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## Gender and Resistance in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Kandasamy: A Study of Identity and Rebellion

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### Abstract

This paper explores the theme of gender and resistance in contemporary Indian literature, focusing on the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Kandasamy. While Lahiri's short stories and novels predominantly examine the quiet rebellion of women against patriarchal structures within the Indian diaspora, Kandasamy's poetry and prose evoke a much more explicit resistance against caste oppression and gender-based violence within Indian society. By analyzing Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, this paper investigates how both authors interrogate societal expectations, subvert traditional gender roles, and carve spaces for female autonomy and agency. Using feminist literary criticism and postcolonial frameworks, this paper contends that Lahiri and Kandasamy offer nuanced portrayals of the complex intersections of gender, identity, and resistance in contemporary Indian literature.

### Introduction

Contemporary Indian literature has seen a surge of narratives focusing on gender, identity, and resistance, particularly in works by female authors. Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Kandasamy have carved distinctive spaces in Indian literary discourse by focusing on the lives of women, their challenges, and their acts of defiance in both subtle and overt ways. Although Lahiri's works are often centered within the Indian-American diaspora, and Kandasamy's focus more directly on caste and gender politics within India, both writers powerfully critique patriarchal oppression and gender-based violence. This paper examines how these authors construct narratives of resistance against societal norms, particularly focusing on two of their major works: Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. While Lahiri's style is

characterized by a quiet defiance embedded in personal and domestic spheres, Kandasamy's writing adopts a bold and radical approach to challenge structures of domination.

### **I. Resistance in the Domestic Sphere: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland***

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* explores the lives of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, and the consequences of their decisions on their family. The novel spans decades, detailing the impact of Udayan's political involvement in the Naxalite movement on his wife, Gauri, and their daughter, Bela. Through Gauri's character, Lahiri delves into the theme of resistance within the domestic sphere, particularly in terms of how Indian women negotiate their identities in a world defined by patriarchal expectations.

#### **1. Gauri as a Figure of Quiet Rebellion**

In Gauri's character, Lahiri constructs a woman who, while deeply impacted by personal tragedy, defies societal norms by rejecting traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood. After Udayan's death, Gauri marries Subhash but remains emotionally distant from him and their daughter. Her decision to abandon her family and pursue an academic career is an act of rebellion against the expectations placed upon her as a widow and mother.

Gauri's rejection of motherhood and her academic aspirations in philosophy reflect her resistance against the gendered roles imposed on women within Indian society. As Anita Mannur observes in her analysis of diaspora literature, "Lahiri's protagonists often struggle against inherited expectations of familial duty, negotiating spaces where they can assert their personal desires" (Mannur 98). Gauri's decision to prioritize her intellectual pursuits over her familial obligations thus becomes a form of resistance against the confinement of women within the domestic realm.

#### **2. Diaspora and Female Agency**

Lahiri also examines how diaspora can create opportunities for women to assert their independence. The Indian diaspora, particularly in the United States, provides a space where traditional Indian gender roles are not as strictly enforced. Gauri's move to America allows her to escape the rigid patriarchal norms of her Indian family and society. However, her freedom comes at a cost, as she becomes estranged from her daughter, Bela, who feels abandoned.

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This tension between personal freedom and familial responsibility highlights a central theme in Lahiri's work—the complexity of negotiating individual identity within the confines of tradition. Gauri's story underscores the idea that resistance is often complicated, and the pursuit of personal freedom can lead to emotional and relational sacrifices.

## II. Radical Defiance in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*

In contrast to the quiet rebellion seen in Lahiri's work, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* presents a much more overt form of resistance against patriarchy and violence. The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of an abusive marriage and the protagonist's eventual escape from it. Kandasamy's writing is raw and unapologetic, directly addressing issues of domestic violence, caste oppression, and the silencing of women's voices.

### 1. Domestic Violence and Patriarchal Oppression

At the heart of *When I Hit You* is the theme of domestic violence and its relationship to patriarchal control. The protagonist's husband, who is a professor and a Marxist intellectual, uses his ideology as a means of controlling and subjugating his wife. Kandasamy critiques the hypocrisy of intellectual men who espouse progressive ideologies but perpetuate patriarchal violence in their personal lives. The novel draws attention to the ways in which women are silenced and oppressed in both personal and public spheres.

The protagonist's resistance is evident in her decision to leave her abusive husband, a choice that defies the cultural expectation for women to endure suffering in silence. Kandasamy's narrative emphasizes the importance of speaking out against abuse, as the protagonist writes: "My story does not end with forgiveness. My story ends with escape. It ends with getting away" (Kandasamy 267). This act of leaving is framed as an act of survival and resistance, a refusal to be complicit in her own oppression.

### 2. Writing as Resistance

In *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy presents writing as a powerful tool of resistance. The protagonist, who is a writer, finds solace and strength in her ability to articulate her experiences of abuse. Writing becomes a way for her to reclaim her voice, which had been silenced by her husband's

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emotional and psychological manipulation. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, “the act of writing is itself an act of defiance against patriarchal structures that attempt to render women’s voices invisible” (Mohanty 43). For Kandasamy’s protagonist, the act of writing becomes both a form of self-expression and a means of survival.

The novel also engages with the intersection of gender and caste, as the protagonist reflects on how her lower-caste background shapes her experiences of oppression. Kandasamy’s critique of both caste and gender hierarchies positions her work within a broader tradition of Dalit feminist literature, which seeks to challenge the multiple layers of marginalization faced by women from lower-caste communities. Through her portrayal of the protagonist’s journey from victimhood to self-liberation, Kandasamy offers a powerful critique of the structures of domination that seek to control women’s bodies and voices.

### III. Comparative Analysis: Subtle vs. Radical Forms of Resistance

While both Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Kandasamy explore the theme of resistance, their approaches differ significantly. Lahiri’s characters, particularly Gauri in *The Lowland*, embody a more subtle form of rebellion, where personal choices—such as pursuing a career or rejecting traditional family roles—serve as acts of defiance against patriarchal expectations. Lahiri’s resistance is often quiet, focusing on the internal struggles of her characters as they navigate their identities within the confines of diaspora and tradition.

In contrast, Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You* offers a much more radical form of resistance. The protagonist’s physical and emotional escape from her abusive marriage is framed as an act of survival and defiance. Kandasamy’s use of writing as a tool for resistance further emphasizes the power of language in challenging patriarchal control. As Laura E. Pérez points out, “Kandasamy’s writing is imbued with a radical politics of defiance, where survival becomes an act of revolution” (Pérez 123).

Despite their differing approaches, both authors highlight the importance of female agency in the face of societal oppression. Whether through quiet rebellion or radical defiance, Lahiri and Kandasamy’s works demonstrate that resistance can take many forms, and that women’s voices, though often marginalized, have the power to challenge and subvert dominant structures.

## Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Kandasamy, through their respective works, provide compelling portrayals of women who resist patriarchal norms in both subtle and overt ways. Lahiri's *The Lowland* presents a nuanced exploration of personal resistance within the domestic sphere, while Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* offers a bold and unapologetic critique of domestic violence and patriarchal control. Both authors, through their distinct narrative styles, contribute to the larger discourse on gender and resistance in contemporary Indian literature.

In examining these two works, this paper has highlighted how gender and resistance are central themes in contemporary Indian literature, particularly in the way female characters navigate and challenge the expectations placed upon them by society. By using feminist literary criticism and postcolonial frameworks, this paper has shown that both Lahiri and Kandasamy offer powerful critiques of patriarchal oppression, while also celebrating the resilience and agency of women.

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