

The creative potential of women:

A Reading of Ambai's *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*

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Abstract

C. S. Lakshmi is an Indian writer who is widely known for her short stories in Tamil. She writes under the pseudonym Ambai. Born in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu in 1944, Ambai calls herself a “feminist who has lived without compromise.” Apart from feminist fiction, the Tamil author has been carrying out research in the field of women’s studies. Her brand of feminism has earned her recognition in literary circles in both India and abroad. Her important research projects include *Illustrated Social History of Women in Tamil Nadu* and *An Idiom of Silence: An Oral History and Pictorial Study*. The resulting research has been published as two volumes of the *Seven seas & Seven mountains* series. The first volume, *The Singer and the Song* (2000), is a collection of interviews with women musicians and the second volume, *Mirrors and Gestures* (2003), is a collection of interviews with women dancers. Her popular fictional works include *A Purple Sea* (1992) and *In A Forest, A Deer* (2006). Lakshmi Holmstrom has translated some of her works into English.

Ambai’s works articulate the experience of women in a colloquial language using multiple narratives. She shows her characters negotiating with the external world to seek freedom of mind and spirit. She demonstrates how patriarchal forces are present even in their absence and exercise an invisible control over the minds of women in the families. She also highlights how freedom cannot be sought by rebellion but by gradually dismantling the confining structures.

The present paper titled *The creative potential of women* is an attempt to examine different aspects of the household presented in Ambai’s short story *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*.

Kitchen is a powerful space. It is a site of power struggle for women of the household. And, it is the powerhouse of the home, as the process of cooking takes place here. Therefore, the kitchen is central to the lives of members of the family. This means that this vital space should be specially designed and appropriately located in the household. However, such is not the case in Ambai's short story *A Kitchen in the corner of the House*. In Ambai's text the kitchen was constructed in the end after the rooms were built; and it was located in the corner of the house. It wasn't carefully made keeping in mind its significance to the home; it was just "stuck on in a careless manner." (*A Kitchen in the corner of the House* 177) The kitchen occupies the opening section of the story. This shows that the kitchen and its inhabitants are vital to the plot. However, its peripheral location is reflective of the condition of its inhabitants-the women. Through her story, the author throws light on the limitations of the women in a traditional household. However, her narrative is not without the prospect of mobility in this confinement.

Ambai begins her narrative with the description of the kitchen. Located in the corner of the house, Ambai writes, kitchen is the most unplanned part of it. It is improperly lit, ill-ventilated and lacks proper drainage:

"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." (*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 177)

The author further describes,

"A zero watt light bulb hung there. 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." (*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 179)

The darkness of the kitchen not only refers to the absence of light in the kitchen, but also to its state of oblivion for the male members of the family. They did not pay attention to it when the house was constructed, and they were least bothered about its maintenance. The patriarch of the house was planning to build a room in the house when the daughter-in-law Minakshi broached the subject of renovating the area around the kitchen. She suggested:

“Papaji, why don’t you extend the verandah outside the kitchen? If you widen it, we could have some chairs out there. If you then build a wash place to the left, you could have a really wide basin for cleaning the vessels. And, then beyond that, you could put up some aluminium wire for drying the clothes.”(*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 179)

Minakshi had valid reasons for her suggestion: the kitchen was very small, it got flooded with water when vessels were washed, and the lines for drying clothes obstructed the view of the mountain. This view of the mountain from the kitchen is representative of the prospect of liberty for the women who toil there. The greenery is symbolic of the healing power of nature. The temple on the top of the mountains stands for the spiritual comfort that is denied to the women because of extremely demanding house work.

Minakshi’s idea was ignored and the state of the kitchen remained unchanged. Her suggestion was considered an open challenge to the authority of the patriarch. Minakshi was a South-Indian girl who had married Papaji’s son Kishan. He felt that she had enticed his son into marrying her. She was dark-skinned i.e. did not conform to the North-Indian convention of beauty. She did not cover her head, thereby refusing to submit before the tradition of the community. She spoke a lot, was fond of reading and roamed about freely. She transcended the personal sphere and moved into the public sphere. In doing so she violated the conventions imposed upon the female gender by the society. So, Minakshi was not the ‘Angel in the House.’ She refuses to be silent and confined. She will speak, as the other daughters-in-law of the house-Radha bhabhiji and Kusum stand silently. Though her suggestion was not heeded, yet she made her statement which is a remarkable feat in a patriarchal society. As Helene Cixous writes in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

“Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away- that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak-even just open her mouth-in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only which that speaks in the masculine.”(*The Laugh of the Medusa*) This observation holds true in the story as well. When Kishan supported Minakshi’s suggestion, his father ignored him. On the contrary when Papaji’s friend remarked that if a woman stayed at home and behave like all other women, she will remain all right, he was lauded by him.

The youngest daughter-in-law of the family- Kusum- was the ideal daughter-in-law. Unlike Minakshi, she was quiet and fair-skinned. She knew sewing, embroidery, baking and had acquired many other skills. She had a degree in politics and French, but her degrees were not meant to empower her. They were just other feathers in her cap, to make her perfectly eligible for the role of a daughter-in-law of a fine family. However, even Kusum desired freedom from the confines of patriarchy. The winged coral floating in the sky was her symbol of freedom. Her reaction on looking at these birds depicts her desire for liberty.

The other daughter-in-law of the family- Radha- works in a bank. She was great at Maths but was not allowed to pursue her studies. She skilfully manages her work at the bank and at home without expecting any help from her husband. Her husband is of the opinion that women are used to household work while men aren't. This reminds me of Judith Butler's idea that 'gender is performative.' Household duties are considered the prerogative of the female gender as they have been assigned those duties from times immemorial.

Then, there were the senior women of the family- Bari Jiji and Jiji. Despite their age and experience, they had no say in the affairs of the house. They echoed the views of the male members of the household. Their life revolved around the men folk, catering to their needs and demands. They had internalized the beliefs and conventions they were taught and were passing on their knowledge to the next generation.

The kitchen was the crucible where all these women mingled. Despite their different ideologies, they worked together to perform the art of cooking which was central to the functioning of the household. They mixed the flour into dough and prepared the spices, chutneys, pickles, pakodas, papads. Kitchen is their working space, the area where they transform the raw into the consumable. It is their territory where they rule. The author is of the opinion that the women have internalized the belief that only kitchen is their kingdom, they can exercise their authority only in this particular space. This belief system has restricted them, binds them, enslaves them. Thus, in advocating for the expansion of the kitchen, Minakshi was demanding the expansion of their territory. When she demanded that the clothes line be placed elsewhere, she called for removal of the barrier that obstructed their view of the mountain. This is in adherence to Michel Foucault's idea that architecture restricts. In *Space, Power and Knowledge*, Foucault has stated that architecture perpetrates social hierarchies and serves as an instrument of control. Architectural changes are significant

because they supplement other changes. However, he also says that architectural changes alone cannot ensure the practice of liberty. It is human thought and action that is vital to ensure liberty. An instance from Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* will illustrate this. When Gita gets married into the traditional Rajsthani household, she is told to cover her head with her veil. Initially, she perceives this to be an act of confinement. However, she eventually realizes that this veil provides her with her own space even in the public realm. A similar line of thought could be helpful for the women of Ambai's story. If they consider the power they can wield through the kitchen they will feel empowered. Cooking is an art, and their culinary skills are a form of creative expression. If they focus on the limitations of the kitchen and the neglect it faces, they will feel powerless.

A woman can't acquire power by rebellion. She can't attain freedom by breaking the boundaries. By trying to transcend the boundaries and emulate the man, she indirectly acknowledges his supremacy. The idea is similar to the female phase of women's writing as explained by Elaine Showalter in her work *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. The female phase is marked by rejection of both imitation and protest against male art forms. It is characterized by the woman turning to her own experience as the source of her art. In a similar fashion, woman in a family can empower herself by elevating the stature of the kitchen.

Jiji feels empowered because she has control over the kitchen. She is proud of her culinary abilities and workmanship. She is proud to possess the keys of the household. She realizes the importance of her role in the family and the authority she can wield through this. She is feeding the family. She is the nurturer. She creates the dishes that are relished by one and all. Their lineage had the reputation for food and drink. Their family is known for their food and hospitality. Kitchen is the place where the uncooked stuff is transformed into delicious food stuff. So, the family's repute rests with the kitchen. The women deserve credit for their hard work and craft. It is this skill which makes the kitchen different from other areas of the house. The kitchen becomes the space for the creative expression of the women. Here, their culinary skills find an expression. Kitchen becomes a space where the women can intermingle freely without any inhibitions. It is a democratic space where the North and the South co-exist and both the cuisines are cooked. It is a ritualistic space where women work with scared elements of food and fire. Their way of life was woven around the kitchen. An important step towards liberty and self-actualization of the women was acknowledging the importance of the kitchen.

However, the younger generation of women do not share this view. Their idea of liberty is transcending the domestic sphere. They believe that they cannot derive power from the kitchen. The kitchen runs on the resources that are provided by the patriarch. So, the ultimate authority rests with him. This authority exercises control over the functioning of the kitchen, thus depriving kitchen the status of an autonomous body. The author compares the patriarchal authority to the tentacles of an octopus that tightly clutches its prey. Liberty can be attained only when a woman is able to set herself free from the patriarchal control on her body and mind. Minakshi says:

“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... Just Dularibai. Dularibai alone. And, from that strength. Authority.”(*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 193)

Her words remind one of Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

“Now let us shake ourselves free, if only for a moment, from the androcentric habit of mind.”
(*The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* 61)

Minakshi rebels against male authority. She declares that the Angel in the House has to be killed if women have to emerge from obscurity as empowered individuals. She is of the view that domesticity is imposed on the women to curtail their creative expression.

“If all this clutter had not filled up the drawers of your mind... 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 while sitting upon Mount Kailasam.”(*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 193-4)

In lamenting the lack of freedom given to women, Minakshi echoes Virginia Woolf’s views on the impact of patriarchy on the intellectual and creative potential of women. In her seminal text *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf imagines the course of life of Shakespeare’s sister. She says that the girl was as intellectually gifted as her brother but was denied the chance to go to school. Her parents discouraged her from reading at home and engaged her in household chores like mending the stockings. She hid or burnt whatever little she wrote. Later, marriage was imposed upon her but she ran away to London. However, her love for theatre and fiction did not get her anything. She eventually committed suicide. Her creative genius was stifled by patriarchal social constructs.

Through her story, Ambai brings to the fore perspectives of different women. She asks the women to realize the power they already possess while they are in the command of the kitchen. Also, she urges them to gradually transcend the boundaries and nurture their creative genius. She tells the women to carve their own identity and destiny by not allowing themselves to be “trapped or diminished by gender, but freed.”

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