

## **Anxiety in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You***

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to explain the anxiety of Meena, the main character in the *When I Hit You* novel. Meena undergoes a lack of emotional needs that becomes one of the reasons that lead her to anxiety. The kinds of absence of emotional needs draw the writer's interest to conduct the analysis in this article since emotional desires stabilize human life. This study focuses on how anxiety is experienced by the main character in the novel. Using the types of anxiety as well as descriptive qualitative methods, the writer conducts a deep observation about the character's symptoms of anxiety: neurotic, moral as well as realistic anxiety, through which the character's anxiety is understandable. Therefore, the writer finds that Meena experiences three types of anxiety which are neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety. Further, the types of anxiety experienced by Meena can be seen in the feeling of tension and restlessness, the feeling of shame, guilt and worry, and also the fears of her abusive husband. Finally, the types of anxiety are worth studying very deeply as such knowledge is very necessary to make people get away from being deep in anxiety.

**Keywords:** *neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, realistic anxiety*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Anxiety is one of the psychological problems people often undergo because of the conflict between the ego and superego (Feist, 2008). Though pathetic, anxiety is helpful because it can be an act of personal reminder for people with low self-esteem to prepare themselves for dealing with a threat (Jonas et al., 2014). According to Freud (2014), anxiety has three general types: realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Moral anxiety occurs because of one's failure in acting consistently with what is considered morally right (Cherry, 2020, p. 2). Realistic anxiety is the feeling of uncertainty that leads to fear of a threat that is still unknown (Glas, 2020). Neurotic anxiety appears by virtue of the id's impulses and is located in the ego. The neurotic system is concerned that the punishment afflicted is the one causing the anxiety. The development of neurotic anxiety acquires from the childhood experience related to punishment or threats from parents or other people who are considered to have authority (Kuchta et al., 2021). Further, Ma and Miller (2021) as well as Ong and Twohig (2022) state that anxiety is a conscious or unconscious uncontrollable feeling due to the overwhelming excessive feelings of fear and worry. Such fear and worry arise due to the occurrence of an unknown threat or danger (Kurniasari, 2022, p. 19).

The feeling of anxiety not only can be seen in real-life events but also in literary works. One of the many literary works that deliver the topic of anxiety is a novel titled

*When I Hit You* written by Meena Kandasamy. *When I Hit You* is a story following the journey of Meena as a young writer who married a university professor. The young Meena, who is still naive and not very familiar with the world, is then immersed into married life along with a man who considers marital relationships and roles as husbands to be the same as ownership of Meena's entire life. Meena's husband takes advantage of it to treat her as property and tries to take away Meena's life as an individual. Their married lives were filled with domestic violence and torture executed by Meena's husband verbally, physically, and sexually. The young Meena then began to realize the reality she was living is not the same as her expectation and needs then recognize the situation as a threat. The unfulfillment of Meena's emotional needs becomes one of the reasons that lead her to anxiety. The lack of emotional needs becomes the writer's interest to analyse in this article since emotional needs balance human's life. Accordingly, the kinds of anxiety are worth studying as such knowledge is useful to prevent people to be deep in anxiety. Thus, what kinds of anxiety experienced by Meena are discussed in this article.

Recently, anxiety in literary works has been discussed by several researchers; Fanani (2015) in his article on a psychological thriller in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, using a psychological theory of anxiety finds that the main character, Theodore Decker undergoes recurrent recollection(s), feeling humiliated, worry, fear, nightmares, and feelings of terror. Asyifa (2019) in her article *The Main Character's Anxiety Disorder in Catherine Anderson's Blue Skies*, uses psychological impacts on anxiety, the researcher finds that the main character undergoes anxiety. Cahyaningrum (2019) in her article *An Analysis of Intrinsic Elements and the Portrayal of Anxiety in Linkin Park's Song Lyrics* entitled *Numb, in the End, Crawling, Faint, and Breaking the Habit*, using new criticism, the researcher finds that the anxiety is about fear, worry, stress, disappointed, sad, confused, and frustrated. Using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Rohaeni (2019) in her article *Anxiety and Defence Mechanism as A Means of Constructing Psychological Thriller in Hawkins' The Girl on the Train* analyses anxiety and defence mechanism and finds that anxieties and defence mechanisms become a means of constructing psychological thriller since they make the characters suffer from the psychological problem and become unreliable narrator, create plot twist, and make the novel become thrilling. Musoffa (2019) in his article *Man Anxiety as Reflected in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*, using a psychological approach finds that 1) the main character, Santiago, is described as a man who is kind, industrious, ambitious, powerful, smart, calm, cheerful, patient, confident and stubborn, 2) the anxieties felt by Santiago are Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Specific Phobia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Monica (2020) in her article *Self Defence Mechanism as an Overcoming Tool of Anxiety in Moyes' Me Before You*, uses defence mechanism types: displacement, reaction formation, rationalization, and sublimation finds that the main character undergoes anxiety. Wati (2020) in her article *The Anxiety as a Trigger of the Repressive Actions in the Novel Genova's Still Alice*, using Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, analyses the main character's anxiety and finds the kinds of anxiety that occurred in Alice Howland namely hormonal anxiety, social anxiety and attack anxiety which could trigger repressive actions in Alice Howland and the researcher found several repressive actions in *Still Alice* novel, namely repetition, moral feeling, and composed self. Yahya (2021) in her article *Representation of Anxiety in Adichie's The Thing Around Your Neck* analyses the anxiety reflected in the contents of the short story and using the transitivity approach

finds that there are five transitivity processes that represent anxiety in the story caused by the helplessness and stereotypes she receives from the people around her, both Africans and Americans. From the fact above about anxiety in human life, anxiety then is a part of human life.

Fanani (2022) in his article *Michael Henchard's Frustration in Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge* analyzes the main character's anxiety phenomena, frustration. Using the theory of regression, the researcher finds that the main character, Michael Henchard, regresses psychologically to the days of yore. Khairatunnisa (2022) in her article *Representation of Anxiety and Hope in Subakir's Women's Room and Kurniawan's Beauty is Wounded and Implementation in Indonesian Language Learning*, using descriptive qualitative research method, finds that both novels emphasize the desire to gain a sense of security, get out of anxiety, and find peace. Utari Onthoni (2022) in her article *Anxiety in John Green's The Fault in Our Stars* analyses the main character's anxiety, Hazel. Using a psychological approach, the researcher finds that there are two kinds of anxiety that appear, state anxiety and trait anxiety.

Thus, Freud's types of anxiety: realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety are worth an application in this article since all the researchers mentioned above do not use them; Fanani in his two articles, refers to frustration and the other to recollections. Asyifa with anxiety disorder, Cahyaningrum with general symptoms of anxiety, Khairatunnisa with an effort to get rid of anxiety, Monica with defence mechanism theory, Musoffa with psychological approach, Onthoni with the state anxiety and trait anxiety, Rohaeni with a psychological thriller from anxiety and defence mechanism, Wati with her hormonal anxiety, social anxiety and attack anxiety, and Yahya five transitivity processes of anxiety, the writer then would like to develop this study by using Freud's types of anxiety above.

Accordingly, the writer comes up with the following questions: what types of anxiety the main character undergoes in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You?* Then, the writer elaborates kinds of anxiety the main character experiences in the analysis. Through this question and this objective, this study meets the requirement of novelty.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. Nassaji (2015) defines a qualitative descriptive method to discover the complexity and to examine how the study takes place and what factors affect it. A qualitative descriptive method also provides a more in-depth observation in understanding the studies that were not yet understood and when there are still many things to explore thoroughly. A descriptive qualitative is a perfect method to use to analyse the social aspect of research (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). The goal of this method is to examine the types of anxiety found in the main character in *When I Hit You*.

Besides, the writer uses descriptive and dramatic methods in analyzing the novel through Freud's types of anxiety by which the researcher means to present the character mainly through description and discussion as well as through reporting the character's speech and actions. Thus, by describing, discussing as well as reporting the character's speech and actions, the writer presents and analyzes the types of anxiety of the main character. Further, to get clear data to analyze, the writer uses Freud's types of anxiety to be a primary method to analyze Anxiety in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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## **Sample Population**

The sample population are taken from Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* from which the writer quotes the words that have things to do with neurotic, moral, and realistic anxiety. Thus, not all items in the novel are worth quoting here.

### **Data Collection Technique**

The writer collects the data in three tables in a note; one part of the data is with neurotic anxiety, the other part is with moral anxiety, and the last part is with realistic anxiety. Therefore, this kind of technique makes the writer easy to analyze the problems.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

First, the writer elaborates on the main character's anxiety: the symptoms of neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety. Second, the writer quotes the quotation related to neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety. Last, the writer analysis the quotation and relates the quotations to the concepts of neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety in order that the writer confirms that the quotations are worth quoting.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Meena's Anxiety**

Meena is a young woman who comes from a small town in India. As a writer, Meena always feels like she already learns many things. She perceived herself to be smart but not until she met someone. Her life starts to change when she encounters a man who works as a lecturer, and also a politician. "I met the man who was going to be my husband. I was enchanted." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 28). As Meena starts to have romantic feelings for the man, she feels like he is the only one that she wants to spend her life with. Meena regarded him as someone who is very smart, and intelligent, but funny at the same time. "This man is the real deal, I thought. He was going to make me look at everything differently." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 31). However, Meena is too naive to fathom that all the good qualities she perceived from the man are not completely portrayed in the way she thinks highly of him. After finally marrying the man, Meena starts to uncover the true cast of her husband. The personality, character, and how her husband handles his anger, all aspects found inside him are far from what Meena expected. Her dream to live with the love of her life and start a happy family suddenly fall apart as she starts to feel anxious. The unfulfillment of Meena's expectations in her relationship caused the emergence of anxiety, as she comprehends that her husband is abusive and manipulative. Thus, there are found three types of anxiety in Meena as she deals with the undesirable situation in her married life. The three anxieties found are neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety.

### **Meena's Feeling Tension and Restlessness**

In her life, Meena often hears about how others fail in their relationship, especially in marriage. Growing up in a happy family, although her parents oftentimes show things that are contrary to what she believes, the relationship of her parents is one of the reasons for Meena as the standard of her dream relationship, a long-lasting relationship. Meena thinks that she can finally start her own family when she met this one man, a man which whom she fell in love deeply. However, not all things can go as

how planned. Meena wrongly judges her husband. The one that she thinks would be the perfect husband turns out to be far from what she imagined. In her marriage life, Meena regularly deals with the abusive behavior of her husband. Moreover, she also has to deal with how manipulative her husband is. All of the bad things that happen to her in her relationship with her husband lead her to anxiety.

At the time when Meena and her husband talk about their agreement on restricting Meena's work time as a freelancer on Facebook. As Meena demands her husband related to her work, her husband starts being manipulative because she is not being obedient to him. "There is no reason why you should be on Facebook. It's narcissism. It's exhibitionism. It's a waste of time... I cannot let you endanger me... If you love me, this is the quickest way you will make up your mind." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 50-51). Hearing that, Meena feels the arousal of anxiety resulting from her inability to perceive what just happened. Her husband ruins her expectations of what a family is, she does not assume that to be married means you have to let go of your rights and freedom.

"For a split second, I think about taking a matchstick and burning my own skin. His aim is to make me suffer for his pain; I do not want to suffer two-fold by inflicting this bizzare punishment on myself. Another matchstick is lit and put out. And another and another. I've stopped counting. It almost makes me feel that he is enjoying himself." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 51)

From the quotation above, Meena shows neurotic anxiety as she feels tense and eager to fight against her husband as he violates Meena's right to work as a freelancer. Her husband manipulates her by saying that she cannot use Facebook as it will waste her time. Her husband seems like he cannot see Meena having a job as it dismisses his ego and ownership of Meena. However, seeing how her husband always interferes with her rights, Meena does not feel terrified of the threat from her husband. In the phrase "For a split second, I think about taking a matchstick and burning my own skin.", Meena shows her boldness by returning the same energy from her husband. The neurotic anxiety of Meena is further present in the phrase "I do not want to suffer two-fold by inflicting this bizarre punishment on myself," which explains how she is not actually afraid of burning her own skin which highlights her feeling of tension caused by the unfulfillment of her needs.

Meena's husband's excuse for disallowing her from using Facebook as a freelancer seems like a trivial problem. However, the main point shown in the novel depicted that his behavior seems like the start of something worse. It is then proven by the feeling of isolation in Meena as she does not have any place to escape from reality. Her husband starts cutting off all her social life and it results in how she is barely communicating with her parents and friends. Those events add a reason for Meena to have anxiety.

Aside from disallowing Meena to do her job as a freelancer which is enough to interfere with Meena's life, not only that, but her husband has also proven to have an affair with an actress. "I disclose to him that I heard of his dalliance with an actress. I report back to him, in excruciating detail. After a journalist calls me up to inform me that my lover's stopover in Singapore had something more to it." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 116). Meena found out that her husband is cheating on her when he should be on a work trip, but instead, she got a phone call that inform her of the real presence of her husband. She finally knew that her husband is in Singapore with his mistress. Those situation leads Meena to feel restless as she realizes that her biggest fear is really happening and that it is not just her instinct.

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“One of my friends says he is supporting an upcoming academic because they share a bed as well as political passion, and the day I run into her in his office, I freeze, I cannot stay in her presence. I do not believe every story that comes my way, I know that some of it is dubious. But I cannot always contain myself, I bring it up despite my best efforts. These rumours that are passed on to me hunker down in the trenches of my mind, ready to charge when I feel neglected. It does not unsettle him. He dismisses it as the handiwork of his detractors – the occupational hazard of being a politician.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 116 – 117)

The quotation above shows how Meena caught that her husband is cheating. After receiving a call from a journalist saying that her husband's work trip to Singapore seems suspicious and has something more to it, her friend also informs her about the relationship between her husband and the mistress. It is known that her husband has managed to maintain his mistress with the study. The phrase “One of my friends says he is supporting an upcoming academic because they share a bed as well as political passion...” explains the reason why her husband supports other woman’s studies. It is known that her husband and his mistress have slept together, and they also share the same interest in politics. This situation is hurting Meena’s ego knowing that her husband, the same husband who forbids her to work is supporting another woman in their study. The phrase “...and the day I run into her in his office, I freeze, I cannot stay in her presence,” explains Meena’s anxiety when she witnessed his husband's affair in front of her eyes. Meena froze and she cannot stay in her presence signalling her anxiety and looking directly at her husband having a relationship with someone else. “Marriage has ruined my romanticism, by teaching me that this thing of beauty can be made crude. Bitch. Whore. Slut. And yet, for every insult that has been flung in my face...” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 92). The awful things that have been done by her husband undermine her romantic view of marriage. What Meena received from her husband, all the abuse and manipulation has become the reason for the anxiety that occurs in her life.

In conclusion, Meena experience neurotic anxiety from being manipulated by her husband and then being cheated on, Meena’s instinct sends a signal to her ego informing her that there are some occurrences that undermine her expectations of marriage life. Meena feeling tense and restless signs the inability to satisfy her desires, which in this case is to have a happy relationship with her husband.

### **Meena’s Shame, Guilt, and Worry**

In her life, Meena also encounters moral anxiety which can be seen in her feeling of shame, guilt, and worry. When Meena is finally aware of the true color of her husband, she starts to think about making a big decision that is contrary to her own value. Meena thinks of giving up her marriage, as it will hurt her more if she just stays silent while surviving all of the distressing situations her husband does. However, her decision to let go of her husband and being a widow after a very short marriage of 4 months makes her worried and causes her anxiety. The negative thought of her being a widow is violating her own value.

“I am the woman who was a battered wife. I am the same wife who ran away.”

“I am the woman whose parentage is not probed. I am the woman who does not provide evidence of lineage, the one who does not have to sketch

my family tree with its mangled roots, with its share of concubines and kept women, with its incorrigible branches of bastardized children.”

“I am the woman who will be cursed by society for being passed from man to man to man, hand to hand to hand. I am the woman at whom society cannot spit or throw stones because this me is a she who is made up only of words on a page, and the lines she speaks are those that everyone hears in their own voice.”

“I am the woman men will not take home to their mother.”

“I am the woman whose reputation is rusting.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 245 – 246)

From the quotation above, Meena is feeling worried. Her way of thinking is that society will not be accepting her and degrading her value as a woman making her immersed in feelings of anxiety. The phrase “I am the woman who was a battered wife. I am the same wife who ran away,” interprets Meena’s feeling shame as she views herself only as someone who’s been abused by her husband and that all she can do is run away. Meena feels like she wrongs the moral value of being a good wife. Moreover, Meena not having a child is also becomes the reason for her feeling shame. Taebi et al. (2021) state that the stigma in society about women and them not having a child becomes a burden and pressure. As a result, Meena looks down on herself as she thinks that she does something contrary to society’s stigma. Having a relationship after she parted ways with her ex-husband makes Meena feel like she is being judged. The phrase “I am the woman who will be cursed by society for being passed from man to man to man, hand to hand to hand,” examines how Meena thinks that society is diminishing women and their relationship with men. Meena also feels like she is being unworthy, she assumes that she lost her reputation from what had happened in her life, especially as a widow.

In conclusion, the experience of acting contrary to her own value and the social stigma is the main factor for her to feel shame, guilt, and worry. Becoming a widow is extremely affecting Meena’s life. After all that happened, Meena began to feel like she lost her sparks, self-esteem, and value. How Meena feels like she wrongs her value of being a good wife. How the norms and moral values in society make her feel like she has done wrong. How society perceives women in marriage, how they degrade women on their failure in marital relationships, and pressure women in everything they do cause Meena on having moral anxiety.

### **Meena’s Fear of Her Abusive Husband**

Besides neurotic and moral anxiety, the fear of real-life danger can also lead to anxiety. Realistic anxiety can easily define as related to real-life events. Meena encounters realistic anxiety when she is being abused by her husband. Although she feels like she is used to it, there are times when she thought her husband has gone too far. Meena is just a regular woman, she does not have the power to fight against her husband physically. “Trying to recollect the first time I was hit by my husband, there are only hot glass tears and the enduring fear of how often it has come to pass.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 69). The first time Meena is abused by her husband, she cannot do anything but cry. After many times Meena accepts her life to be forever under the shadow of fear, terrified of what is going to happen. Meena feels like she does not deserve to be physically tortured. She is being a good wife, she is doing all the house chores, and taking good care of her husband. All she does was just trivial; talking to a friend, deleting

unnecessary emails, and leaving the plate unwashed as she need to rest. "...sometimes, his bones of contention are so thin that they make me wonder if any accusation is only a ruse and excuse to hit me." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 69). Meena thought that her husband is always searching for an excuse so he can abuse her. It can be seen during her marriage, her husband has always been abusing her.

"When he hits me, the most frightening part is not the pain and the possible scarring and the perverted sense of shame. It is not in knowing that I'm defeated, or in the realization that I am not physically strong enough to match him blow for blow, that I cannot teach him a lesson never to mess with me."

"When he hits me, the terror follows from the instinct that this will go further, that this does not end easily, that today it is my arms that he is punching, but tomorrow it will be my hair that he will wind around his palm to drag me through the rooms, the next day it will be my backbone that will endure a shattering blow, the day after that it will be my head on which his angry fists will descend."

"When he hits me, these thoughts pile on in quick succession."

"When he hits me, the terror flows from the fear that today he uses his bare hands, but tomorrow he could wield a heavy-buckled belt, he could grab an iron rod, he could throw a chair, that he could break open my head against a wall."

"Every day, I inch closer to death, to dying, to being killed, to the fear that I will end up in a fight whose result I cannot reverse." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 155)

From the quotation above, Meena fears her abusive husband. Meena feels terrified of what the terrible things her husband could do to her. Meena thinks that her husband is still dissatisfied with all the things that he does to her. Day by day, Meena always suffers from the abusive behavior of her husband. From the phrase "...or in the realization that I am not physically strong enough to match him blow for blow, that I cannot teach him a lesson never to mess with me.", the occurrence of realistic anxiety found in Meena when she realizes that she does not have the ability to stand up for herself and to fight against her husband. She is terrified because she knew that she cannot prevent the abuse to not happen. Furthermore, Meena also feels the terror of when her husband torturing her. Meena thought that over time, her husband should have gathered the courage to be more vicious in committing heinous acts against her. The phrase "...today it is my arms that he is punching, but tomorrow it will be my hair that he will wind around his palm to drag me through the rooms, the next day it will be my backbone that will endure a shattering blow," reflects Meena's fear that her husband will actually do such horrible things. As a result, Meena's fear culminated as she realises that every day, she stepped forward closer to death.

Thus, Meena often encounters realistic anxiety. The feeling of horror and terror of her husband always frightens her. Becoming the punch bag to her husband, Meena begins to think that as she walks far in her relationship with her husband, it is equal for her to come closer to death. Meena's inability to fight against her husband and her not having the power to stand up for herself caused her stress. Meena cannot comprehend the awful things her husband does to her. She cannot imagine what could happen in the future if



her husband did more and take things too far. Therefore, Meena feels anxiety because she realizes that she cannot escape from the abusive relationship.

All in all, to compare the previous researchers, this study has a novelty. Fanani's anxiety finding in his two articles refers to frustration and recollections, Asyifa's anxiety finding refers to anxiety disorder, Cahyaningrum's anxiety finding refers to general symptoms of anxiety, Khairatunnisa's anxiety finding refers to an effort to get rid of anxiety, Monica's anxiety finding refers to defence mechanism theory, Musoffa's anxiety finding refers to a psychological approach, Onthoni's anxiety finding refers to the state anxiety and trait anxiety, Rohaeni's anxiety finding refers to psychological thriller from anxiety and defence mechanism, Wati's anxiety finding refers to her hormonal anxiety, social anxiety and attack anxiety, and Yahya's anxiety finding refers to five transitivity processes of anxiety, the writer then would like to develop this study by using Freud's types of anxiety above. Therefore, Freud's types of anxiety: realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety are applicable to this article since it is a novelty.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, the writer comes to conclude that though it is not easy to apply Freud's types of anxiety because there are studies that dealt with the psyche of humans, however, the writer succeeds in getting the novelty of the study. That the main character in the novel experiences three types of anxiety: neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and realistic anxiety is certainty; the neurotic anxiety found in the main character in this study is the feeling of tension and restlessness. The moral anxiety causes the main character to feel shame, guilt, and worried as she feels that she acts contrary to her own value and the social stigma. In realistic anxiety, the main character faces a real-life danger which is fear of her husband resulting from the marital abuse. The main character fears that the more she goes deep into her relationship, the closer she goes to death.

In a nutshell, the writer hopes so much that in the future, there are researchers interested in developing this study with other theories since this study is not flawless. Consequently, literary studies will develop in line with the other studies.

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