



Shadowy And Deceptive Life Of Women In Ambai's A Kitchen In The Corner Of The House

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Abstract: Although roughly two centuries have passed since the Victorian era, it is clear that women writers still struggle for recognition and acknowledgement, especially in literary genres where men appear more dominant than women. They face the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works. They are being categorized in ways different to men and still have been subjected to unethical remarks. Although women now have more freedom to write, many of their struggles are similar to those of the nineteenth century women writers. Their struggle to establish self-identity and assert their individual rights have led to wage a desperate and inevitable war against the patriarchal societal norms of the particular period. In India, women writers have been contributing their share to the realm of Indian Writing in English. They use literature as a tool for socio-cultural documentation. Some of them often use pseudonyms to hide their identity and get recognition of their works unbiased. C.S. Lakshmi is one such well-known Indian feminist writer, who writes her stories using a pen-name, Ambai. The present paper attempts to highlight how Ambai's texts vividly illustrate the way patriarchal centre silence and marginalize the emerging female voices and how women in the postcolonial context seek the appropriation of the centre's language and its subversion.

Key words: Women writers, patriarchal norms, literature, identity, emerging voices.

Introduction

Literature is an important medium to highlight the emerging voices, to let the world know one's thoughts and ideals, hopes and aspirations, pain and suffering due to oppression and suppression, in the name of caste, creed, gender, linguistic and ethnic affiliation. Writers use literature as a tool for socio-cultural documentation. Literature of a society may be restricted to a particular region because of the language in which it is written. However, when a literary work is translated into various other languages, it gives an opportunity for the world to get an idea about the socio-cultural aspects of a particular society. Moreover, the culture and tradition of a society is conserved and preserved through language, literature and other art

forms, and every text is embedded in the socio-cultural aspects of the society. Translation, therefore, may serve the purpose of documenting, preserving and disseminating a society's culture, tradition, rituals and customs.

Indian writing in English or Indian literatures translated into English has evolved a lot in the hands of writers of different phases in the pre- and post-colonial India. Women writers have also been contributing their share to the realm of Indian Writing in English. Modern women writers face the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men and still have been subjected to unethical remarks. Although women now have more freedom to write, many of their struggles are similar to those of the nineteenth century women writers. And if women did not play a prominent part in a written literary code until the second half of the nineteenth century or later, it is obviously because they were denied the benefits of education and given little or no role to play in the public life. Their struggle to establish self-identity and assert their individual rights have led to wage a desperate and inevitable war against the patriarchal societal norms of the particular period.

In the global context, many women writers in the nineteenth century, including Fanny Fern, Harriet Jacobs, Mary Ann Evans and Louisa May Alcott etc. felt it necessary to publish their writings under their pseudonyms. While some male authors such as Jozef Korzeniowzki (Joseph Conrad) and Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) also used pseudonyms, their use of it was a form of artistic expression, rather than a tool to conceal their true identity from the male dominated literary world. Fern used a different name as an effort to keep her identity anonymous. Similarly, Jacobs used her pseudonym Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in order to recount her harsh experience as a slave without having to face her fear of criticism from the white population. Although Parton and Jacobs used female pseudonyms in their publications, other writers in the nineteenth century and contemporary writers today make use of pseudonyms. The use of male pseudonyms is common for many modern women writers as well like Alice Bradley Sheldon (James Tiptree) and Joanne Rowling (J.K. Rowling). Sheldon wrote under the pseudonym James Triptree in order to publish her work in the male dominated literary genre of science fiction. Before her death in 1987, Sheldon expressed her reasons for choosing an alternative name: "A male name seemed like good camouflage. I had the feeling that a man would slip by less observed. I've had too many experiences in my life of being the first woman in some damned occupation" (Phillips, 2006). Joanne Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, was urged to change her name to "J.K. Rowling" by her publishers. The publishers claimed that Rowling would not attract enough attention of young boys if they knew that a woman had written the series. Although roughly two centuries have passed since the Victorian era, it is clear that women writers still struggle

for recognition and acknowledgement, especially in literary genres where men appear more dominant than women.

Many of the Indian women writers also use pseudonyms to hide their identity and get recognition of their works unbiased. Ambai, a well-known Indian feminist writer, is also a pen-name of C.S. Lakshmi. She is not only a writer, but also the founder-trustee and director of SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) in Mumbai. Her texts vividly 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. As a writer, she expresses herself better in her mother tongue. Some of her better known publications include *Siragugal Muriyum* (Shattered Wings) in Tamil, a collection of short stories in 1976 and *The Face behind the Mask*, a critical work in English. Ambai's stories are different in theme and technique from those of her contemporaries who generally seek to conform to norms and entertain readers who turn to fiction for relaxation.

Ambai's short story *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* translated by Lakshmi Holmstorm, depicts the pathetic situation the women in Indian society had been kept under for centuries together. It traces the shadowy existence of women, virtually living in a small, dark kitchen, unheeded by the symbol of patriarchal power, the father-in-law. It talks about the treatment of women in Rajasthani society, their values, customs and beliefs, thereby portraying a very realistic social milieu, concentrating on the experiences of women, highlighting the diverse abstract themes such as position of women in the past and present, symbolic renaissance and liberation of women. The story opens with a vivid description of kitchen in the neglected corner of the house through the lens of an omniscient narrator, Minakshi, the youngest daughter-in-law in the family. She is new to the house and finds the kitchen right at the end, stuck to the compartments in a careless manner. The kitchen has two windows, underneath one, tap and a basin. The basin was too small to keep even a single plate in it and underneath that the drainage area without any ledge.

In the Indian society, kitchen is an important segment of the house, which is considered to be the source of health and wellbeing of the people of the house. However, in the story, the kitchen is placed in the back of the house. The kitchen remains neglected while keen attention was given to the construction of the other segments of the house. This negligence, in turn, signifies the 'role' of women in that house. "The women appeared there 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" (Ambai, 66).

The story revolves around the life of a group of women living in Ajmir. These women are the representatives of the 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 main duty of a woman in our society. Ambai narrates the story from the perspective of Minakshi. She, being an outsider who belongs to different cultural background, is able to observe critically the traditional joint family system of her husband Kishan. In the story, the narrator's empowering marginality is juxtaposed to the marginality of the other women in the family. Ambai observes that the life of these women indeed encompasses the 'space' kitchen and was woven around the activities related to kitchen. It is the space where they used to spend maximum hours of their life. The little space called 'kitchen' has seen their dreams, hopes, miseries and compromises for survival. In the story, Kishan's mother Jiji suffers a heart failure and even on the verge of collapse, the first thought that strike through her mind is the precarious state of kitchen after her death. She asks others to take control over the kitchen.

The story has five episodes. The first and second episode of the story depicted the lives of a group of women who struggle constantly for control over the small space called 'kitchen'. In the beginning it had been controlled by the step-mother of Ppaji, the family's patriarch and then it went to the hands of Jiji, his wife. These women wear a mask of power over the other, which in reality belongs to the man, the patriarchal symbol. Even the least suggestions given by the women in the family had been considered as words of insult to the authority. 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. The condition 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.

Ambai observes that food and cooking is a way of imposing control or power within the family. Symbolically, 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 a man's heart. The story also examines the mother-in-law's illusionary authority in the kitchen and the establishment of hierarchy within it. Minakshi terms this power conflict as 'food war'. Indeed, it is true that Ambai's work portrait 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 deceptive power of the kitchen and then loses it to the other in the process of transfer of power, as in the case of Badijiji to Jiji in the story. Jiji's mother advised her during the ritual of 'leave-taking' to get hold of the power over the kitchen and decorate herself pleasingly. She further advised Jiji that these two are her strength and she'll derive power only through it. 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 ironically is not so in reality.

In one of the episodes, on the day of picnic, it was depicted that women got deeply engaged themselves in the act of cooking and cleaning, even forgetting to enjoy the occasion. 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. The proceedings of the picnic scene portray the third kind of women, 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. Even on their way back home, they were much worried about the dinner preparations than their day out.

In the first part of the story, we find images of beautiful green mountains. The mountain is the symbol of liberation and power. The enchanting view of the mountain range is visible from the kitchen's window 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 depressing fact that most of the time these margins are strengthened by the women folk themselves.

The concluding climactic fifth 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, rather she was termed as an 'excellent worker' by her husband. It seems that it was her familial duty to fulfill and not more than that she deserves. 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 the kitchen define the boundaries and politics of the patriarchal system. The small dark room, 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 obliterate their socially gendered and individual identities. 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 derange patriarchal hegemony.

To sum up, it seems that 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 sonority 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. Through this story, Ambai appeals to rethink and rebuild the role of women's space and in turn her power according to the current socio-political scenario.

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