

## Decoding Gender and Negotiating Culture: Re-configuration and Representation in C.S. Lakshmi's Selected Short Fiction

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### Abstract

Popularly known by her pseudonym, 'Ambai', C.S. Lakshmi attempts to re-define feminism in the Indian context in her story anthology, *In a Forest, a Deer* (2006) written in Tamil and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ambai explains her own label of feminism which is not just about taking up cudgels for women's issues but also about how the discourse or debate on gender has focused on the absolute binaries of male/masculine and female/feminine. The chief questions, therefore, which the Paper on her short stories will address, are: How does the writer examine the 'female' experience? How is a 'feminist' perception different from 'femininity'? How does the craft of writing reflect the gender roles as prescribed by a middle-class Indian society? How does such writing help to highlight the state of society that we live in today, especially in relation to its women? And, how is such a perception worked out in and through a translated narrative? The attempt will thus be to focalize the move from a linguistic/ textual analysis to a broader ideological/ cultural context, using gender as ingress and paying more attention to the inequalities, ideological values, identities and individual choices to arrive at cultural reformulations of gender.

**Keywords:** Culture; Feminist; Gender; Identity; Woman.

Although the twenty-first century came with the upsurge of male female equality, it is unfortunate to say that we are still not in a position from where we can deny the existence of gender discrimination that operates in our society at multiple levels. Sex is biological whereas Gender is cultural/ social. In other words, sex only discriminates between 'maleness' and 'femaleness' on the basis of physical differences but Gender is a term deep-rooted in ideology and manifests itself in the hierarchical organization/ patriarchal construction of society, for determining the 'masculinity' and 'femininity' of a person. These terms are not eternal truths or given norms but are social practices that have been institutionalized and enforced into tradition / system over a period of time to justify the power and authority of man over woman. Michel Foucault's concept of power states that 'it is

something that is exercised rather than possessed' (Ann Brooks: 50) and so he maintains that the structural models of power operates within society through institutional arrangements like education, laws, work. These agencies levy control over the body, mind and emotions of human being and creates hierarchical forms of power. It is this power that creates discrimination between male and female, rich and poor and white and black etc.

Both men as well as women are attached to various stereotypes but women especially to negative ones. Jyoti Prasad Saikia, in his book *Gender: Themes and Issues* (2017), quotes L.L. Lindsey's views on gender: "The assignment of negative stereotypes can result in sexism, the belief that the status of female is inferior to the status of male." (4) Lindsey further expresses her views on patriarchy as perpetuating sexism and leading to the oppression of women. Saikia goes on to opine that "Gender involves differences in power, in terms of both 'power to' (encompassing legal and informal rights) and 'power over' (access to resources as well as the pursuit of knowledge and personal goals). (9) It is precisely such an understanding of gender that drives C.S. Lakshmi's feminism which for her is not just about taking up cudgels for women but also for examining as to how the discourse on gender has, all along, rendered human beings as absolute/exclusive male/masculine and female/feminine.

C.S. Lakshmi (1944 - ) who writes under the pen name 'Ambai' is a noted Tamil feminist author (well-known for short stories) and independent researcher in women's studies. Her works reflect the passionate espousal of the cause of women, relationships, love, space, quest, identity, harmony, self-discovery, and the like. Her translator, Lakshmi Holmstrom, has painstakingly recorded the impressions and textures of the original stories (written in Tamil) in the story collection *In a Forest, a Deer* (2006) thus traversing the distance between the languages. Ambai opines in the 'Foreword' to the anthology: "This magic of a story taking shape in another language can happen only if, like pushing a fishing boat into the sea, a translation gently nudges a story into the vast ocean of another language." (IFD:i)

Most of the women characters in the stories how a desire for independence, individuality, autonomy and space. They embody culture and, throughout their life, participate in the politics of cultural identity which is evident through their language, caste and/or region. In an article entitled "Bodies Called Women: Some Thoughts on Gender, Ethnicity and Nation", Ambai talks about tradition as a not so stable and fixed notion for it contains within it, elements that keeps getting erased and reformed. Her focus, therefore, is to examine the notion of unbroken tradition that remains forever unchanged and according to which women are the sole bearers of cultural

and national identity. Their body becomes the carrier of the traditional markers of culture and identity. In other words, how a woman lives, how she dresses up, what she reads and each and every decision related to her body as well as life is a point of debate and discussion for it is believed that she is the guarantor of the 'purity' of lineage.

In the Indian society, it is wifehood and motherhood that are still considered the sole aim of a woman's life. In the story "Journey1", the protagonist discards all the outward symbols of matrimony and wifehood such as the 'tali' and asserts her individuality and single status. If a woman has an opinion on married people's behaviour and/or their children, it is assumed that "she is not even married. What does she know about the joy of children." (IFD: 16-17)

In another story entitled "Camel", the simile of comparing the nose-pin of a woman with that of a camel's piercing and threading of a rope through it, is full of satire and mockery. The rogue camel was 'punished' just as Surpanaka got her nose cut because she had dared to deck herself up with jewellery to declare her love. In the words of Jasbir Jain: "Jewellery is one of the great hindrances to self-respect, a great material bargaining counter, a dividing line between rich and poor, a married woman and a widowed one, as also between men and women." (94)

In order to 'tame' a woman, physical pain is inflicted upon her, couched in the guise of custom and tradition, to subdue and control her from running wild (tasting freedom). In fact, marriage, house, customs, etc. serve as the mechanism for controlling female sexuality.

Ambai's rigorous feminism is further revealed in the story "Direction" wherein she narrates the tale of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi declaring the latter too as an *Adishesha* lying on her serpent-bed. The gendered categorization of male and female, depending on the sex they are born with, is attached to a person since birth. In fact, it is the anatomy/ bodies that are granted meaning and which give value to their sex in different ways. In the opinion of V. Geetha, the framing of norms of different roles and responsibilities from males and females, that are expected in a patriarchal society, is nothing but to fix/limit their areas of work, style of clothing, right to education as well as choice of learning; but, what is most important behind this distinction is the access to resources and power which consolidates the position of the male as superior and more powerful than the female.

Ambai also highlights a very gendered view of society whether it be a concern with matters of cleanliness in the story entitled "Direction" or the choice of an academic subject in the story "First Poems" or riding a vehicle

"Vaaganam". When the question of cleaning the rubbish bins arises, it is said: "Women should come forward and take responsibility in this matter." (IFD: 43) Arguments such as 'Girls like Humanities and boys are good at Science', signals the discriminatory/ biased view of society to keep women bound to household duties and not let their minds engage in scientific pursuits for it is assumed that they can only be good at languages or history, etc. besides their daily chores. It is for this reason that in the story entitled "First Poems", the father says: "Girls could never be good at Science and Maths." (IFD: 51)

The unequal treatment meted out to women is best exemplified in the story "Vaaganam", albeit in a humorous manner. It was when Chithi sits on the motorbike that the debate begins thus: "It would be better to wash the motorbike in cowdung-water or to bathe Chithi herself in cow-dung." (IFD: 66) It is emphasized that "Girls with broken arms and legs never got married" (IFD: 70) But, what if a boy broke his limb? A girl who dreams to ride a cycle finally finds fulfillment when she comes upon a vehicle- an electronic one- on which she travels great distances thus acquiring subjectivity by going against the gendered view of society on what women should/can do and not?" She, who was descended from all those who had chariots composed of snake, lion, swan and horse, now had a vehicle of her very own." (IFD: 73) The voice of triumph over male power is rather resonant here.

Ambai's storytelling has an almost lyrical quality to it, with generous use of images and metaphors. One such story is "Parasakti and Others in a Plastic Box" about the gossamer bond between a mother and her two daughters. Here, Ambai has used the medium of letters for story-telling. The title story "In a Forest, a Deer" is a metaphorical story of Thangam Athai who, according to others, 'had never blossomed' for she just 'has a hollow body'. The story raises questions related to a woman's body, reproductive ability, barrenness and the social stigma attached to it. Despite the fact that her body is a battlefield on which all kinds of mental, physical and/or psychological war is played out, Thangam manages to keep herself at peace by accepting it the way it is and realizing her self by brushing aside negativities and social taboos. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah observe that it is only a woman's reproductive functional abilities that give her worth and value in the society.

Ambai here throws light on the various traits of a woman's personality such as generosity, love, warmth and compassion, as seen in the loving caresses that Thangam showers on the children of her husband's second wife. A few questions that are posited here are as to why is womanliness determined only by a woman's marital status and/or capacity to give birth?

Why is Thangam's body considered hollow even when she is capable of giving life to so many around her?

Tirumagal is another of Ambai's brave and unconventional protagonist who is shown playing three roles; a loving daughter, abused wife and caring mother. The story traces the journey of her emancipation from a life of oppressive relationships to that of an independent being who acquires agency to eventually attain her subjectivity. Agency calls for the ability to act with intent and awareness. And, in a woman, it empowers her to act effectively against her own oppression and subordination, thereby giving her a sense that she can be herself. Kathy Kea demystifies "empowerment", in Patti Lather's book, noting that it may be "liberating but it is also a lot of hard work and new responsibility to sort through one's life and re-build according to one's own values and choices." (76)

Ramasami, on the other hand, is portrayed as a true epitome of a progressive individual who displays the much-needed mutual understanding needed between men and women. His upbringing of Tirumagal –including respect for her abilities and her need for space - is an example which Ambai wishes to see in every father (male) for his daughter (female).

"Wrestling", as the name suggests, is for the war of the sexes; the war between Shanmugam and Shenbagam (husband and wife). Through the character of Shanmugam, Ambai shows male dominance and chauvinistic ownership of the wife as well as insecurity over her achievements while Nagammal (Ayya), just like Ramasami, is a man who considers both men and women as equals and does not discriminate between the two sexes when it comes to teaching music. Ambai thus projects Ayya as one who champions for equal rights for women, in both personal and professional spheres.

The archetype Sita in *The Ramayana* is the ultimate model of an ideal devoted Indian wife who is faithful to her husband and hence maintains her *pativrata dharmalike* a virtuous wife. But these are age-old stereotypes and beliefs, and seem redundant - if not defunct -in today's world. If one wishes to understand the present social, economic, political and religious attitudes, then mythology is a sine qua non. It is by revisiting history and traditional/cultural myths that one can apprehend the impact that these characters have on the psyche of a people.

Ambai contests these myths by comparing Sita with Chenthiru in the story entitled "Forest". Chenthiru is a loyal wife who plays a vital role in her husband's firm. However, in spite of her hard work and devotion, she is refused partnership in the firm. She feels so offended by this behaviour that she decides to stay alone in a forest to explore life and her own self and find peace. Parallel to this story runs the well-known tale of Sita who too found

shelter in a forest after being banished by Rama. Ambai, however, revisits the epic to re-write it by giving space to Sita for self-realization and self-exploration, thereby making her point in favour of the expansion of boundaries for a woman.

In other words, Ambai deconstructs the story of *The Ramayana* to that of *Sitayana*, from the perspective of Sita who questions the norms of wifehood and daughterhood thus hitting hard on the discriminatory and biased view of society. She even despises the actions of Rama. Finally, she redeems herself and emerges as an empowered woman who reclaims agency and discovers herself when she says: "It is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now let me take hold of it; take it into my hands." (IFD:178)

Many unjust practices are exposed by Ambai (viz. the double standards of morality, gender wars, clashes of ego, confinement to domesticity, hierarchical order of family and many more) who questions social attitudes using diverse narrative strategies. Proverbs, myths, music, food and colloquialisms, have been made use of to explore a woman's space, self, silence, self-realization, subjectivity, dreams, sexual-awareness, communal harmony, autonomy, and the like. All of these point to Ambai's own brand of feminism which is more about advocating for the "non-degradation of human beings than bra-burning." (Chowdhry) In fact, she has re-defined and re-negotiated a whole spectrum of relationships including those of father-daughter, mother-daughter, husband-wife, teacher-student, lovers-friends, etc. In Ambai's own words, the book is thus not just about women but about the need to see women's writing beyond the classification of "women's perspective" or "transformative literature". This leads to an understanding of her work in a broader perspective, and not just as a woman's work dealing with issues pertaining to women. Holmstrom maintains in the 'Introduction' to the anthology:

There has always been in her work a thrust towards freedom from bondage, the letting go of identities that we are forced into, one way or another. (1)

Paula Richman too remarks: "Lakshmi is passionately interested in women's lives and experiences; the spaces they occupy; their support system; and, their sustaining dreams". But, a majority of her stories deals with the issue of "quest for self-realization and liberation". (Rajbanshi 390) The general consensus that thus emerges is that Ambai attempts to transform the self-image of women by re-drawing the map of patriarchal domination and its degenerative influence on women.

To sum up, Ambai has dexterously dealt with a range of references to childhood memories; the experience of exile and travel; the Tamil diaspora;

the relationship between the individual and the community; the question of the individual self; the overturn of roles and rules, etc. and it is through her writing that she "...continues to explore the possibility of a more fluid notion of the self, and not to seek an open-ended society wherein we encounter each other not through given roles and identities, but as individuals and equals." (IFD:12)

In sum, it maybe concluded that C.S. Lakshmi/ Ambai's works are characterized by her passionate espousal of the cause of women. She writes in a lucid and profound style, with a touch of humor and realism. 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 towards demystifying gender and negotiating the cultural terrain, in the eventual attempt at re-configuration and representation.

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