliefs about gender, such as sex typing and beliefs in masculinity and gender ideals are among the best predictors of violence against women” (Mahalingam et al, 2007, p. 599). According to these scholars, there is a direct correlation between non-egalitarian attitudes towards gender and the acceptance of violence as a means of domination: “men who score highly on measures of male power and believe in a traditional view of gender (e.g., that women should be limited to reproductive and family roles) also endorsed violence as a means of controlling women’s behaviour” (2007, p. 599).⁶ Thus, Tamil women, as any other Indian women and many more worldwide for that matter, suffer the consequences of a severely patriarchal society and are thereby exposed to discrimination, forced submission and violence, very much like the subaltern in once-colonised nations. Nonetheless, there is a substantial difference between the marginality of the subaltern and women in India. No matter how little agency they may have, they do not dwell in the margins of society: since they are in charge of the running of every family household on a regular basis, they hold society together and are very much at the centre of it.

2.2.2. The influence of caste

As suggested above, brutality against women is not exclusively Tamil, Indian, or Asian. Leaving aside the unfortunate universality of the phenomenon, for the purpose of this paper it is important to consider the specificities of Tamil society and explore how caste can have an impact on patriarchal violence. Confirming my own perception as an observer in my recurrent stays in Tamil Nadu, several scholars have shown that there are profound differences between women of high and low status, women from urban and rural areas, and women who belong to a high caste

⁶ Mahalingam et al. reached this conclusion after analysing Graham-Bermann, S. A., & Brescoll, V.’s study: “Gender, Power, and Violence: Assessing the Family Stereotypes of the Children of Batterers.” (See Works Cited for full bibliographical details).



versus those considered outcastes. Leaving aside whether these differences have an influence on the chances of becoming a victim of abuse, which is to be analysed later, the caste system bears great importance in Tamil culture and is connected with patriarchal violence. García Rodríguez provides a brief account of the system:

The four groups that come from Brahma's body (the Hindu God of creation), are the 'savarna', meaning they belong to one of the varnas, and the ones that fall out of the system and do not belong to any varna, but are still Hindus, are called 'avarna'. Thus, we have the savarna groups: Brahmins / Brahmans (higher castes), Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras (lower castes); and the 'avarna': the Dalits, who are outside the system and are considered outcastes. (García Rodríguez, 2022, p. 16)

Although García Rodríguez admits that "this is a simplistic way of understanding and viewing what caste is" (2022, p. 8), the explanation proves the existence of a system of social categorisation that is unique to India, although it varies in application depending on regional, educational, and economic backgrounds. The existence of the caste system perpetuates social inequality and promotes domination upon the groups considered inferior or even excluded from the system.

Sandhya is a Dalit and "the Dalit woman occupies a space that is subordinated to the authority of the community and its needs, and therefore (...) her subjectivity cannot be equated with a bourgeois individual subject and her story" (Nair, 2008, p. 179). Nair clearly implies that Dalit women undergo more layers of discrimination than women of higher status. Assuming that most Dalit women live in rural areas, where educational levels are lower,⁷ the risk of becoming a victim of patriarchal violence increases. As Ram et al confirm, it is more likely for a woman to receive violence from her partner if they have a poor educational background (2019, p. 363). Sandhya is a Tamil speaker and also speaks a little bit of English. However, she struggles when it comes to reading and can hardly write a sentence in her own language; she does not know how to

⁷ The *Household Social Consumption on Education report* published in 2022 by the National Service Scheme of India states that 21.7% of urban Indians are holders of a university degree, whereas only 5.7% of rural Indians do. See full bibliographical information in References.



use a computer either. This connection between patriarchal violence and low levels of education is supported by figures in the National Family Health Survey published by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare of India reflecting the data collected in 2020-2021, which reveals that 42.2% of ever-married women aged 18-49 years have experienced spousal violence in rural areas in Tamil Nadu, whereas the percentage in urban areas is 32.9. Other studies such as the one conducted by Tichy et al, however, question the idea that women in rural areas suffer more violence than those who live in the city. When collecting other data in relation to their study, they state the following:

Despite the fact that many higher-class women have been educated and ‘westernised’,⁸ they are expected to be well versed in westernised values as well as traditional Indian values. When these traditional norms are not abided by, women and their families may be subjected to severe ramifications such as family alienation and domestic violence. (Tichy et al, 2009, p. 548)⁹

These scholars suggest that higher class women also have the pressure of abiding by the ancestral social norms of the group they identify with, as otherwise they would probably experience discrimination from their families and friends. These social norms are clearly patriarchal and leave more privileged women also unprotected in a universe of male supremacy. Kandasamy’s work puts the focus on how the values of a patriarchal society make women prone to suffer abuse and does not distinguish between women of different status. In the interview mentioned before, she emphasised how her high social status did not help her escape abuse: being “feminist, outspoken, successful [and] loud” (Self, 2019, para. 4) was no protection against violence. Thus, despite the results provided by some studies – such as the one conducted by Ram et al – and the figures published by the Indian Government asserting that women of low status have more chances of suffering from violence against women, other studies – such as Tichy et al’s – and the experience of Meena Kandasamy challenge this idea. In any case, what is clear is

⁸ This was concluded by Omvedt, G. in *Caste, class, and women's liberation in India*, in 1975. See full bibliographical information in References.

⁹ Hypothesised by Mitra A. & Sing P. in *Human capital attainment and gender empowerment: The Kerala paradox*, in 2007.



that a caste-based society that perpetuates social inequality and encourages domination over the less privileged is the perfect ground for the proliferation of patriarchal violence, which aims to keep women under the control of allegedly stronger and purer male counterparts.

2.4. Forms of patriarchal violence

2.4.1. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Patriarchal violence against women can present itself in multiple forms. As this paper critically discusses the differences between two Tamil married women of different status, its first focus of study is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), defined by the United Nations as:

A pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviours that frighten, intimidate, terrorise, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. (United Nations, 2023, para. 1)

As mentioned above, the (Indian) National Family Health Survey states that 38.1% of married women in Tamil Nadu¹⁰ have experienced physical and sexual violence in their homes. The study claims that Tamil Nadu ranks second in India in relation to domestic violence against women. Also, more than two-thirds of married women in Tamil Nadu are said to be afraid of their husbands due to spousal violence. These three pieces of data are enough to establish that the presence of IPV in Tamil Nadu is alarming. It is even more alarming to see its ominous presence as a consequence of a society where hierarchy and domination is encouraged. As several scholars state, this violence against women “mainly occurs as it is used by the abuser to maintain power and control within the intimate relationship” and is more common in developing nations such as India because of the deep-rooted patriarchal, conventional cultural norms that see women as second-rate citizens (Sangeetha et al, 2022, p. 1). Although not exclusively in India, IPV

¹⁰ This percentage does not distinguish between rural and urban areas.



violence has peaked over the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as the lockdowns entrapped many women with their abusers (Evans, 2020, p. 2303).

This paper tackles violence against women in Tamil Nadu exerted as a means to perpetuate male power and control over them and, as mentioned before, does not intend to linger on the detailed recounts of physical and sexual violence out of respect for the intimacy of the victims. For this reason, it is going to focus on the tactics used by the perpetrators of violence in order to dominate their victims rather than on the specific acts of brutality. In this sense, the Duluth Model¹¹ and its Power and Control Wheel¹² can help illustrate how both actors seize and exert control of the agency of the victims. The Wheel describes eight different tactics that actors of physical and sexual violence use. The three most relevant tactics to study here for the purpose of this paper are: coercion and threats, emotional abuse and isolation. As for the first tactic, the two women under study here have provided examples. In the case of Sandhya, once she moved back to her parents' house with her son and without her husband after being rescued by her brothers, her husband threatened her several times, on the phone, to furtively go to her village and kidnap her and the kid so that they could be back under his control. In the novel, the use of coercion and threats is even more cruelly refined: the protagonist's husband tells her that giving her new phone number "indiscriminately" would put his life in danger as the Communist political activist that he is. He says to her: "you will become a widow overnight. Do you want any of that?" (Kandasamy, 20175, p. 8). This coercive behaviour shows his obscure appetite for control over his wife's life.

Using emotional abuse is the second tactic specified in the Power and Control Wheel employed by perpetrators of patriarchal violence that neatly applies in both this paper's case studies. The nameless narrator of the book puts his wife down and intentionally makes her feel bad about herself on numerous occasions, such as when insinuating that her existence is close to

¹¹ The Duluth Model is "an ever-evolving way of thinking about how a community works together to end domestic violence" active since the early 1980's in Minnesota, USA. <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/>. See full bibliographical details in References.

¹² Its Power & Control Wheel is used as a tool to understand the overall pattern of abusive and violent behaviours and has been published by the United Nations in 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse>. See full bibliographical details in References.



purposeless in order to undermine her self-esteem: “now go, make yourself useful. I’m hungry” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 181). On her part, Sandhya, who has always expressed her dislike for her dark skin in a culture where fair skin is associated with wealth, has often been reminded by her husband of how black her skin is; undoubtedly, an attempt to belittle her.

The third relevant tactic identified by the Wheel is using isolation. With regard to Sandhya, she explicitly asked me once not to ever send her any telephone messages alleging that her husband, who was not living in the village over my stay, could eventually see that a man had been writing to her and he would not like it. When Sandhya was living with her husband and seemingly exposed to his brutality, asked her good friend, the founder of the NGO I collaborate with, not to call her. It is only sensible to read her requests as a sign that both the NGO coordinator and I are perceived by her husband as a dangerous influence, since he has heard enough about us to know that we always encourage her to empower herself. In what can only be understood as an attempt to prevent that, he intends to draw her away from us. As for the nameless narrator of *When I Hit You*, she is gradually isolated through demands that are always fallaciously justified by her husband. For instance, she is asked to close her Facebook account because using social media, according to him, is an act of narcissism (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 50). Also, she is urged to disclose all her personal passwords under the pretext that such a gesture would be proof of her trust in him (2017, p. 54). Then, when she is encouraged to change phones and consequently lose her old number with all her contacts, he argues that keeping a Tamil number would be more costly than getting a new one from Karnataka, her new home (217, p. 57). After that, her access to the internet is limited to three hours a week to help her overcome an alleged addiction (2017, p. 59). Finally, a few weeks later, all her email history is purposely erased in order to be made “free of the burden of memory” (217, p. 139). All these measures leave her confined in the house with almost no access to external contacts: isolation is accomplished.

Both the narrator of *When I Hit You* and Sandhya, through threats and coercion, emotional abuse and isolation, are subjugated to the tactics of their husbands. Consequently, fear, low self-esteem and loneliness endanger their ability to act against their aggressors. Then, apart from



the three tactics already seen, the most efficient way for the perpetrators of violence to disarm their victims is by keeping them both as invisible and silent as possible. Kandasamy's narrator illustrates this to perfection: first, she details how she tames her hair into ponytails with "no sign of disobedience" and dresses down for her husband as "he approves of dowdiness" (2017, p. 15); then she states: "I should be blank" (2017, p. 16). As for how he silences the nameless narrator of the novel, there are numerous examples. The most self-explanatory one is an instance at a doctor's cabinet: the protagonist's husband has urged her to start a fertility treatment; the couple is at the doctor's office; the husband and the (female) doctor discuss the narrator's potential pregnancy, which she does not want, without not even once addressing a single word or asking a single question to her; her feelings or views on the matter are irrelevant to them; the narrator concludes: "as long as a woman cannot speak, as long as those to whom she speaks do not listen, the violence is unending" (2017, p. 197). Her husband speaks for her, and thereby has control over her; he owns the narrative of both their relationship and the abuse. Looking back, the narrator manages to understand how control was exerted on her and addresses her husband:

It was your tongue in your mouth that forced me into silence. It was your tongue in your mouth that forced me into submission. And then, it was your tongue that forced me.
(Kandasamy, 2017: 173)

The narrator seems to see clearly how her tormentor succeeded in belittling her to the point of obliterating any sense of self-empowerment that could have allowed her to build an argument against his narrative.

As for Sandhya, her history of forced silence dates from a much earlier period of her life, as it will be developed over the following section. As mentioned before, Sandhya has never had a voice which could be listened to within her family; since she was a child, she has been instructed by her mother on how to work for the comfort of the men in the family and has been drilled by the same men on what to do: stay indoors; do not be seen. Sandhya spent most of her childhood looking out the street through the holes left in diamond pattern in the façade wall of the family house; her head had to be covered with a shawl in a way that her face could only be partially



seen. Her friend, the NGO founder and project coordinator, accidentally spotted her through the holes of that wall for the first time more than twenty years ago, when Sandhya was a child. When I met her for the first time, fifteen years ago, she was in the exact same place, peeping through the holes of the façade wall with a shawl half-covering her head. She has always been encouraged to be invisible to the eyes of the villagers. Within this context, silencing the victim is not even required. When Sandhya married, she had already experienced what it was to be both invisible and silenced. Unfortunately, tacitly accepting this endemic situation of oppression did not save her from the IPV violence she was going to suffer. If anything, it may have made it easier for her husband to exert control over her, as her sense of empowerment had slowly been eroded by Family Violence for years.

Together with IPV, Family Violence is a crucial form of patriarchal violence that perpetuates the submission of women and hence will be discussed in the following section. To bring this section to a close, it can be concluded that IPV violence, as seen in the cases of Sandhya and Kandasamy's narrator, aims at leaving its victims with practically no visibility, no voice, and thereby no agency: under the brutal effects of unrelenting attack, a victim has no capacity to defend herself, argue or contradict her oppressor and is at the mercy of her abuser. In this sense, it can be said that once a woman starts suffering the abuse of her intimate partner, social status does not make a difference.

2.4.2. Family violence

IPV is not the only form of violence endured by women in Tamil Nadu. As Ram et al's study also shows, 87.4% of women perceive controlling behaviour by others in the household (2019, p. 364). This control is sometimes exerted by other members of the family, and not always by men. Within the context of marriage, common practices such as "village exogamy" – marrying the bride with a husband from a distant village making her a stranger in a new home – isolate the new wife (Rao, 2015, p. 416). Her behaviour is going to be scrutinised by both men and women to ensure that she performs the role of the submissive, discreet, hard-working wife that she is expected to be. They will also make sure she complies "to acceptable and authorised roles and



norms of conduct” (Gorringe, 2018, p. 4). These norms ensure control over the woman and perpetuate the mandates of patriarchy, in which honour has a role to play: as Gupte suggests, caste honour is “largely centred on the behaviour of women” (2013, p. 73), and “vested in male (family and/or conjugal) control over women and specifically women’s sexual conduct: actual, suspected or potential” (Welchman & Hossain, 2005, p. 4). In a society of well entrenched patriarchal values, “men lose honour through the behaviour of women from their families” (Rege et al. 2013, p. 36), and as “IPV is regarded as a private matter, [...] considerations of familial setup and cultural norms appear to take precedence over women’s interests” (Sangeetha, 2022, p. 7).

The idea that men can lose honour through the acts of women is clearly exemplified in *When I Hit You*: the protagonist’s father, being fully aware of the fact that her daughter is suffering abuse from her husband, asks her not to raise her voice against her husband and adds the following: “if you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 158). To him, then, the shame he may feel if she leaves her husband is more important than her daughter’s well-being. In the case of Sandhya, the men in her family also feel she is responsible for an anomaly that brings shame to the family: she has broken a patriarchal mandate and has failed to fulfil her duty as a wife when abandoning her husband. Even though it was her brothers themselves who actively rescued her, the fact that she is currently living in her family household is a constant source of tension: they either ignore or disrespect her and, what is worse, she is constantly reminded that she does not belong there and should get back to her husband, ignoring the fact that her presence in the house was originally seen as the only way to save her life. As a consequence of what is perceived as an anomaly and a sign of weakness, she experiences the reprimands of her father and brothers, and indirectly, of her sisters-in-law; she is often required to stay as far away from the public scene as possible – often literally commanded to stay inside the house and not come out. In summer 2022, two years after having returned to her family home after the rescue, she was invited to spend a day out with us – the NGO’s founder and myself; she accepted the invitation and looked excited about the plan. However, on the same day of the outing, she cancelled. Asked why, she refused to explain. Eventually, she revealed that her father had asked her to stay and take care of the shop the family has at the



entrance of the house. This sounded odd as the shop is always attended by her father. Our impression was that he did not approve of the outing as it involved being seen and intended to be a pleasurable experience for Sandhya. Luckily, she has the support of her mother, but she, as a woman, does not feel entitled to contradict either her sons or her husband despite her love for her daughter.

Kandasamy also recounts episodes in which the narrator's parents seem to ignore the wishes of her daughter and place her husband's interests before hers. The pressure that she receives is of a very different nature, as she lives far away from home and has been able to make her own decisions. Nevertheless, it seems clear that her parents intend to have an influence on the way their daughter should act in relation to her husband. Shortly after the wedding, when the protagonist of the novel feels that her husband is starting to control her excessively and lets her mother know, the mother quickly attempts to justify his behaviour, suggesting that "he's probably feeling insecure" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 56) and asking her "to be complacent." "He's doing this for your own good", her parents concur. By stating such ideas, they seem to believe that, to them, it is her husband's duty to guide her and their daughter's obligation to keep quiet and obey.

As shown so far, violence against women in Tamil Nadu is intrinsically related to a highly hierarchical society where male domination is encouraged. In this sense, both IPV and Family violence can be seen as mechanisms used by a patriarchal system of organisation that intends to silence the victims and ensure control over their agency.

Once explained what patriarchal violence consists of and how it is inflicted, it is relevant to explore the role of institutions in the matter, since there is social consensus that all victims, regardless of their socioeconomic background, are more likely to become survivors if they receive help.

3. OVERCOMING VIOLENCE

3.1. Acknowledging abuse



Before giving an overview of the resources available to victims in Tamil Nadu today, it seems pertinent to bring attention to the following question: how easy is it for victims to acknowledge abuse? In Tamil Nadu, many women may struggle to identify the violence exerted by their partners as a crime if they understand their husbands' violent actions merely as a way of fulfilling their duty as benevolent guides for the weaker: "the benevolence that is perceived to characterise the 'guidance' of women often overshadows the identification of abusive application of these roles when they do occur, not only for the perpetrator but also for the victim" (Tichy et al, 2009, p. 549), to the extent that "this paradoxical concept of benevolent support through subjugation may make it difficult for women to correctly distinguish what is acceptable from what would be deemed an abuse of power". If Sandhya answered "yes" to questions such as whether her partner embarrasses or makes fun of her in front of her friends and family or whether he treats her roughly – including grabbing, pushing, pinching, shoving or hitting her,¹³ it would not necessarily mean she would consider these actions objectionable: according to the National Family Health Survey cited before, 79.8% women in the state of Tamil Nadu felt that it is acceptable for husbands to beat their wives. These figures do not distinguish between rural or urban areas. However, considering that the population in Tamil Nadu is distributed almost equally in this respect,¹⁴ it can be assumed that this feeling is not only shared by women in rural areas. As for whether urban women belonging to higher classes are more or less likely to feel the same, Tichy et al. argue that women with higher levels of education and exposure to other influences find it easier to recognise abuse (Tichy et al, 2009, p. 549).

Such is the case of the protagonist of *When I Hit You*: she finds out, two weeks after the wedding, that her husband has been replying to his emails by signing both their names at the end of every message. She feels outraged and tells her mother about it (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 56); this reaction shows that the protagonist acknowledges the abuse. In this case, there is a clear difference between Sandhya –who tends to normalise her husband's brutality against her, as explained further below – and Kandasamy's character, who can quickly identify the anomalous

¹³ These questions are part of the study: *What is domestic abuse? Covid 19 response*, published by the United Nations in 2023. See full bibliographical information in References.

¹⁴ According to the Tamil Nadu Population Census 2011, 48.4% people lived in urban regions while 51.6% in rural areas.



behaviour of her husband as a reason for concern. Scholars such as Tichy et al, however, identify other difficulties that affect higher-status women like her: “Some high-status victims reported that law enforcement authorities were unwilling to assist when abuse was reported due to disbelief or fear of the ramifications that could result from angering the high-status husband” (Tichy et al, 2009, p. 549). “Disbelief” in the account of the woman and “fear” of the rich male partner are examples of how fixed patriarchal values are and how unequal Tamil society is, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of class. In any case, as exemplified by the contrast between the protagonist of the novel and Sandhya, there is a difference between being abused and perceiving oneself to be a victim of abuse. In this sense, women of higher status and more solid education seem to acknowledge the anomalous behaviour of the actor(s) of violence faster and that can increase their chances of reaching out for help. This could easily lead one to think that the main research question of this paper has already been answered: as a result of having had more agency throughout their upbringing, women of higher status and better education have more chances of being aware sooner of the danger they are in. As discussed in sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 in this paper, this agency and sense of self-empowerment does not necessarily protect the victim from abuse. However, assuming that higher awareness means more access to assistance is questionable: 81.1% of married women victims in Tamil Nadu neither informed nor sought any help from anyone, according to the National Family Health Survey.

3.2. Measures to combat patriarchal violence

If a Tamil woman gathers the courage to seek help and report the violence she is experiencing, she can resort to the authorities and hope for the efficiency of governmental institutions that aim to implement the legislation in place, based on the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, passed in 2005. This Act establishes the policies to be adopted by institutions such as police forces, medical facilities and service providers. Since 2013, the Ministry of Women and Child Development of India has also created a telephone helpline which is now available in all states. These actions are often perceived as insufficient or inefficient by both activists and scholars. Tichy et al, for instance, claim that India “legally bans the physical and emotional harming of an intimate partner in most instances while providing virtually no



social mechanisms to support this ban” (2009, p. 547). The judiciary system is also to be questioned, as a court decision by a judge is unlikely to be favourable to the woman’s case:

Many women in India know that when it comes to reporting domestic violence they have two choices: to report the violence to a justice system that is not in her favour and hope for justice or to divorce her abuser and hope for child support to survive. (Tichy et al, 2009: 549)¹⁵

As for the first choice, the authors seem to refer to the limited presence of a gender perspective within the Indian judicial system, which certainly makes patriarchal violence harder to prove. This issue is currently controversial in “full democracies”¹⁶ as well, but the idea implied here is that the more patriarchal a society is, the less sympathetic judges may be. As for the second choice, the mention of the need for child support in order to survive reveals the situation in which a woman can find herself if she decides to live her life as a divorcée: financial struggle, family alienation and discrimination are likely to be common features in her new life. That could be the case if she ever gathers the strength to disobey her partner and request a divorce.

In *When I Hit You*, there are several references to the defencelessness women experience when reporting violence against them to the judicial system. First, there is a reference to a real court case, the Suryanelli sex scandal, in which a sixteen-year-old girl was raped by forty-two men over a period of forty days in Kerala, in 1996. The narrator denounces that the police did not thoroughly investigate the case and the High Court, years later, questioned the character of the victim (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 219). As for the narrator herself, she explains that she reported her case to the police, but as she writes the Metropolitan Magistrate Court has failed to call it for more than two years as her ex-husband has moved to South Africa and cannot be deported. Besides, the protagonist expresses her disappointment with the judiciary and censures the callous attitude of the Public Prosecutor in charge of defending her, who at some point during the

¹⁵ Tichy et al. are quoting Ahmed-Gosh in “Chattels of society: marital violence in India. Violence Against Women. .See full bibliographical information in References.

¹⁶ UNESCO’s Global Democracy Index 2020 rates the quality of democratic practices on all countries in the world and classifies them as “full” (for instance Spain and Denmark) or flawed (for instance India and The United States of America). See full bibliographical information in References. <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends/global-democracy-index>.



investigation asked her if she was jealous of her ex-husband's new girlfriend (2017, p. 233). Her conclusions are devastating: "the quest for justice does not lead anywhere" (2017, p. 230). As for Sandhya, she has never expressed the possibility of reporting the abuse she suffers to any institution, and claims that she hopes her husband will eventually change his behaviour towards her. In this case, the difference between the two women is obvious: the protagonist of the novel acknowledged abuse, got divorced, reported the case of abuse, put distance between her and the tormentor and, as developed later, concentrated on her healing after such a traumatic experience. Sandhya, still today, believes her husband is a good man who is simply going through a bad patch: she has not even reached step one, which is acknowledgement of the abuse.

Apart from governmental institutions, there are self-help groups especially focused on women that victims can turn to if they are willing to seek help. These groups, well entrenched in rural areas mainly inhabited by outcast populations, find their origins in the struggle for more rights for the Dalits. The tradition of activism for Dalit rights comes from the beginning of the twentieth century, and a relevant figure of the movement is B.R. Ambedkar, who, as long ago as in 1927, addressed women directly in his speeches and encouraged them both to get rid of all recognisable signs of 'Dalitness' in their appearance and to ensure education for their daughters (García Rodríguez, 2022, pp. 24-25).¹⁷ Since those days, several Post-Ambedkar movements, for instance the Dalit Panthers,¹⁸ have aimed to defend women's rights and have achieved remarkable success in self-help groups. However, they have certain limitations: in 2009, the activist and writer Urmila Pawar, when recalling her early days in activism and self-help groups, stated the following: "Women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement, and the women's movement was indifferent to the issues in the Dalit movement. Even today things have not changed!" (García Rodríguez, 2022, p. 65). Despite the fact that women are given an opportunity to get involved and that one of the 2013 amendments to the

¹⁷ García Rodríguez quoted Pawar & Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, 2006. See full bibliographical information in References.

¹⁸ A social organisation born in the 1970's that sought to challenge caste discrimination; it later became a political party still active today, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK).



Constitution of India makes the presence of 33% of women in local political bodies mandatory,¹⁹ there are factors that hinder the progress of female leaders who are in touch with the real concerns of Dalit women: even within these groups there is a tendency to favour the leadership of educated urbanites which, perhaps involuntarily, allows the weight of patriarchy prevail, as claimed by Gorrige (2017, p. 151). This may discourage less educated women to join these groups and ask for help if they are suffering patriarchal violence of any kind.

Thus, notwithstanding the work done both by governmental and non-governmental organisations, many voices claim that this is not enough to reach all women in need of help. Nowadays, however, there are also powerful Non-Profit Organisations accommodated by a scheme developed by the Government of Tamil Nadu called *Mahalir Thittam*, a socio-economic empowerment programme for women.²⁰ Many of these organisations, such as Women's Collective,²¹ with more than 100.000 members in Tamil Nadu, put emphasis on the fight against violence towards women and take pride in the fact that their members are mostly Dalit, showing that the voice of many critical activists is being heard.

Despite the importance of all these measures, institutions and groups that offer support to women only represent one of the many stages a victim must pass through in order to become a survivor: before reaching these sources of assistance, they need to recognise their circumstances as anomalous, and then have the means and/or gather the courage to report them. Afterwards, they need to believe that this institutional aid can protect them from their abuser(s) and, if that is the case, help them recover from the trauma and prepare for the potential discrimination that may occur among members of their own family, friends and fellow citizens. Looking back at the main research question of this paper and based on the contrast between the situation of the narrator of

¹⁹ The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution concerning the Panchayati Raj System in Independent India were passed in 1992 and 1993 respectively.

²⁰ This programme was set up in 2013 and is implemented by Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd through each district in the State of Tamil Nadu. NGOs can resort to this resource if interested in running self-help groups. See the website for the Nilgiris district as an example here: <https://nilgiris.nic.in/departments/tamil-nadu-state-rural-livelihoods-mission/>.

²¹ Women's Collective was registered under Tamil Nadu Societies registration act 1975 on 15th September, 2001 as a not for Profit Voluntary organisation. <https://www.womenscollective.net/>. See full bibliographical information in References.



the novel and Sandhya concerning their ability to take actions to overcome their situation, it can be said that: a woman of higher status and better education has more chances of seeking help as, throughout her upbringing and before marriage, she has had more agency. As shown in section 2.4.1 in this paper, she has had more voice and visibility that has given her enough sense of empowerment to, when confronted with abuse as an adult, take actions to reverse her situation and, despite the difficulties, start the process of healing.

3.3. *Writing as healing: Meena Kandasamy's When I Hit You*

As it has been shown above, the path to follow for a victim of patriarchal violence who seeks help within institutions that can potentially protect them from the abuse they suffer is long and arduous. Unfortunately, Sandhya is far away from taking that path, as she still justifies and normalises her husband's behaviour. The protagonist of *When I Hit You*, in contrast, has left her husband, reported the case to justice, and most importantly, does not perceive herself as a victim anymore. Nevertheless, the fact that the narrator has overcome the fear and has moved away from the influence of her ex-husband does not mean that the suffering has simply disappeared: "Intimate Partner Violence (physical, sexual, and emotional) causes serious short and long-term physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health problems for women" (Ram et al, 2019, p. 362), often medically diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Once a victim has managed to put distance with the perpetrator of violence, she needs to heal. Healing from trauma is not a straightforward process. Among many other therapeutic resources, writing as a healing tool can be considered an option. Over the last four decades, especially after the research work of James Pennebaker, a social psychologist, "writing therapy has shown therapeutic effects in the elaboration of traumatic events" (Ruini & Mortara, 2022, p. 1). Pennebaker developed a method of expressive writing which is often referred to as the Pennebaker Paradigm.²² It consists of "putting feelings and thoughts into written words in order to cope with traumatic events or situations that yield distress" (Ruini & Mortara, 2022, p. 2). This method has been both applied

²² In 1986, James Pennebaker & S.K. Beall carried out a project based on expressive writing. It showed that writing about traumatic events resulted in improvements in physical and mental health. For full details, read Pennebaker's Beall's study: "Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease.". See full bibliographical information in References.



for physiological and psychological-related health issues (Glass et al, 2019, p. 241). It can be used in groups or individually and consists of a series of short prompts that encourage participants to write about their traumatic experience and guides them through four steps that aim to help them take four different perspectives:²³

(1) a direct dive into expressive writing about the trauma itself; (2) a second opportunity to express further, and potentially deeper, emotions about the trauma; (3) an invitation to view the trauma from a new or different perspective; and (4) encouragement to create a cohesive story about the trauma that will help them move forward. (Glass et al, 2019: 241)

The third and fourth perspectives of the Paradigm are interesting to analyse here as they can be related to Kandasamy's novel. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the story of the abusive marriage is told by a first-person nameless narrator, and it starts when she describes the new house where she moves into after the marriage. She explains:

It makes a perfect film set. And in some ways, that is how I think of it: it is easier to imagine this life in which I'm trapped as a film; it is easier when I imagine myself as a character. It makes everything around me appear less frightening; my experiences at a remove. (Kandasamy, 2017: 14)

Her words convey the presence of fear and the need for an emotional removal from the life she had in that house: four long months of abusive marriage. By expressing this, Meena Kandasamy, the author of the novel, invites herself, through the existence of a narrator, to view the trauma from a different perspective, as the Pennebaker Paradigm suggests. This different perspective is inherent to the mere existence of a narrator, essential in any story: the writer unloads the weight of the experienced trauma onto the shoulders of the protagonist and thus detaches herself from

²³ In order to make it accessible for general readers who wish to use the method by themselves, Pennebaker published a book: *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval*. See full bibliographical information in References.



the emotional burden that patriarchal violence makes victims bear. In *When I Hit You*, the author goes even further and adds a layer of sophistication to this perspective of the Pennebaker Paradigm: on several occasions throughout the novel, the narrator imagines her life as if it was a film: “And cut! I am the wife playing the role of an actress playing out the role of a dutiful wife watching my husband pretend to be the hero of the everyday” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 20). Here, not only the author but the narrator herself builds a narrative, in her case a cinematographic one, within the narrative of the story of abuse. This double layer of detachment from the real story of abuse helps the victim put even more distance from the victim she was and take a new or different perspective in relation to her traumatic experience.

As for the fourth perspective of the Paradigm, it reflects the importance of creating a cohesive story. From the very first line, the novel reveals the very reason why the narrator decides to write about her story of abuse: “my mother has not stopped talking about it” (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 3). Over the next few pages, the text unravels the threads of a completely biased and deceptive version of her daughter’s story of abuse that varies in degree of detail depending on the type of audience her mother has before her. The narrator denounces that her mother has created a parallel version of her abusive marriage and shares with the reader the first lesson that she learned as a writer: “Don’t let people remove you from your own story”. Then she adds: “I fear her [her mother’s] engaging narrative may override the truth” (2017, p. 9). Unravelling the truth is seen as essential; and she finally closes the first section of the book with the following: “I must take some responsibility over my own life. I must write the story” (2017, p. 10). The narrator highlights the importance of writing about one’s story so that nobody can change it. Thus, building a narrative of a traumatic event in written form is presented as a necessary means to take responsibility for one’s history and prevent others from distorting the facts and consequently the narrative of the victim’s experience. Ensuring control of the narrative of their story can help victims strengthen their self-esteem and thereby (re)gain their agency. Meena Kandasamy, as a victim and as an author, creates a cohesive narrative that tells a story of abuse. Merely by bringing herself in front of a computer or a piece of paper and writing about her trauma, no matter how realistically or creatively, the victim can find a way of moving



forward, a way towards healing, a way towards the consolidation of her status as a survivor. As the protagonist bluntly states: “It is by writing this that I can get over it” (2017, p. 82).

Thus, writing about their story of abuse can help victims see their traumatic experience from a different perspective, since the writing process necessarily involves detaching oneself through a narrator. Besides, creating a cohesive story can also contribute to the process of putting distance to the abuse suffered and thereby assist the victim in finding a way forward towards their emotional healing. As presented here, writing about her abuse in the shape of a cohesive story with a nameless narrator has helped Meena Kandasamy leave behind the victim she was and consolidate her status of survivor.

Also, by way of contrast, it has been explained how Sandhya, due to the weight of deeply entrenched patriarchal and rigidly hierarchical social values, has been mostly kept silent and invisible to the community both by her family and her husband. Her agency has been suppressed from a very early stage of life, which has prevented her from owning a sense of empowerment that could now help her acknowledge the criminal abuse she suffers and seek help. This acknowledgement cannot occur without agency. Her unresolved situation makes Sandhya stand in a position of extreme vulnerability: most members of her family continue to perceive her mere presence in her family home as an anomaly and make sure she is reminded of it daily. As for her husband, although he does not live in the village, he utters threats of returning and taking her and their son away with him. This would facilitate his position of power and control over her and prevent her from a hypothetical transition from victim to survivor.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After determining the patriarchal nature of the violence exerted on two very different women, this paper has contextualised, described, exemplified and critically discussed the mechanisms used by the perpetrators of violence in order to ensure the supremacy of male domination. It has also outlined the existing resources of support for the victims in Tamil Nadu and has finally focused on writing as a healing tool. In light of what has been shown in this research, it can be



concluded that, in order to help a victim of patriarchal violence in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in India, especially if her life resembles Sandhya's, oppressive views both towards status and gender need to be challenged. Those who are doomed to social exclusion because of the very structure of Tamil society, especially women in rural areas, need to both be given more agency throughout their childhood and encouraged to pursue their studies, which can contribute to their empowerment. It is only by empowering women that victims can recognise injustice and look out for help. Besides, the practice of arranged marriages and village exogamy needs to be eradicated so that women can have a say in their future and thus their agency can be guaranteed. This paper has shown how a woman of higher status has had more agency in her life before marriage. It is true that having more voice and visibility in her upbringing has not prevented her from suffering abuse. Nonetheless, it has helped her both acknowledge the abuse faster and find the self-empowerment needed in order to seek help, report the case to the authorities and work towards her healing. Thus, looking back at the main research question of this paper, it can be concluded that the difference in social status does not necessarily protect a woman from patriarchal violence. However, it does play a role in determining the chances of overcoming patriarchal violence in Tamil Nadu today. In this sense, it is in the hands of society to find a way to combine the preservation of tradition with the compliance of human rights in order to protect those less favoured within the community.

In order to ensure efficient support for victims who manage to both acknowledge and report situations of patriarchal violence, several conditions need to be met: firstly, governmental institutions need to continue improving the legislation that can protect the rights of women. In this sense, special emphasis needs to be put on ensuring its effective application – especially in the judiciary, where a flagrant lack of gender perspective often overrides the rights of the victims and their chances of proving abuse in court cases. Parallely, both governmental and non-governmental institutions need to ensure that their teams are made up of enough women of different origins – urban and rural – and status – lower and higher – so that victims can relate to them and thus perceive institutions as more approachable.



If victims do manage to get away from the abuse of their families and/or intimate partners, they are still likely to face discrimination from other citizens and institutions, and most importantly, to suffer the emotional consequences of a traumatic experience. In this respect, as demonstrated through my analysis of Meena Kandasamy's novel, writing can be used as a healing tool. Techniques such as the Pennebaker Paradigm can be effective: they aim to offer victims a way to emotionally detach themselves from the victim they have been and create a narrative along which to build their new status of survivors. By following this principle, Meena Kandasamy, an urbanite with a solid education, has been successful in contributing to her own emotional journey towards healing from the trauma caused by her abusive marriage. Sandhya, however, would struggle to use such a technique, due to her scarce sense of empowerment and especially to her poor educational background, which could challenge her ability to build a narrative of her abuse in written form. Nevertheless, the existence of a tradition of women self-groups in rural Tamil Nadu –mainly owed to the struggles of the Dalit movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, the advances of feminism worldwide and the work of social activists in the region–, gives room for hope. The Duluth Model presented above or other similar techniques within the frame of expressive writing could be adapted to the circumstances of women in a given area. These women, even if they have poor reading, writing and/or IT skills, could be encouraged to build and write a cohesive story of abuse, which could help them detach themselves from the damage caused by trauma and thereby embark on their journey towards their emotional healing.

Designing the structure of these writing therapeutic sessions, workshops or courses adapted to the circumstances of Dalit Tamil women from rural areas is a potential focus of further research on the matter. Furthermore, the implementation of measures to reinforce the presence of a gender perspective in governmental institutions, especially the judiciary, could also be another focal point of study to develop: cases in which women fail to prove their abuse in front of judges who may find it safer to side with their more powerful male partners or to give responsibility to the victim are, as seen in this paper, a controversial issue still today.



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