

## ROLE OF 'SPACE' IN DETERMINING 'POWER' – A STUDY OF AMBAI'S A KITCHEN IN THE CORNER OF THE HOUSE

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Literature is an important medium to 'voice out' one's pain and suffering due to oppression, in the name of caste, creed, nation and gender. Especially, a form like short story provides much 'space' for voicing out against the domination either actively or passively. A short story is a brief work of prose fiction, like that of the novel, having the components, elements and the same techniques as well. This had already been substantiated by Edgar Allan Poe in his definition of the short story. Though it lacks the 'magnitude' of the novel in its dimension, it still is not inferior in presenting the 'intended' emotion of the writer. It is no wonder that the short story is the widely read genre of the modern man in his busy life.

The Indian English Literature has evolved a lot in the hands of writers of different phases in the post- colonial India. Women writers have also been contributing their share to the realm of Indian Writing in English. If women did not play a prominent part in a written literary code until the second half of the nineteenth century or so, it is obviously because they were denied the benefits of education and given little or no role to play in public life. Their struggle, to establish the identity and to assert their individual rights, has led them to wage a desperate war against the 'patriarchal' society of their time. Ambai, as a well-known feminist writer, is the pen-name of C.S.Lakshmi. Her texts illustrate how the patriarchal centre seeks to silence and marginalize the female voice and how women in the postcolonial context seek the appropriation of the centre's language and its subversion.

C.S.Lakshmi, is not only a writer but also the founder-trustee and the director of SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) in Mumbai. As a Writer, she expresses herself better in her mother tongue Tamil and some of her corpus of publications are *Siragugal Muriyum* (Shattered Wings), a collection of short story in 1976, *The Face Behind the Mask*, a critical work in English. Most of her stories had been published in the journals like *Kachadathapara*, *Kanayazhi*, *Pragnyai*, *Ini*, *India Today* and *Kalachuvad*. Ambai's stories are different in theme and technique from those of her contemporaries who generally seek to entertain readers who turn to fiction for relaxation. Ambai, unlike most other

women writers, have had a marked preference for the short story.

This paper is a maiden attempt to discuss the role of one's 'space/place' in deciding the 'power' that one has in his/her domestic environment in the narrow circle and in the society as a wider circle. Ambai's short story, *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, depicts the pathetic situation the women in the society had been kept under for centuries together. It traces the shadowed existence of women, virtually living in a small, dark kitchen, unheeded by the patriarchal power, the father-in-law. A Critic points out this as: Most of her stories are about relationships and they contain brilliant observations about contemporary life. Exploration of space, silence, coming to terms with one's body or sexuality, and the importance of communication are some of the recurring themes in her works.

### Space and Power- Inter-Related

The story *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House (VeetinMoolayilOruSamayalarai)* opens with a vivid description of kitchen in the house through the eyes of an omniscient narrator, Minakshi. Being the youngest daughter-in-law, she is new to the house and finds the kitchen right at the end, stuck to the compartments in a careless manner. It has two windows, underneath one, the tap and a basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it, underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge, pictured in words,

"As soon as the taps above are opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle...within ten minutes there will be a small flood. Having stood for a long time the soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness"

The story revolves around the life of a group of women living in Ajmir. These women are the representatives of entire women population especially in India, who spend a large part of their day within the confinement of kitchen. This confinement is often undertaken willingly since nurturing of the family is considered to be the chief duty of a woman in our society. Ambai narrates the story from the perspective of Minakshi,

the youngest daughter-in-law of the house - a person from outside the cultural background of Ajmir. As an outsider, she is able to observe the traditional joint family system of her husband Kishan critically. Here, the narrator's empowering marginality is juxtaposed to the marginality of the other women in the family.

In the Indian society, 'Kitchen' is an important segment of the house, which is the source of health and wellbeing of the people of the house. But in this story, the kitchen is placed in the back of the house. While keen attention was given to the construction of the other segments of the house, the kitchen remains neglected. This negligence signifies the 'role' of women in that house - "the women appeared there [kitchen] like shadows, their heads covered, their deep coloured skirts melting into the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant, spicy dal"(Ambai66).

Ambai observes that their life indeed encompasses the 'space' kitchen and was woven around the activities related to kitchen. Their anxieties and desires are connected with the fire place of the house. It is the 'space' where they used to spend the largest part of their life. The little space called kitchen has seen their dreams, hopes, miseries and compromises for survival. In this story, Kishan's mother Jiji suffers a heart failure. Even at the verge of collapse, the first thought that strike through her mind is the perilous state of kitchen after her death. She asks others to take control over the kitchen. She even remembers the time when she single handedly made food for the entire family. It shows how deeply they are connected with the 'space' and idea of cooking.

The story has five episodes. The first and the second episode of the story depict the lives of a group of women, who struggle constantly for 'power' over this small 'space'. In the beginning it had been ruled by Padijiji, the step-mother of Ppaji and then it went to the hands of Jiji, his wife. They wear a mask of power over the other, which in reality belongs to the man, Papaji, the patriarchal power. Even the least suggestions given by the women in the family had been considered as words of insult to the authority, Papaji. On one occasion, Minakshi's suggestion of improving the condition of the kitchen had not been approved by anyone including the other women of the family, except Kishan, her husband. Yet, the state of the kitchen remains unchanged just like the lot of women in the family. Their shadowy figures symbolize the illusions of the women's life.

### Food War – A Power Conflict

The family's lineage had a reputation for its love of food and drink. Even the prasad of the family goddess, Amba, was spirits. Ambai observes that 'food and cooking' as a way of imposing control or power within the family. It is noteworthy that Indian kitchen turns out to be the hub of family politics where the mother and the wife compete as chefs and present the choicest delicacies to win the heart of the male. Hence the proverb, "The right way to win a man's heart is through his stomach". The story also examines the mother-in-law's illusory authority in the kitchen and the establishment of hierarchy within it. Minakshi terms this power conflict as - "food war". Thus, it is true that Ambai's work portrays the kitchen politics which can be seen in most of the Indian families.

As long as a woman survives a husband, she used to enjoy this fake power of the kitchen and then loses it to the other, as in the case of Badijiji to Jiji. This is emphasized by the reminiscences of Jiji's mother's advice to her, during the ritual of 'leave-taking': "Get hold of the power over the kitchen; Decorate yourself pleasingly; these two are your strength, and you'll derive power only through this". Even in the state of collapse, she feels proud that she has the power over everything in the kitchen, including the spices kept under her control, and she boasts of herself as a Queen of the 'place', which is not so in reality. Even the economically independent woman like, VinaMausi craves for the social recognition all her life.

In the first part of the story, we find images of beautiful green mountains and a temple on top. Unfortunately, such a beautiful sight is hidden by the clothes line. Here, the mountain is the symbol of liberation and power. The enchanting view of the mountain range is visible from the window of the kitchen. But the cloth line hinders the sight. It points out how the symbols of liberation are overshadowed by the grim image of the kitchen. Women are blinded themselves with different norms of the society from the idea of power and equality. It is rightly pointed out that - 'women have always had to wrest this space to work from the invisible margins within the margins'. It is a depressing fact that most of the time, these margins are strengthened by the women folk themselves.

In the **fourth episode** of the story, even on the day of picnic the women involve themselves in the act of cooking and cleaning, they forgot to enjoy the scene. In this sense we can say that, all human society has traditionally been held together by the invisible labour of countless women. Even though the writer presents the difference between the women of present and past, their ultimate 'space' of action

remains to be the kitchen, isolated from the greenery waiting for them outside. Thus, Ambai's short story reveals how gender is created within the society with special reference to 'kitchen' as a segment of house. The walls of kitchen define the boundaries and politics of the patriarchal system.

The proceedings of the picnic scene portray the third kind of woman, like Kusuma, who knowingly 'exile' their 'selves' and sacrifice their freedom and creativity to find social acceptance. This willing exile becomes the cause of profound pain and suffering. The image of the joyous flight of the birds on the lake, strikingly contrast the tedious and sweaty image of the women in the dark and suffocating kitchen.

Their eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep. Papaji peeped into the kitchen.

'As soon as the trip to the lake was mentioned, the lot of you began to leap with enthusiasm' he said.

The sarcasm in his tone is heightened by the passivity of the women working in the kitchen and it presents the contradictory notions inherent in male hegemonic attitude to women. Even on their way back home, they were much worried about the dinner preparations than their day out.

The **fifth and climatic episode** of the story describes the narration of Jiji's early married life. All the efforts and pain that she had taken to feed the whole family was never appreciated by anyone, but acclaimed by Papaji as "an excellent worker". Hence it was her familial duty to fulfill and not more than that she deserves. Ambai's description of Jiji's naked body reveals the suffering she had been undergoing during her every pregnancy. It also acts "as a revolutionary language that threatens to unhinge patriarchal hegemony". Yet in the end, Minakshi's vision of freedom ignites the quest for self-realization and liberation of Jiji.

The small dark kitchen, considered to be a 'sanctum' for women like Jiji, is not a source of power but a barrier which women need to overcome in order to efface their socially gendered and individual identities. Ambai's words could be heard through Minakshi's voice as:

"Your womb and your breast will fall away from you; the fragrance of your cooking will evade from you; the glittering of your jewels will fade away ... Not trapped, nor diminished by gender, but freed"

Hence, Minakshi presents a vision of freedom for Jiji, even at the end of the story: it is this quest for self-realization and liberation that finally energises as Ambai's overall theme.

### 'Voice out' the Silences

Ambai is deeply concerned about women - the silences they are locked into, the space they try to create for themselves against tremendous odds, the relationship with their bodies and the sorority they share with other women. She narrates in her stories, women's real experiences and transforms women's silences in words and images. By exploring the ways in which people describe themselves and the communities to which they could be said to belong, she underlines how human beings are made subjects. But what is more important is her search for a new language which is linked fundamentally to her political beliefs and practices as a woman and as a writer. The author also encourages other writers to stop reinforcing popular and conventional images of women and to write the truth.

Being aware of the power of language to inscribe new spaces, C.S. Lakshmi uses, in her article "Landscapes of the Body" published in *The Hindu* in December 2003, introduced MalathiMaithri's poem as a way of exemplifying 'language' as women's weapons of defence. This poem serves as an introduction to the short stories' analysis which aims to exemplify how Ambai gives voice to silences, to deconstruct the dominant discourse which has displaced women as the other. Through this story, Ambai makes a clarion call to rethink and rebuild the role of women's 'space/place' and in turn her 'power', according to the current socio-political atmosphere.

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