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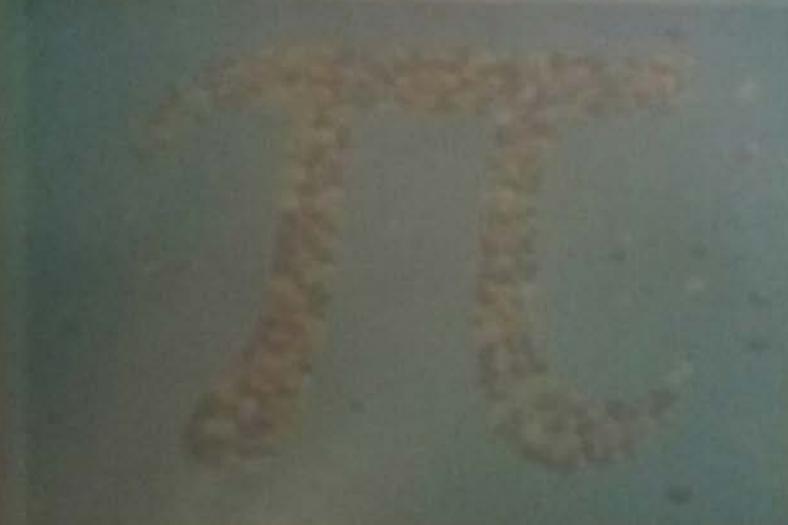
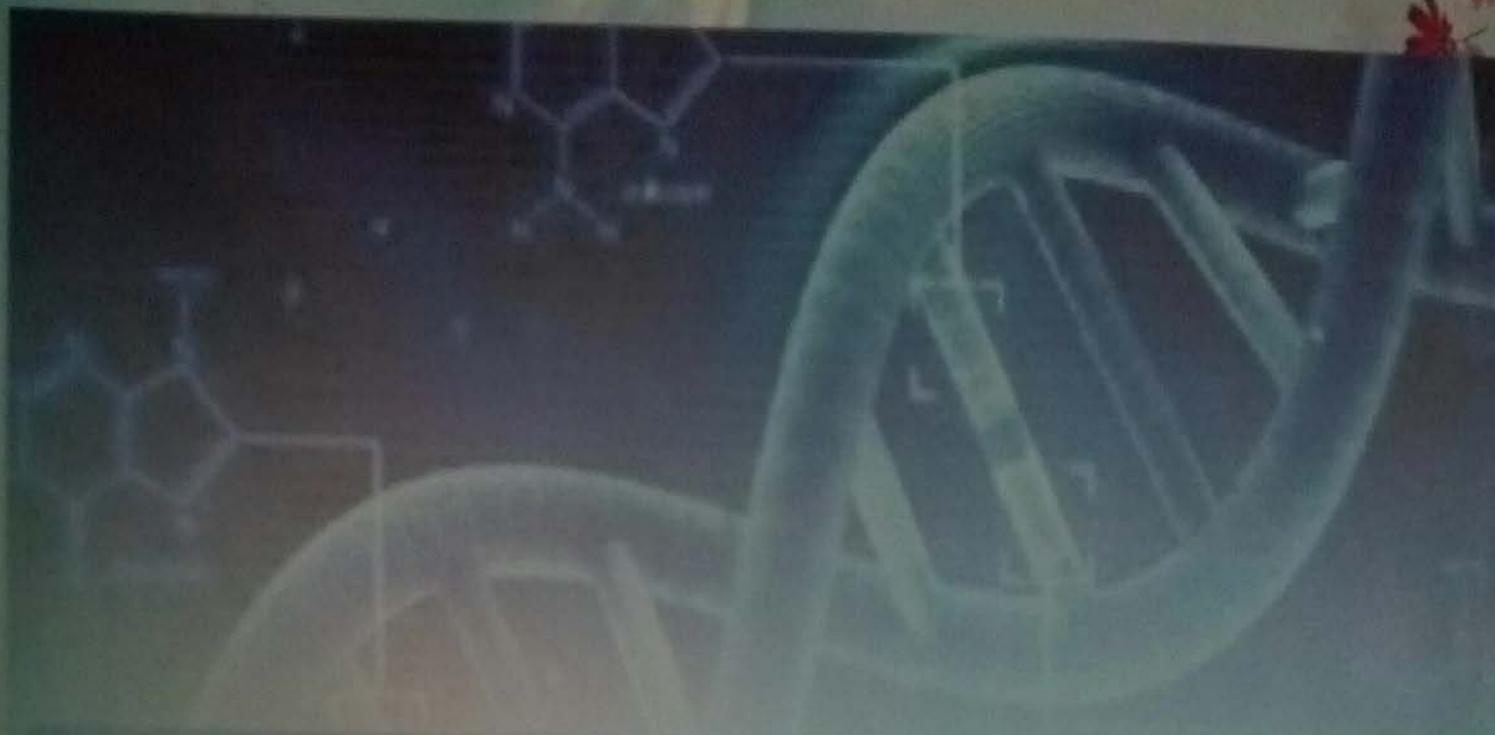
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## CONTENTS

S. No.	Title and Author(s)	Page No.
1.	Electrochemical and Surface Analysis Studies on Corrosion Inhibition of Aluminium by an Eco-Friendly Inhibitor in Alkaline Medium <i>G. Oviya and C. Mary Anbarasi*</i>	1
2.	Synthesis, spectral characterization and pharmaceutical activity of Schiff base metal [Cu(II) and Zn(II)] complexes derived from benzaldehyde derivatives <i>C. Kanagavalli<sup>1</sup> and M. Kalanithi<sup>2</sup>*</i>	13
3.	Quest for Self identity in Meena Kandasamy's novel 'When I hit you: Or, a portrait of the Artist as a young Wife' <i>J. Josephine*</i>	22
4.	A Study of Homi. K. Bhabha's 'Mimicry' in Tsitsi Dangarembga's <i>Nervous Conditions</i> <i>A. Monika*</i>	26
5.	Colonial Architectural Legacy in Manjeri <i>Shareena Jasmin*</i>	31
6.	Solving Land Use Model with Matrix Representation using Genetic Algorithm <i>D. Selvi<sup>1</sup> and G. Velammal<sup>2</sup></i>	41
7.	Fruit Mediated Synthesis and Characterisation of ZnO Nanoparticles using Strawberry extract <i>S. Vennila<sup>1</sup> and Sr. S. Jesurani<sup>2</sup></i>	52
8.	கவிஞர் வைரமுத்து கவிதைகளில் பெண்ணியம் செ. ரெஜினா	59
9.	நாஸ்டியார்ல் நிலையாமை அ. ஜான்கிமேரி	64

## QUEST FOR SELF IDENTITY IN MEENA KANDASAMY'S NOVEL 'WHEN I HIT YOU: OR, A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WIFE'

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'Marriages are made in heaven' is a verse but it fails for many people who live their life unhappily.

Ilaveni Meena Kandasamy (born 1984) is an Indian poetess, fiction writer, translator, and activist who is based in Chennai, Tamilnadu, India. Her parents are University Professors. She has developed her interest in poetry and also started translating books by Dalit writers and leaders. Most of her works are centered on feminism and anti-caste Caste Annihilation Movement of the contemporary Indian milieu.

Meena has published two collections of poetry namely, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Two of her poems have won accolades in all-India poetry competitions. The *Touch* has been translated into five different languages upon publication. Other works such as *Mascara* and *My lover speaks of Rape* won her the first prize in all India Poetry competition. From 2001-2002, she edited *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network. Apart from her literary works she raised her voice for various contemporary political issues relating to caste, corruption, violence, and women's rights in more ways than one.

Her works have been published in various anthologies and journals that include *Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry*. *When I hit you* is a dazzling and provocative novel of an abusive marriage. This novel expresses how an educated woman suffered in an abusive marriage. She loses her identity and becomes alienated from her living world. She feels that she has lost everything in life.

The problem of individual identity has a complexity in its different manifestations. Rootlessness is self-alienation which in its turn is related to the loss of identity and its quest to get out of its crisis. The modern world is characterized by mechanization, urbanization, growing hostility due to changing values, depersonalization, self-misgivings,

delusions, rootlessness, discontent, psychological and other maladjustments. All these taken together have made alienation a part of our life. We live in a world plagued by several forms of crisis in which we are even enmeshed in the crisis of our identity and consciousness.

The unnamed woman who is a profound poet and writer wants to make her world better. The unnamed woman narrator talks about how she fell in love with a University Professor, whom she married. He seems to have similar thoughts to hers in many things. But after their marriage, their relationship gets strained. Moving with him to a rain-coastal town, she swiftly learns that what for her is a bond of love is for him a contract of ownership. As he sets about reducing her to his idealized version of an obedient wife, bullying her and devouring her ambition being a writer in the process, she attempts to push back with violence. He behaves very differently and takes away her freedom slowly. He predicts to do all the things in small ways. He ceases nowhere allows her to speak to her parents and friends. More so he starts to inflict violence and emotionally blackmails her. He even starts beating her when she defies him and violently rapes her. She sinks herself more and more in the dark place, the black hole, which is her marriage.

When she begins life with him she was very happy. She becomes what he wants her to be: the good housewife. She cooks food that pleases him. She allows him to have sex when he demands. She wears the clothes that he wants her to. She learns Kannada, as her husband does not speak the language of love. She removes herself from Facebook. She lets him delete and answer her emails. She stops responding to phone calls. She stops socializing. She stops using lipstick. She stops combing her hair.

She never likes to hear scurrilous words and doesn't like to continue to live the insulting life. She calls him a Naxalite guerrilla Pg.no150. She likes to escape or run away or to leave the devil's house but every day and every way she gets sunk herself more in the marriage dark pit. Even she never raises her voice against him. She accepts her sorrows and worries. She never starts to fight against him. She never speaks a word against him. He brutally treats her in a violent way. She loses herself identity in her world. Her ambition, aim and fascination for everything get spoiled. As a woman writer she has many thoughts and ambitions. But everything fails under the rough rule of her husband. She is an alienated heroine who lives in an absurd world.

He finds mistakes with everything that she does. Like any coward, he uses small failures as an excuse to hit her. Despite her own humiliation that is marked when the outside world mocks at her appearance, and disappearance, she continues this succumbing and yielding. The narrator's self-rejection, the denial of experiencing a moment because it's already in the past, is most poignant. To cope, to escape, she dons the role of a writer marking plot points from her own abusive marriage. She must learn how to survive. It knows that she cannot fight back, that she cannot teach him a lesson, and that this is only the beginning.

She feels withdrawn from people, feels empty within even when she basks in the sunshine of affluence. Sometimes in her despair she finds anarchy all around in which she is abandoned in the planet. And this condition makes her to pass through some dark dungeons of the world. To her parents her husband appears to be perfect but to her he is a guerrilla. She quickly finds out that her husband is a psychopath. She thinks that a broken marriage has affected her family and no more she could bear such crucial happenings. "If you break off your marriage, everyone in town will mock me," (When I hit you pg.158) moans her father over the phone. Her father is quite aware of all the torture poured into her but he urges his daughter to rethink her decision to extricate herself from the bond named marriage. The justification and denial by her parents further deepens these wounds. The parents instruct her to be patient. They advise her to have a child to mend the brute, her husband.

Her husband teaches her lessons in red-hot brutality peppered with Communism; her parents teaching her lessons on coping with brutality and wifeliness. How many Indian girls in abusive marriages have experienced this trite? She allows her unnamed tormentor to build the edifice of controlling her body, brick by brick, bit by bit, and then when she's had enough, too much, she tears it all down with the silent fury of a nighttime earthquake. This is her liberation.

This book expresses us to think of all women who have suffered in marriage, most of them silently lead their life but many of them withstanding emotional violence, some of them become physically and sexually violent. It's not easy. The narrator speaks of this: the aftermath of walking out of her marriage. Of being questioned by social media and friends. Of being judged by cops when she files a complaint.

As a feminist and crusader of equality, the narrator exposes herself to the eternal question that all domestic abuse survivors like Kandasamy and myself, shall ask: "Why did you stay?"

"How could someone educated, independent and smart tolerate this?" Unfortunately these questions are asked more than "Why did he do it?" The answer is not simple. We are all creatures of love. We all hope that the one we love preserves our heart and doesn't hurl it against the wall to shatter into a million pieces.

But the narrator is clear about her decision. She doesn't want to be thought of as a battered wife because then she will be loved as "a scar loves a wound" (Pg.no 18). She deserves more than that. All women do.

All in all, the book travels around the life of the writer. Kandasamy's prose reads like a poem. Her feminism reads like a manifesto discovering itself. Her tryst with truth reads like a scar slashing across experience. Her pithy prose does not numb but highlights the horror. The narrator and perpetrator are left unnamed and largely undescribed. They could be any man and any woman. This obtuseness throws the violence into sharp relief, manifesting itself into the central character. This feeling of unfeeling is something Kandasamy excels at.

Simultaneously, "everything that you think about reminds you of your own state of entrapment" (Pg.no 30) as the book deftly quotes. Her story is my story and it is your story. What we see in it is our own truth. And in this way of telling the tale of violence, which is a demon present only to diminish and reduce a woman, the woman is neither diminished nor reduced. Instead, she rises and rediscovers her dignity.

This thing of crude is shaped into beauty by the hands of the author. It is said that right before someone gets into an accident they forget the last few moments leading up to it. To dig into your worst memory of yourself, from experiences that have no material but your pain, and to turn that into a tomb of love, as this book represents, is in itself the hallmark of greatness. And that is what Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is: a great book. It is a story that must be told and a story that must be read.

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