

**Rejecting 'the Feminine Mystique' in Quest for Self-fulfillment:
A Study of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of
the Writer as a Young Wife* and
Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived***

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Abstract

Meena Kandasamy and Anuradha Roy, two of the most gifted women writers in the literary arena of contemporary Indian English fiction, have candidly manifested their female protagonists' definitive quest for self-fulfillment in a socio-cultural backdrop where seeking autonomy has often remained out of reach for women. In Indian tradition, a woman must give way to her husband in every respect with stoic acquiescence and servile obedience. However, the women in Meena Kandasamy and Anuradha Roy's novels, though curbed and crushed in abusive and dysfunctional marital surroundings, ultimately transcend traditional boundaries in an effort to establish their individuality. Betty Friedan (1921-2006), an American feminist writer, in her path-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) censures the concept of 'the feminine mystique', a mistakenly-held credo of femininity which deprives women of leading lives to their fullest potential by restricting their roles in society only as housewives and mothers. Betty Friedan, in her book, has also urged women to start a passionate journey towards self-fulfillment by rejecting the false image of the feminine mystique. This paper aims at analyzing the lives of women in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* and Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* who come up with indomitable courage and prowess to reject the passive and gaily content image of the feminine mystique with a view to having a full realization of their potential and individuality.

Keywords: Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, Anuradha Roy, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Feminine Mystique, Marriage, Wifehood, Motherhood, Self-fulfillment

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is credited with the prestige of heralding the advent of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s in the United States. Friedan starts with exploring an unnamed problem faced by the American women, the problem which teaches American women to "desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (Friedan 11). According to her, this strict adherence to the self-demeaning myth of femininity, which she has named "the feminine mystique" (Friedan 37), results in a "strange dissatisfied voice stirring within" (Friedan 21) women, a voice which does not fit with the pretty image of femininity expounded by the so-called experts (Friedan 22). This harmful image of the happy housewife makes women "deny the reality of the changing world" (Friedan 59). Friedan, a staunch feminist, ruefully deplors that "The end of the road, in an almost literal sense, is the disappearance of the heroine altogether, as a separate self and the subject of her own story" (Friedan 41). Friedan also censures "the woman who lives according to the feminine mystique that there is no road to achievement, or status, or identity, except the sexual one" as "sex does not really satisfy these needs" (Friedan 255). On the contrary, the woman actually turns herself into a sexual object by trying to find satisfaction in sex and "lives finally in a world of objects, unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself" (Friedan 255).

Towards the end of her monumental book, Betty Friedan champions a new life plan for the women who are forced to a parasitic existence depending on their husbands and children. She urges her women readers to tear away the trap of gender roles prescribed by the feminine mystique through serious education, commitment, and meaningful paid job, a "work in which she can grow as part of society" (Friedan 333). Finally, Friedan ends her book in a note of optimism giving vent to her conviction about a time "at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete" (Friedan 364). The enduring significance of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, besides its substantial contribution to the worldwide feminist movement, lies in the fact that it has since its publication continued to inspire women all over the world to establish self-identities and accomplish self-actualization by rejecting the pre-ordained gender roles imposed on them.

Meena Kandasamy's the Women's Prize for Fiction shortlisted novel *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is an agonizing yet gripping chronicle of an abusive marriage of an unnamed young wife, a married everywoman, who goes through intense physical and psychological torment at the hands of her monstrous husband for four months and eight days before running away to her parents' home and ultimately pursuing her dream of becoming a writer.

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Based on the loathsome experience of the author's own marriage, this novel is a semi-autobiographical account of a young wife who at the end excels in showing superhuman dexterity and enterprise to transcend the life-annihilating barriers posed by the inhuman cruelty and outrage of her husband. Prior to her marriage, the twenty-something young woman has had a failed mission "in the Quest of One True Love" (Kandasamy 36) with an ambitious politician of approaching forty. After being "used" by the politician in a love affair that almost robs her of her own individuality, she realizes, "In love, I inhabit an imaginary underground; I simultaneously exist and do not exist. I'm summoned into being when my lover needs me; I'm dismissed, like a genie sent back to its bottle, when he is done with me" (Kandasamy 115). She comes back to Chennai to her parents with a broken heart and soon meets the college lecturer, a former Maoist guerrilla, whom she marries thinking him to be a perfect husband behind whose liberal mask slyly hides a perfect monster.

In her husband's home in an alien town of Mangalore, she starts playing the role of 'a perfect wife'. Reverence, obedience, humility, adherence, tolerance, patience, modesty and dutifulness have become her exclusive codes of conduct. She almost loses her own identity as a separate being in her feminine role of a dutiful wife. Confined to the four walls of a house for the first time in her life, the wife imagines herself as a character in a film playing her destined role. She does everything the way her husband wants with no sign of disobedience. Consequently, she feels trapped and realizes, "There are not many things a woman can become when she is a housewife in a strange town that does not speak any of her mother-tongues. Not when her life revolves around her husband" (Kandasamy 13). Thus, the husband's mission of turning the wife into an appendage to his life gradually gains momentum and he turns into an absolute evil, first, by constantly slating her for her "petit bourgeois woman writer" (Kandasamy 80) mindset; and then by beating her up with laptop cable, leather belt and twisted electrical cables. He finds faults with everything she does.

Facing this savagery, the wife helplessly feels herself embodying the image of a self-effacing housewife. At this point, the young wife's state of physical and mental trauma is completely analogous to the experience of Tehmina Durrani's young female protagonist Heer in *Blasphemy* who after going through gruesome levels of torture by her spiritual leader husband Pir Sain muses, "He had spent me without replenishing anything. My eyes had become like stagnant swamps sunk in on themselves. My mouth had lost its words. My body felt senseless. It seemed like debris had collected in a dirt dump. The flesh would soon shift from my bones, then the skin would shift from the flesh, and yet the master required eternal youth" (Durrani 148).

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In an attempt to cut off all communication of her wife with the outside world, the husband at first makes her delete her Facebook account, which is “an act of career suicide” (Kandasamy 52) for a freelance woman writer. She is also forced to allow him to answer and delete her e-mails. Next, her SIM card has been changed and ultimately she is made to stop answering calls. When her husband relegates her to a state of absolute self-denial, she nauseously muses, “I feel robbed of my identity. I’m no longer myself if another person can so easily claim to be me, pretend to be me, and assume my life while we live under the same roof” (Kandasamy 55).

The husband’s incessant violence eventually makes her choose the strategy of silence. However, when she finds that her silence, the very thing her husband has commanded all along, only results in further physical abuse, rough sex, and disciplinary rape, she resorts to her intellectual ability to write in a desperate attempt to retain her identity and flout her husband. Very soon, trying to fight back in her own way, she starts writing letters to imaginary lovers following the pattern of erasing the words before her husband comes back at lunch. Surprisingly, her “nothing except a housewife” (Kandasamy 93) reality does not manage to rob her of her words. She muses, “I know that I have already escaped the present and that gives me hope, I just have to wait for this to end and I can write again, and I know that I am going to be writing about this, I know that this is going to end” (Kandasamy 87-88). Her sense of resistance makes her think, “With me, at this moment, I feel only the relish of rebellion, the comfort of long-forgotten words that now make me feel safe, feel loved” (Kandasamy 97).

Realizing the futility of finding an escape route from this wretched married life through the police, the parents, relatives, friends or neighbors; she finally decides upon escaping. It is when threatened with life by her husband that she hears whispering to herself in the voice of God that she is “more useful alive than dead” (Kandasamy 186). Despite her parents’ constantly trying to convince her over the phone to stay with her husband, she plots her self-rescue mission with silent fury and a vehement resolution:

I will not allow myself to become the good wife, the good mother, the good-for-nothing woman that marriage aims me to reduce me to. I will not allow my story to become a morality tale- about loose women, about lonely writers, about melancholic poets, about creative, unstable artists, not even about a war against head lice. I will give all of you an ending to this story to which you cannot object. I will hold out until I hand-deliver the finishing thread that will earn your tear-eyed, hard-won approval- a return to my parental home, to that state of innocence, to a system of returning. (Kandasamy 208)

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Finally, she exploits the next available chance of her liberation and comes back to her parents' home one night in an auto-rickshaw shedding her miserable existence of wifehood "like a second skin" (Kandasamy 213). Coming back as a strong unbreakable woman, she dedicates herself in reading and writing. A few years later, she finally follows her father's injunction: "*Go away. Don't come back.*" and moves as far away as her talent as a writer can take her. In her attempt to forget the blemishes of an abusive married life, she attempts her pen in writing her own story, a story which turns out to be everyone's story, a story where every married woman can see her own truth. Taking refuge in words, she feels, "Words allow me escape. Words give birth to another woman" (Kandasamy 241).

Throughout the novel, the anonymous young woman functioning also as the narrator carries on a Herculean struggle to both maintain and fashion her own identity which demonstrates that she has never lost her personal dignity and intense urge for self-assertion in the face of brutal dehumanization. In the end, boldly saying 'no' to the imposed image of a housewife, she embarks on a mission of leading the life of an independent woman with a distinct life plan and worthy purpose of living. She vigorously avers:

I am the woman with wings, the woman who can fly and fuck at will. I have smuggled this woman out of the oppressive landscape of small-town India. I need to smuggle her out of her history, out of the do's and don'ts for good Indian girls. I am the woman who is willing to display her scars and put them within exhibition frames. I am the madwoman of moon days. I am the breast-beating woman who howls. I am the woman who wills the skies to weep in my place. (Kandasamy 247-248)

Set mostly in the late 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s against the backdrop of World War II and India's struggle for independence from the British Raj, the second novel of this paper's focus, Anuradha Roy's the JCB Prize for Fiction shortlisted novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* at its core is a tale of Gayatri Rozario. Gayatri, a beautiful and creative young woman, is the mother of Myshkin Chand Rozario, the narrator of the novel. A sixty-year-old Myshkin, after receiving a bulky postage package all the way from Vancouver, Canada containing his mother's letters written during her stay at Bali to her friend Lisa, starts narrating his mother's youth, her unhappy marriage with condescending Nek Chand Rozario and her subsequent decision to leave her family to go to Bali with a German painter Walter Spies and an English dancer Beryl de Zoete.

Through the projection of Gayatri's sense of a restless lacking and her subversive quest for autonomy despite her comfortable in-law's home, educated husband and loving child,

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Anuradha Roy raises serious questions on the outdated notions of femininity and age-old traditional beliefs that help to perpetuate the predominance of men over women in Indian society. In their book *The Subordinated Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women*, Vern L. Bullough, Brenda Shelton, and Sarah Slavin, American historians and sexologists, seem to echo the fate of a woman in patriarchy:

The very word *woman*, in fact, emphasizes this passive, subordinate position. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wifman*, literally ‘wife-man,’ and the implication seems to be that there is no such thing as a woman separate from wifhood. As individuals, with few exceptions, women were not counted as important. They were simply mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, proper and forgotten. (Bullough et al. 1)

Existing between the societal demand of being subordinate to the masculine world and her commitment to the assertion of her womanhood, a woman always inhabits a bipolar world. For Gayatri as a married woman, the problem is always simply being someone’s mother or someone’s wife without any chance of establishing her own identity. However, the impulsive, spirited and art-loving Gayatri in *All the Lives We Never Lived* in due course shows the courage to give up her feminine image of an inert ‘good-wife’ which epitomizes the realization of her womanhood through identity-assertion and self-affirmation.

Gayatri’s unusual freedom at her adolescence, thanks to her supportive father Agni Sen, at a time when daughters were chained to a restricted world of domesticity expected to desire nothing more than a comfortable in-law’s home, a husband and children, does a great deal in molding her free-spirited individuality and developing her passion for travelling, dance and painting. She is trained by tutors “to learn languages and painting, as well as dance and classical music, all this in an age when women sang and danced to entertain rich men and were derided for it” (Roy 25-26). Her father often takes her to historical monuments in Delhi, to musical salons and to see artists at work. Soon after her visit to Santiniketan with her father, they embark on a ship from Madras to Singapore to travel around the East Indies during which they meet German artist and musician Walter Spies on a raft in Bali. However, after her father’s unexpected death, her family arranges her hasty marriage to Nek Chand Rozario, her father’s former student. Educated, frugal, strident, and patriotic Nek Chand prides over his being progressive in allowing freedom to his wife, but for him, Gayatri’s painting, dancing, and singing are not “serious matters”, just “hobbies” (Roy 35).

Raised with freedom and a passion for art, Gayatri feels trapped and stifled in her circumscribed existence as a wife. Nek Chand’s gloating over his progressiveness makes Gayatri

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retort in Fury, “So, my freedom is something you store in a locked iron safe? To dole out when you see fit?” (Roy 36). Myshkin soon metaphorically encapsulates their married life: “They were like two people stranded on an island together with no common language” (Roy 36). Gayatri’s idea of personal freedom sharply contrasts with Nek Chand’s idea of the freedom of a nation where women are held captive in the name of wifedom and motherhood. Furthermore, Walter Spies’ sudden reappearance in 1937 along with an English ballerina Beryl de Zoete in Muntazir, Gayatri’s in-law’s place, adds some more fuel to the already blazing married relationship of Myshkin’s parents. While his countrymen are fighting for freedom, Nek Chand is harshly critical of Gayatri’s expeditions with Spies and Zoete in the old city in search of traditional dance teachers or to distant hillsides, painting, and sketching. However, Gayatri who makes it the mission of her life to annihilate decorum, abstinence, and compliance, responds sharply to Nek,

What good will the great nation’s freedom do for me? Tell me that! Will it make me free? Will I be able to choose how to live? Could I go off and be alone in a village as Walter has been doing? Could I be there and paint as well? Or walk down the street and sing a song? Could I spend a night out under the stars away from the town as your father did the other day? Even Myshkin is freer than I am! Don’t talk to me about freedom. (Roy 90)

Finally, after ten years of asphyxiating married life, Gayatri undertakes another journey to Bali with Spies and Zoete to break free from confinement, to follow her own version of personal freedom, to spread her wings to fly in the open air, above all, to be what she wants to be and to do what she likes to do leaving behind her feminine roles of motherhood and wifedom. In reply to a question about Gayatri’s character in an interview by Chandreyee Ghose in *The Telegraph*, Anuradha Roy says:

She is not modelled on anyone, she came to me as a complete, sparkling, gifted, sometimes abrasive, sometimes contradictory woman who believes she has something that sets her apart. Many of the characters are fighting for freedom of different kinds, including freedom from colonial rule and Gayatri defies the accepted mode of defiance; what she is fighting for is not personal freedom to paint or picnic (as her husband thinks); she is struggling for the idea that you cannot be caged into giving your life to a version of freedom that belongs to someone else, however worthy that may be. But she knows her kind of freedom comes at a price, including being condemned by society and that is probably as true today. (Roy, “Interview”)

Moreover, escaping with Spies, a homosexual who does not have any physical attraction towards her, makes Gayatri’s escape an act of pursuing unalloyed autonomy. It is neither due to

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Spies and Zoete's influence nor singer Akhtari Bai being her "dose of Dutch courage" (Roy 131-132) that prompts Gayatri to leave, it is her feeling of "a bird trapped inside beating its wings" (Roy 223) as a result of the boredom and humiliation of a subservient existence in her married life that makes her embark on a mission of self-actualization. Moreover, Gayatri, in one of her letters to Lisa, makes it clear that she could have escaped to Bombay with her neighbor Brijen who, like a romantic hero, promises her a new life. But, she realizes, "I did not love him, I have come to understand, I merely loved his addiction to me. I am not made for love. I want nobody. I need to be absolutely free" (Roy 262). Thus, her impenitent but guilt-stricken going away to Bali is, in fact, "a chance at another life" (Roy 263), the one she is meant for. In the end, what makes her daunting task of leaving her home, husband, and child behind to chase her passion of painting more laudable is her unwavering determination expressed in these words: "Anyway, no more room for self-pity, none! I am here. I came because I chose to, I will not mope and moan, I will work" (Roy 243).

Thus, the female protagonists of both Meena Kandasamy and Anuradha Roy's novels are inspirational figures for our present time when thousands of women like them are intently seeking an escape route from the conventional notions of marriage and motherhood and keenly waiting for the recognition of their abilities in any work to be serious endeavors. These two fictional married women through their longing for individual freedom and through their courage of pursuing their separate life-plan essentially foreshadow a time "when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfillment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full knowledge of who they are" (Freidan 364) as envisioned by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.

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