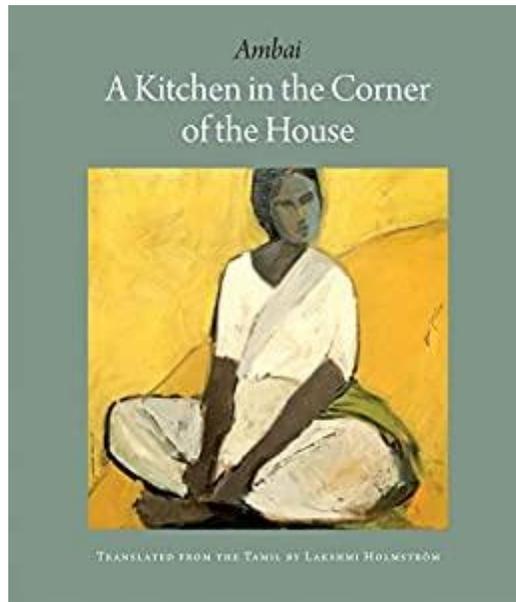


A Study on the Post-Modern Feministic Techniques Used in Ambai's *A Kitchen In The Corner Of The House*

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Kitchen-Corner-House-AMBAI-ebook/dp/B07MN13R31/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=A+Kitchen+in+the+corner+of+the+House&qid=1634505837&s=books&sr=1-1

Abstract

Women writers in India portray the sufferings of women through their literary works. Especially, through the story *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, Ambai attempts to transform the existing gendered structures and argues that this can truly help women to overcome internal and external oppression and reclaim the lost feminine spaces. The author depicts the male dominated society wherein women were the victims longing for their freedom and their true identity, and this is enunciated in the story through the character Minakshi.

Keywords: *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, Ambai, Post-modern feminism, gendered structures, sufferings, Patriarchal, Identity.

A Kitchen in the Corner of the House is a translated work of literature by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ambai is an Indian feminist writer and independent researcher in women's studies from India. In 1967, she published the short story *Veetin Mulaiyil Oru Samaiyalarai* (A Kitchen in the corner of the house). Ambai is an independent researcher in the field of women's studies for past three decades. She writes under the pen-name Ambai for publishing Tamil fiction and her real name (C.S. Lakshmi) for research work and other articles.

Post-modernism is a 20th century avantgarde (revolutionary) movement as a response to modernism. Its impact can be seen in architecture, music, paintings, literature, culture, economics and even in linguistics. What did post-modernism do? It questioned and rejected many certainties of modernism like deductive reasoning, scientific methods, objective truth, progression, capitalism, patriotism, institutionalisation. It celebrated meaninglessness, fragmentation, and virtual Reality. Post-modern Feminism is a mix of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and French feminism. It rejects the opinion that all women share a common experience. It claims that women cannot be seen as a homogeneous group. Post-modern feminism is a kind of resistance to ways of thinking, perceptions, and ideologies. Anything having boundaries and of fixed nature is questioned. The goal of post-modern feminism is to destabilize the patriarchal norms entrenched in society that have led to gender inequality. Post-modern Feminism is a particular kind of postmodernism and a particular kind of feminist theory that has become prominent in feminist thinking over the past few decades.

The story "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" is a tale of a family settled in Ajmer. At the surface level, the story seems to be full of gentle humour, affection, and concern. But upon deep analysis, it is found to convey a message relevant to the modern times. The story describes the experiences of a young South Indian girl, Minakshi, who marries a man from Rajasthan and enters into a joint family household. She is surprised by several regressive practices and the story is a clear opposition between North and South India. From times immemorial, women have been oppressed in our patriarchal society. Their whole world has been confined to household duties like cookery, embroidery etc. Minakshi, the narrator of the story, places herself on the margins of a traditional household as an 'outsider' to the patriarchal structure that reflects an exiled existence. This existence does not free her from cultural constraints but situates her in a post-critical position that enables women's Self-representation. Few centuries ago, women were treated very badly by the men folk. They did not give freedom to their wives. At that time, women had no uniqueness of their own. They were confined only to the kitchen. They were treated as machines and producer

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 21:10 October 2021

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of babies. They were expected to be calm and unspoken throughout their lives. Papaji, the man of the past has the same kind of thinking. He expects women to be meek and submissive.

The story portrays the pathetic condition of women in Ajmer whose life revolves around the kitchen. These women reflect the entire womanhood who sacrifice their maximum lifetime in the kitchen. The tradition that a woman should never advice a man is broken by the character Minakshi, the daughter-in-law of papaji. When others do not care about the kitchen, Minakshi boldly asks papaji to extend the kitchen. ‘Papaji, why don’t you extend the verandah outside the kitchen? If you widen it, we could have a really wide basin for cleaning the vessels. And beyond that you could put some aluminum wire for drying the clothes’ (51). All the others in the family are amazed and were standstill. Radha Bhabhiji stares fixedly at her. Kusuma straightens her veil to hide her agitation. Nobody is dare enough to support her view. Minakshi wants to overcome all the traditional roles that humiliate women.

Two windows, Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within ten minutes there would be a small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness (66).

Ambai has used kitchen in the centre of the lives of women characters in the story. It has become the symbol of different ideas. There is an abundance of tropes to do with food, cooking and eating in the story. The story examines the mother-in-law’s illusionary authority in the kitchen, the establishment of a hierarchy within it, and how that authority can be subverted through ‘food wars’. The writer focusses her attention on the traditional attitude about the selection of a bride for the family. The family prefers to have educated, fair-skinned and quiet daughter-in-law for the third son. That’s why Minakshi from South India is not liked by Papaji. As Papaji remarks to the skin specialist,

“This is Kishan’s wife. She never stops roaming the town. She always has a book in her hand, A Chatterbox. Examine her hands” (59)

Kusuma is considered a perfect daughter-in-law. She is an expert in embroidery, flower arrangement, bakery, sewing and in making jam, juice, and pickles. However, she is willing to suffer the injustice and work according to the dictates of the family. Minakshi’s sensible and practical suggestion to extend the verandah is not entertained. Instead, her suggestion is taken as an affront. Though, her husband, Kishan endorsed her suggestion, it is outrightly rejected. Untouched Papaji utters, “Dark skinned woman, you refuse to cover your head, you who talk too much, you who have enticed my son...!” (68). He also teases his son Kishan for helping his wife

in cooking. As Minakshi observes, “a woman has every right to do as she will in the kitchen but if she dares to ask her father-in-law to shift the washing line where clothes hang to dry outside, obstructing the view of the mountains from the kitchen window, she will be laughed at, for what need is there for a women to enjoy nature’s vistas?”

When Jiji suffers from a second Asthma attack, she is confined to bed. Although, she is almost asleep, yet she goes nostalgic and narrates her life history to Minakshi. She says that her father-in-law handed over the keys of the house at the time of his death. She placed the keys onto her silver waist hook and felt like a queen. She always believed that her strength and authority came from the bunch of keys, rich clothes, and costly ornaments. In the last pages of the story, Jiji gets heart-attack and Minakshi helps her wherein Jiji tells her that she was under the control of papaji for which Minakshi asks her to come out of all the bonds of society. So long she believed that it’s the kitchen and the key that gave her the power, but when Minakshi asks her who she really is, it dawns upon her.

“Jiji, no strength comes to you from that kitchen, nor from that necklace nor bangle nor headband nor forehead jewel. Authority cannot come to you from these things. That authority is Papaji’s.
From all that be free
be free
be free.
But if I free myself . . . then . . . what is left?” (62).

Thus, Minakshi helps her to realize the real meaning of freedom and emancipation. Minakshi comments:

“If all this clutter had not filled up the drawers of your mind, then perhaps you too might have seen the apple fall; the steam gathering at the kettle’s spout; might have discovered new continents; written a poem sitting upon Mount Kailasam. Might have painted upon the walls of caves. Might have flown. Might have made a world without wars, prisons, gallows, chemical warfare” . . . (62).

When Minakshi identifies with her self-representation as a non-identical woman, the position of marginality turns into a position of empowerment that ruptures the normative representation of heterogeneous individuals as homogeneous women. Minakshi’s independence is different from that of Vena Mauri, in the story whose experiences as an independent, single woman weaken her and destroy her. Her plight is an indicator that female experiences of uninterrupted

freedom cease to be constructive when they are isolated from social systems and discourse. Vena's freedom falls to dismantle and envision the possibility of change in socially gendered relations. So it is not the freedom that only defies cultural dictates that define 'women' exclusively in relation to 'men' but also the freedom that attempts to transform existing gendered structures that Ambai argues, can truly help women to overcome internal and external oppression and reclaim the lost feminist spaces.

Ambai being a feminist writer uses examples of food and cooking to highlight certain themes; frames and boundaries, and pleasure outside them. As a writer who grew up in Tamil Nadu, but lives in Bombay, her recurrent theme is the quest for identity, or sense of the self. Ambai also sees food and cooking as ways of imposing control within the family and maintaining boundaries within communities. She questions the value of hospitality, which merely reflects the status and importance of the family. Sometimes, these women are seeking their identity in the wilderness by themselves. Sometimes, they remain hidden under the veils covering their heads and faces and only have a kitchen in the entire house where they can rule as Queens and make their decisions without the interference of men. Some women must fight through barriers of religion or caste in addition to rejecting the definitions of what it means to be a woman.

What Minakshi wants to say is that the mind of Jiji is filled with trivial things. She would sink deeper and reach the universal waters. Then she can connect herself with this world that surrounds her. The sparkle of jewellery will vanish away. She will feel free from the discrimination on the basis of gender. She will realize her true identity and achieve her individuality. She had begun questioning the constant suppression that women are being made to submit in all spheres of life. "A Kitchen in the corner of the house" is an outstanding story that highlights the diverse abstract themes such as liberation of women, position of women in the past and the present, symbols of freedom and renaissance of women.

The common observation that one could make in all the stories of Ambai is a strong woman protagonist focussing on the harsh realities of what it is to be a woman in the modern world. She is torn between the stubborn traditional moulds that society places them into and their will to strike out on their own. As Lakshmi Holmstorm observed "There is a kind of exhilaration in this playing with forms at the height of her work, is what looks like Post-modernistic techniques of multiple perspectives". Many voices are fragmented, and interspersed narratives techniques are used in the post-modern novel. Ambai's method is post-modern novel, but on the other side is her rootedness in Tamil Literature and culture which is evident in her easy and often inverted use of allusions. Ambai felt the need to evolve a new language to express her deep concerns. This new language she feels can evolve not only out of our understanding as gendered and historical beings but requires going down into the deep foundations of life. Women, according to her, need to

express the silence in their lives and need to create a space for themselves. There are so many unarticulated desires, emotions, aspirations in women's lives that make up that silence with a range of passionate feeling. Ambai endeavours to express this silence into works and images, a task that seems to be a difficult and daunting one which is almost impossible.

Ambai has been criticized for her impressionistic style, rarely creating formal narratives, but creating characters with rapid and almost random strokes. Ambai defends as being more representative of reality. According to Ambai, "Real life presents itself with so many layers". Yet Ambai's work is no simple-minded feminist condemnation of men. Most of Ambai's works are quite short, but seems to be moving longer and more complex stories. Her works are characterized by her passionate embracing of the cause of women, humour and lucid. Her profound style is a touch of realism.

Thus, the translated literary work becomes a continuous quest for freedom to express, to communicate, a quest for self-fulfillment for understanding gender constructions, social, cultural oppressions. Ambai firmly believes that an understanding of what we do today can come only from our understanding of our past and thus her fiction becomes a quest for one's roots, a journey into the historical past that has created the present self. Historicizing the self is a first step towards understanding. This is Ambai's message in the story enunciated through the character Minakshi.

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