

Gender, Culture and Representation in Ambai's *In a Forest, A Deer*: A Postmodern Analysis

Gunja Patni and Vishnu Kumar Sharma

Abstract

C. S. Lakshmi (1944 -), popularly known by her pseudonym 'Ambai', is one of the finest Tamil fiction writers today and recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (2021). She re-contextualizes and re-defines feminism – in the Indian context – in her seminal work *In a Forest, A Deer* (2006), hereafter *IAFAD*, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström. Winner of the Hutch Crossword Translation Award 2006, this anthology is an enduring assertion of Ambai's beliefs that women need to: know, that is, to be in touch with a stable or grounded 'self'; to allow fluidity and change; to be free from bondage; and to let go of identities that are forced upon them, one way or another. For Ambai, feminism is not just about 'women' but also about recognizing how modern discourses of gender produce human beings as exclusively 'male/masculine' or 'female/feminine'. The primary inquiries that are explored in this analysis of her short stories are: How does the author interrogate the experience of being 'female'? What distinctions can be drawn between a 'feminist' perspective and the concept of 'femininity'? In what ways does the art of storytelling mirror the societal gender constructs prevalent in middle-class Indian culture? We will shift the focus from a mere linguistic or textual examination to a broader exploration of ideological and cultural contexts, utilizing gender as a gateway and scrutinizing the existing inequalities, ideological paradigms, power relations, and the changing contours of female subjectivity/agency. We analyze these themes by drawing on a range of postmodern critical theories, examining gender/body politics, notions of self, agency, and their associated complexities. Thus, by highlighting the enduring legacy of male hegemony and patriarchal constructions of womanhood, and the embodied female experiences, this article subverts the male-female power equations in *IAFAD*, wherein Ambai demonstrates continuing concern with the predicament of women, as well as her evolution towards a feminism that attempts to question female space, identity, and freedom.

Keywords: Agency, Feminism, Gender, Identity, Self, Subjectivity, Women

Introduction

It is pertinent to note that "gender is both part of the world we live in as well as a way of understanding that world."¹ While sex distinguishes between biological male and female based on physical characteristics, gender is entrenched in ideology and reflects a hierarchical, patriarchal societal structure that dictates the traits of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' attributed to individuals. These terms are not eternal given norms; rather, they are social constructs that

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¹ V. Geetha, *Theorizing Feminism: Gender* (Kolkata: STREE, 2002), p. xv.

become ingrained, institutionalized, and enforced over time to legitimize male dominance and authority over women within societal traditions and systems. Simone de Beauvoir opined that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” arguing that gender is made in culture and not something fixed by nature.² De Beauvoir acknowledged that women were placed in a subordinate position as the ‘Other’ in relation to men. Jacques Lacan argued that the phallus serves as the primary signifier in our symbolic world, and generates all possible meanings, so women, in contrast, are always positioned as the ‘Other’ within this symbolic framework.

There is no such thing as The woman, where the definite article stands for the universal.
There is no such thing as The woman since of her essence- having already risked the
term, why think twice about it? of her essence, she is not all.³

Monique Wittig contends that “there is only one gender, the feminine, and that the masculine is not a gender because society has made it the ‘general.’”⁴ In other words, masculinity is a universal standard, while femininity is simply an attribute and therefore treated as less than. Judith Butler argues that gender is by no means tied to material bodily facts, but it is performatively constructed in culture, a social construction, a fiction, and so gender identities consist of acquiring what is outside (in culture) viz. societal norms, tradition, and expectations:

Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.⁵

In other words, genesis is not solely corporeal; it is performative so that the body becomes its gender only “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” and can be seen as a form of discipline.⁶ Sarah E. Chinn describes the process as:

While we may recognize that gender is coercive, it is familiar; it is ourselves. The naturalizing effects of gender means that gender feels natural – even the understanding that it is performative, that our subjectivities themselves are constructed through its performance, does not make it feel any less intrinsic. Our identities depend upon successful performance of our genders, and there is an entire cultural arsenal of books, films, television, advertisements, parental injunctions and peer surveillance to make sure those performances are (ideally) unconscious and successful.⁷

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1949), p. 273.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 144.

⁴ Monique Wittig, ‘The Point of View: Universal or Particular?’, *Feminist Issues*, vol. 3 (1983), pp. 63-69.

⁵ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 273.

⁶ Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’, p. 274.

⁷ Sarah E. Chinn, ‘Gender Performativity’, in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, eds Sally R. Munt and Andy Medhurst (London: Cassell Books, 1997), p. 306-07.

Behaving outside of expected gender norms leads to various forms of punishment – especially in females – both direct and indirect. Conversely, conforming to these norms offers a sense of reassurance about the fundamental nature of gender identity. However, this reassurance quickly gives way to anxiety, as society often penalizes or ostracizes those who challenge the idea of fixed gender roles. This indicates a societal awareness that the truth of gender identity is socially constructed and not inherently determined.

Regarding prevailing developmental tendencies, postmodernist thinking provides an insightful viewpoint. It diverges from the empiricist pursuit of objective truth by highlighting the subjective, contingent, and socially constructed nature of knowledge and reality. Nollaig A. Frost and Frauke Elichaoﬀ remark that:

It refocuses the relative experience of each individual and moves away from an often arbitrary and artificial (binary) categorizations, such as “man” and “woman.” It questions the validity of distinctions and assumptions based on cultural, societal, and class distinctions; and it deconstructs these socially constructed categories to explore variations in individual experience within these groupings. In doing so, it questions and makes obsolete the groupings themselves.⁸

Michel Foucault, while conducting his analysis of power relations and the operation of it points out that “power is not about acquiring something or the thought of combating and oppressing some force. It operates from a myriad of perspectives, a myriad of individuals, organizations, and groups, in a variety of relationships.”⁹ Foucault’s exploration of discursive power introduces a new perspective for feminist thought. He contends that power is governed and molded by a web of discursive interactions. Therefore, if women aim to seize power and transform the subordinate position they have historically occupied, they must significantly modify the standing of women’s speech and address its marginalization. Postmodern feminist writers recognize that women’s individual experiences are complicated and varied so it is impossible to homogenize their demands and experiences. In fact, “The convergence of feminism with postmodernism, according to feminist scholars, offers a chance to question and analyse repressive power systems, broaden the scope of feminist analysis to include diverse experiences, and interrogate the complexities and fluidity of social identities in contemporary society.”¹⁰

Additionally, feminist philosophy has evolved alongside the emergence of postmodernist concepts. Instead of viewing gender as a simple dichotomy, Postmodern feminist writers explored the multiplicity and complexity of gender identities, recognizing a spectrum of possibilities beyond traditional categories. Rajul Bhargava opines “The postmodernist project of ‘difference’ is what the women writers would like to play upon and make the ‘other’

⁸ Nollaig A. Frost and Frauke Elichaoﬀ, ‘Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory’, in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Hesse Bibber (California: Sage, 2014), p. 96.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 23.

¹⁰ Lauren Kathleen Frost, ‘Big Daddy Lives or Don’t Say the F Word: Intersectional Feminist Directing in Theory and in Practice’, *The Arbutus Review*, vol. 10, no.1 (2019), pp. 4-20.

realize its significance.”¹¹ Similarly, Luce Irigaray’s theoretical underpinning/theory of sexual difference supports feminism in advocating for the recognizing and celebrating of differences among individuals, groups, and subject positions, ultimately facilitating practical efforts to subvert traditional gender norms/power structures and improve women’s situations. The aim of feminism thus, is to position itself as the main focus of discourse/discussion and ideology.

Postmodern feminism is committed to critiquing all those modern theories that are so lofty, grandiose, and all-encompassing, attempting to build a theory of community, i.e., establishing political and moral principles based on the experiences of local, specific groups while rejecting causation and macro-social conceptions.¹²

In this case, the objective of this article is to explore gender dynamics, power relations, and the changing contours of female subjectivity/agency in contemporary India. To make the discussion more plausible, the author(s) will employ various postmodern critical scholarships on gender politics, politics of the body, identity, selfhood, agency, and its attendant issues. Additionally, we will delve into methodological portrayals of women and examine how these approaches are groundbreaking in contemporary contexts. The hypothetical position is to study if women today can negotiate their position in family/society based on their choices; are they allowed to give voice to their concerns, desire(s), and so on? In the study, the author(s) do a detailed analysis of *In a Forest, a Deer* (2006), hereafter, *IAFAD*, a collection of stories written by C. S. Lakshmi (Ambai).¹³ Lakshmi Holmström’s translation captured the flavors and nuances of the original stories from Tamil. As Ambai writes “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.”¹⁴

This article explores the following: first, How does the author interrogate the experience of being ‘female’?; second, What distinctions can be drawn between a ‘feminist’ perspective and the concept of ‘femininity’?; third, In what ways does the art of storytelling mirror the societal gender constructs prevalent in middle-class Indian culture?; and fourth, How does such a narrative contribute to shedding light on the contemporary condition of society, particularly concerning women? The endeavor aims to shift the focus from a mere linguistic or textual examination to a broader exploration of ideological and cultural contexts, utilizing gender as a gateway; to subvert the male-female power equations in the chosen text wherein Ambai demonstrates continuing concern with the predicament of women, as well as her evolution towards a feminism that attempts to question female space, identity, and freedom. Modern life has considerably altered and added to the content of a woman’s experiences, which have been interpreted by her in diverse and original ways. The quality and level of women’s perception of the world have drastically changed and so has her awareness of her *self* and her relationships

¹¹ Rajul Bhargava, *Gender Issues: Attestations and Contestations* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), p. 2.

¹² Mohd Hafiz Bin Abdul Karim and Ariff Aizuddin Azlan, ‘Modernism and Postmodernism in Feminism: A Conceptual Study on the Developments of its Definition, Waves and School of Thought’, *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-14.

¹³ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. viii.

with the world. The 'new woman' today, shorn of her feminine mystique, is eager to bestir herself to shake off the sloth of centuries, which thwarts her character and aspirations.

Ambai in Contemporary Tamil Writing

C.S. Lakshmi (1944 -), better known by her pen name 'Ambai,' stands out as a contemporary Tamil author whose writings passionately advocate for women's causes while delving into themes of relationships, love, space, exploration, identity, harmony, and self-discovery. She is the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women) and a member of the Global Feminisms Project. She has authored several books in Tamil and English, including: *Sirakukal Muriyum* (1976); *Veetin Mulaiyil Oru Samaiyalarai* (1988); *A Purple Sea* (1992); *In a Forest, A Deer* (2006); and *A Meeting on the Andheri Overbridge* (2016). Recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award (2008), the Sahitya Akademi Award (2021), and the Tata Literature Lifetime Achievement Award (2023), to name but a few, she has devoted her life to the cause of women. Ambai is the pen name she has chosen for her creative writings. She says "Ambai is the woman who becomes a man called *Sikandi* in *Mahabharata* and takes revenge on *Bhishma* who she feels ruined her life. I liked the androgynous quality of Ambai and liked the idea of a borderless gender."¹⁵

And so, in her works, we find women who resist and give voice to their concerns, choices, dreams, longings, and more importantly, their individuality. Paula Richman aptly observes that Ambai displays a fervent interest in women's lives and experiences, exploring the spaces they inhabit, their support system, and their enduring aspirations. Yet, prevalent throughout her narratives is also the theme of the journey toward self-realization and liberation. She draws inspiration from Tamil short story writers such as Mauri and Pudumaipittam, among others, and astonishes her readers by creating something new; an experiential style with new forms and new language which is linked basically with her beliefs and practice both as a woman and a writer. Her plea to the modern woman writer is to explore and augment a newer and freer form of expression that restraints from reinforcing popular and conventional images of women and speak/write the truth, based on their real experiences. She says that such a new language must also be able to communicate women's silences through words and images.

The story titled "Unpublished Manuscript" concerns an accomplished academic Tirumagal and her daughter Senthamarai, and as the hidden stories of their lives. Neither Ambai nor any of her protagonists are believers in the traditional sense. They believe in God but are not god-fearing; they are spiritual but not very religious. Women such as Tirumagal never go to the temple or perform *pūja*. It is interesting to note that Ambai adopts some of the themes from the Bhakti Movement in the story to escape from the rigidly defined roles and identities. Bhakti poets believed in the notion of melting or dissolving away given roles and categories. And so, we find Tirumagal – hoping for a casteless, classless, and genderless society just as Bhakti poets did – singing a lyric of the Tiruvāṣaṁ, "*Nekku nekkul urigi urigi...* Melting melting to the heart's core"¹⁶ and the daughter, Senthamarai, eagerly questioning her

¹⁵ Antonia Navarro Tejero, 'Gender Without Borders: An Interview with C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai)', *Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses*, vol. 57 (2008), pp. 159-62.

¹⁶ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 83.

mother that “If men can soften and dissolve and melt through *bhakti*, why can’t they do so out of love?” She decided firmly on the sort of man she could respect. He would have to know how to melt. “Melting, melting to the heart’s core.”¹⁷

Tirumagal, the daughter of a rationalist and idealist Ramasami, chooses to marry Muthukumaran who projects himself as a progressive writer. Muthukumaran’s macho and sexist attitude forbids him from accepting the truth that women can work, earn, and be famous. “Why do you always have to be sitting in front of your typewriter? I am the poet here. If I were to sit in front of it, it would mean something. What is this rubbish you are writing?”¹⁸ The irony of the context lies in Muthukumaran’s repetition of the question “Are you a woman? Call yourself a woman?”¹⁹ Muthukumaran’s predicament extends beyond the personal realm; it is inherently societal with an erroneous belief in the association of dominance/power with male identity (manhood) and masculinity. In many societies, individuals in comparatively weaker positions are relegated to a feminine status, regardless of their prescribed gender roles. Hence, masculinity “not only defines relationships among and between men and women, it also defines relationships among and between men and in some situations, among women, too.”²⁰

It is imperative to state here that women are labeled as masculine when assuming leadership roles with militaristic power dynamics and unethical practices underscores that masculinity is not inherently biological. Women are compelled to embody masculinity to navigate and challenge the masculinized power structures within the system. This fact underscores the importance of comprehending masculinity and femininity in both genders, viewing them as conscious constructs of the human mind rather than biological predispositions. Consequently, understanding the construction of masculinity and its association with power poses a challenge to hierarchical power structures and relationships. In this narrative, Muthukumaran internalizes the negative connotations of masculinity, attempting to assert dominance over Tirumagal, ultimately leading to a strained familial relationship.

Tirumagal marries Muthukumaran, a man whom she loves, and realizes after marriage that what she hoped to be a lifetime of bonding turns out to be nothing but a contract of slavery, where her inner life and individuality are erased in the marriage. Marilyn Friedman states that,

Intimate relationships affect us in our very homes, our “havens in a heartless world” (to recycle a contemporary cliché), the places where we are supposed to be safe, nurtured, and protected. In intimate relationships, we expose our bodies and bare our souls, making ourselves vulnerable at the very core of our beings. When one’s haven is a heartless world, there is no further place of refuge, no sanctuary in which one can rest secure from the violence that threatens one’s exposed and vulnerable core self.²¹

The story brings out a crucial aspect that is often overlooked: the myth of a happy love marriage. It shows how gender-oppressive ideology and behaviour mark the politics of the body and how such behavioural patterns are perpetuated irrespective of education and class:

¹⁷ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 84.

¹⁸ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 94.

²⁰ Kamala Bhasin, *Exploring Masculinity* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), p. 24.

²¹ Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 141.

If a female body was to be nailed down as Gulliver was by the Lilliputians, the different nails would be the projected religious and mythological role models, the issue of purity (inclusive of virginity and fidelity), marriage, lineage, caste and economic status. Thus, violence, rape, abduction and control, become the necessary associates to produce a docile body and control its labour.²²

Tirumagal in the story leaves her abusive husband and defiantly breaks the mould of the 'ideal wife' archetype. Here, Ambai's narrative is centered upon the subjectivity of Tirumagal who finally evolved from the position of passive victim to a state of potential for active agency, an active subaltern, a female with a capacity to voice and express. Friedman defines agency as something exhibited by beings "who can act from intentions, that is, who can do things because they want to or because of reasons or purposes that are theirs- beings who can engage in doings for which they are, and can be held, responsible."²³

"More often than not, women are seen as objects of change rather than as agents of change, imitators rather than initiators, bystanders rather than full participants," but here Tirumagal is an exception.²⁴ She takes the reigns of her life in her hands and raises herself from the position of an oppressed and docile being to one capable of making decisions, hence acquiring a subject position. She is Ambai's bold and progressive protagonist seen in three different roles – a loving daughter, an abused wife, and a caring mother – who finally transformed into a woman capable of claiming her individuality. Years later, when she has left her violent husband and is living alone, cooking with her daughter is then a means of returning to the ordinary world – a pleasurable and aesthetic activity. Considering Tirumagal and Senthaamarai's pursuit of self-actualization and freedom, it becomes evident that Ambai endeavors to reshape women's self-perception by re-drawing/challenging the entrenched patriarchal dominance and its detrimental impact on women.

Another important characteristic of Ambai's works is that she does not essentialize men and women. She believes that both males and females possess the ability to nurture. So, we have Ramasami, an unconventional character who loves cooking for his daughter and his family. Men such as Ramasami break the prescribed roles/dictates given by society. His upbringing of Tirumagal, which includes recognizing her talents, capabilities, and her right to personal space, is an example of individuality and equality which Ambai wishes to see in every man (as father/husband/brother) for the woman (as daughter/wife/sister). Ramasami's liberal thoughts on widow's education also align with the post-modernist thought of making women independent and self-sufficient when he says:

What is so revolutionary in saying that a widow can live a decent life only by marrying a fellow? We must help her to educate herself and find a job . . . But when you say that some man must come and give her a new life, it looks as if you are suggesting that we must always keep her under the control of a man . . . If she wants to, then let her marry.

²² Gunja Patni and Rimika Singhvi, *Female Subjectivity in Narrating the Body: Selected Works of Contemporary Indian Women Writers* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2023), p. 114.

²³ Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, p. 9.

²⁴ Kanwalpreet Kaur, 'Women and Agency: A Story of Struggle for Empowerment', in *Gender, Patriarchy and Violence*, ed. Rajesh Gill (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2017), p. 148.

But why do you make out that he is giving her a new life? Why do you suggest that the man is making some sort of sacrifice?²⁵

Ambai's portrayal of Ramasami is a clear indication of her objective of seeking an open-ended society where we encounter both sexes not as exclusive male or female, or through given roles and identities, but as individuals and equals.

Wifedom and Motherhood

The societal expectation that wifedom and motherhood remain the primary objective of a woman's life persists. The custom of wearing a vermilion mark or '*tali*' symbolizes the specification of a woman's marital status, and the absence of such feminine traits makes her the subject of discussion. The story entitled "Journey 1" narrates the story of one such unconventional woman who has discarded all the outward symbols of matrimony and wifedom to affirm her individuality. Apart from delving into life's existential realities, Ambai intricately portrays the sensibilities and sentiments of women regarding their roles, status, and recognition in society. She meticulously observes their emotional intricacies, vehemently denouncing the quiet anguish and vulnerability experienced by countless women, particularly those within the institution of marriage.

Infertility, in India (specifically), is taken as a disease and society has a particular way of screening women who are childless. An infertile woman is oppressed physically, psychologically, socially, and legally – by men and women alike – often resulting in alienation from society and her body, thus making maternity the central issue. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the experience of motherhood as "the potential relationship of any woman to the powers of reproduction and to children," and the institution of motherhood as "ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control."²⁶ Thangam Athai, according to others, has a hollow body, a body that has never blossomed because of her inability to bear a child. The story corresponds to Ambai's view that women's experience of mothering is controlled and manipulated through the social institution of motherhood. It raises questions related to a woman's body; her reproductive capability; nurturing capacities and the related social stigmas. Julia Kristeva rightly opines that "If pregnancy is a threshold between nature and culture, motherhood is a bridge between singular and ethical."²⁷

Moreover, women are often conditioned to think of child-rearing/motherhood as life's chief objective, an assumption that women achieve personhood only through motherhood. Despite the truth that Thangam has an auspicious hand and could give life to many, she is considered barren, "like a ripe fruit full of juice . . . through her touch, through her caress, a life-force sprang towards us from her body, like a river breaking past its own banks. It was at the touch of her hands that cows would yield their milk. The seeds that she planted always sprouted" she was pitied.²⁸ Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah's contentions on this fact is that:

²⁵ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 88.

²⁶ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 13.

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident' in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University, 1977) p. 6.

²⁸ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 76.

“In India, women’s self-worth and value is usually dependent on their reproductive functions”²⁹ and so, “The appeal to resist this social imperative, an appeal that is heavily pedagogic in tone, is a staple of virtually all the feminist discussion of female infertility that generally argue that the desire of motherhood is socially constructed and therefore, susceptible to revision.”³⁰

Adrienne Rich’s distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering highlights the complexities inherent in women’s reproductive roles. While the institution of motherhood often operates within patriarchal structures to control women’s reproductive capacities and enforce traditional gender roles, the act of mothering itself can be a source of immense joy and empowerment for women as in the case of Thangam Athai who does not take infertility as any deformity, rather questions them who pity her affirming that “she has the same properties that all bodies have ... It feels pain when it is hurt ... If its wounds go sceptic, it gathers pus. It digests the food it eats. What more do you want?”³¹ Whatever the world says she feels herself like a queen, a house full of children (though of the husband’s second wife) to shower love and caress upon. This differentiation underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing women’s agency and individual experiences within the broader context of societal expectations and constraints.

Almost in all cultures, mythology has revolved around the extraordinary exploits performed by the male heroes be it Lord Rama, Lord Krishna or Ulysses, and Achilles. The central focus is on heroic deeds of male heroes often relegating the valor of women to the background. The character of Sita in *The Ramayana* epitomizes the ideal of a devoted Indian wife, unwaveringly loyal to her husband and steadfast in her marital fidelity. However, these traditional norms appear outdated, if not obsolete, in today’s society. To grasp the intricate social, political, and religious dynamics of modern India, an exploration of mythology is a *sine qua non* for mythology here is not just an academic or a historical subject but an important and living topic of contemporary relevance.

Chenthiru is a loyal wife who plays a significant part in her husband’s business endeavors but is refused partnership in the firm despite her dedication and hard work in establishing it. Ambai here draws an interesting parallel/twist between the life of the traditional Sita of *Ramayana* and the modern Chenthiru. Sita goes to the forest after being tested for her fidelity by Rama for the second time but Chenthiru, unlike Sita is not forced, rather radically moves to live in the forest to explore life and her *self*. The story signifies Ambai’s dexterous use of myths and the innovative ways in which she interweaves them into contemporary life situations to create a profound conceptual impact.

Here, Ambai resists the events that occurred in history and re-write them from the perspective of Sita – a retelling from *Ramayana* to *Sitayana* – challenging the norms of daughterhood and wifhood, thereby making her point in favour of the expansion of boundaries for women. Her questioning of the established norms tells of the discriminatory and biased view of society against women from which she is ready to free herself. In the end, after rummaging between the choices of whether to renounce or not to renounce, decides to take the

²⁹ Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women and The book Review Literary Trust, 1991), p. 34.

³⁰ Christine St Peter, ‘Feminist Discourse, Infertility, and Reproductive Technologies’, *NWSA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1989), pp. 353-67.

³¹ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 76.

reign of her life into her own hands 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.”³² And so, we find in the story Sita visiting Ravana’s hut to learn Veena. Sita is represented as a strong woman neither complaining nor lamenting or yearning in pain rather utilizing her time learning to play the veena. This story gives voice to those genders/class/caste in mythology who have been considered as the *other*. Ambai is courageously committed to the cause of providing new significance to the roles of women in various myths.

Through the character of Chenthiru, Ambai puts her creative powers to rediscover the role and significance of women in Indian mythology. She revisits and reinterprets the popular Indian mythology and narrates it in her stories by de-objectifying women, satirizing the narrative treatment given to a woman to eradicate the gender stereotypical projection of women characters and make the stories gender sensitive where the “other sex” is revised and given prominence. Ambai’s post-modernist text offers a variety of demystifications of traditional female roles, for instance, wifehood, not as it is traditionally expected to be fulfilling and nurturing but as enslaving.

Tradition is gendered so the same elements of tradition, such as religious beliefs, education, dress codes, and freedom of movement are enforced very differently on males versus females. “Vaaganam” is another such story that narrates a girl’s desire to ride a bicycle; to see the whole world but is bound to the domestic space not by any man but, a woman, her mother. It is imperative to acknowledge here that social spaces are marked, gendered, and reworked, where women herself and others give importance to scriptures of morality to define female identity. These scriptures may be interpreted in various ways at different times. The public domain entails an assertion of authority and control over both - people and objects, whereas the domestic realm is marked by its subordinate status.

Centered on the intersection of space and gender, the primary concept revolves around women’s pivotal role in shaping and sustaining domestic spaces through their material contributions. Chithi is subjugated and subordinated by a patricentric society that maintains its patriarchal rule by involving the active participation of women in upholding traditional gender norms and power structures. So, we find Chithi’s mother restraining her from riding a bicycle for “girls with broken arms and legs never got married.”³³ One can find the unequal treatment meted out to women in a society that accepts a male even with a broken limb but not a woman. Moira Gatens notes that masculinity is not valued unless performed by a biological male. Hence the male body is imbued in our culture with certain traits that characterize maleness or masculinity. Similarly, femininity is performed by the biological female. The female body in our culture is imbued with certain traits that characterize females or femininity.

The body is the site where power relations are both created and interrogated. Patriarchal discourses seek to control the female body through regulative practices. Mary Wollstonecraft sheds light on the truth that girls from their infancy are taught that “beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its

³² Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 178.

³³ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 70.

prison,”³⁴ continuing that “Like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength, and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty.”³⁵ Luce Irigaray’s exploration of how language, culture, and power dynamics shape our understanding of sexual difference and the role of women in society is important. Luce Irigaray contends that for so long as women remain ‘the other’, divided among themselves as well as from men, they will not be capable of governing or being governed. They will remain in the order of powerlessness. Thus, women need to come together to fight against the injustice.

Here, Chithi while confronting the pervasiveness of male power, devotes herself to an electronic device, a possible way for her to resist subordination and preserve the anatomy of the female body and female selfhood. She flaunts the traditional hypocritical ideologies and finally, finds fulfillment when she comes upon an electronic vehicle to travel great distances – feeling like a queen – thereby, showcasing to the world what she can do:

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. She began to seek the right electronic moment to destroy demons and meet the gods.³⁶

Ambai’s unbridled imagination and her rigorous feminism – a society where both the sexes enjoy equal freedom – find a vent in the story titled “Direction”, a story of a girl who is stung to anger at the notion of Lord Vishnu lying on the serpent bed *Adishesha*, with Lakshmi relegated firmly to his feet. The girl in the story brings into the framework the secondary status given to women including Goddesses in the society. She questions why only Vishnu has *Adishesha* and not Lakshmi. Here, a rather quirky Lakshmi deserves her own *Adishesha*. She unveils goddess Lakshmi’s desires/outrage saying,

I wanted to walk through deserts, chatting to Fatima. I wished to take the infant Jesus from Mary’s arms, to carry him on my hip, and to wander around Bethlehem and its surroundings. What good does it do me to sit here like this, at his feet? Do I at least have a serpent bed to rest upon, stretched out at my ease?³⁷

Truly, Ambai’s women are role models for the women of the future. There is no hypocrisy here as women breaking the rules where men are held in the spotlight. Men and women are equally feminists, equally nurturing and equally oppressing as well.

Conclusion

While tracing the position of women in society – in relation to her individuality, autonomy, identity, self-discovery, agency and subjectivity – vis-à-vis cultural traditions and hegemonic patriarchal structures, it can be observed that Ambai presents a rich context for the re-visioning

³⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1792), p. 82.

³⁵ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, p. 31.

³⁶ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 73.

³⁷ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 41.

of subjectivity. She adeptly unveils numerous unjust practices (viz. the stress on jewellery, double standards of morality, gender war, division and jealousy, clashes of ego, confinement to domesticity, hierarchical order of family, etc.) by challenging social attitudes, using a variety of narrative strategies. Proverbs, myths, music, food, and colloquialisms have been made use of to delve into the multifaceted aspects of a woman's existence and to explore a woman's personal space, identity, self-discovery, individuality, aspirations, sexual consciousness, communal unity, autonomy, and more.

Ambai wishes to transform the self-image of women, and destroy patriarchal domination and its negative influence on women. Her women characters question the concept of love, marriage, and sex and feel an urge to redefine human relationships. As she asserts, My characters think not only out of the box but also question the prevailing systems. "What is to be a good woman is something defined and pre-planned. Drawing a 'kolam', cooking and keeping the husband in good humour defines an ideal woman, and this is questioned by my characters."³⁸

It is fair to say that Ambai advocates for a brand of feminism focused on preserving human dignity rather than symbolic acts like bra-burning. Indeed, Ambai has redefined and renegotiated a wide spectrum of relationships, ranging from father-daughter and mother-daughter dynamics to husband-wife interactions, teacher-student relationships, and even the intricacies of love. Her exploration of these relationships offers fresh insights and perspectives, challenging traditional notions and enriching our understanding of human connections.

In Ambai's words, her book transcends mere categorization as solely about women; rather, it emphasizes the importance of viewing women's writing beyond labels like "women's perspective" or "transformative literature." This broader perspective allows for a deeper understanding of her work, recognizing it not just as literature concerning women's issues, but as a contribution to broader themes and human experiences. Lakshmi Holmström opines, "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."³⁹ Ambai has beautifully refashioned the stories and tackled the issues like search for identity and investigation of the self in a postmodern world of shifting definitions around feminism and patriarchy and it is through her writings 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."⁴⁰

To sum up, Ambai has beautifully showcased and has raised awareness of what it is to 'be' a woman, to how one 'becomes' a woman, and the often-painful journey of taking up the subjective position from being a mere object, and the recognition, establishment – and assertion – of self and identity. Ambai's feminism is thus an aspect of her anxiety to recover a humanism that she sees as denied by the contemporary world. Throughout her work, there is a sustained questioning of patriarchal value systems, but her text also situates gender with other intersecting factors that constitute female subjectivity. Hence, there is a need to look at Indian

³⁸ 'Feminist Writer Ambai Wins Sahitya Akademi Award, In NFHS Report Card, the Good, the Sober, the Future', *Kurukshetra IAS Academy*, 31 December (2021). At: <https://kurukshetraiasacademy.com/daily-current-affairs-31-12-2021-feminist-writer-ambai-wins-sahitya-akademi-award-in-nfhs-report-card-the-good-the-sober-the-future/>

³⁹ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ambai, *In A Forest, A Deer*, p. 12.

woman's writing through the prism of Indian feminism which comes with a necessary corollary, to not view men and women as opposing forces but as complimentary to each other in the fashioning of society and civilization.