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Journeys of the Self: A Study of Female Protagonists in the Selected Short Stories of Ambai

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Ambai is the pseudonym or penname used by contemporary Tamil writer C.S.Lakshmi. This paper attempts to take up four short stories from her collection titled 'Kaatil Oru Maan', first published in Tamil in 2000. This collection of short stories was later translated into English by Lakshmi Holstrom and published in 2006 under the title 'In A Forest, A Deer.' This paper seeks to study the female protagonists in the selected stories that contain the recurring theme of journeys into different places. These journeys represent not just the physical movement of these women into various public spaces that often were not accessible to them earlier, but also serve as a metaphor for the search for a greater understanding of the ever-evolving self in a society that is also changing. The stories that will be studied are, "Journey 1", "Journey 2", "Vaaganam" and "Forest".

The protagonist in all of the stories under study are middle-class, upper-caste, educated, unconventional women, much like the author herself. In some stories there are hints that the protagonist is also a writer, like in the story, "Forest", the protagonist goes into the forest to escape the city, taking with her a pen and notebook. Thus, these women can be seen as an extension of the author herself.

In the journeys that are undertaken, there is often a self-conscious awareness that the protagonist is not conventional, and does not adhere to the patriarchal image of a married Tamil woman. There is a constant sense of being on the outside, an observer, but also being observed and judged in a social context where the woman stands out for being unconventional or thinking unconventionally.

For instance, in the story titled "Journey 1", the unnamed protagonist boards a bus by herself and seeks a single seat for she does not want curious passengers bothering her. She feels defensive and her situation is described in terms of war. To quote from "Journey1", "This single seat was going to be her line of defence. Nobody was going to get past it. Any stripling Abhimanyu attempting such a thing would be felled immediately" (14). However, she fails to get that desired seat and has to share with a woman whose baby urinates on her. When she complains, she is accused of being ignorant because she does not have children of her own and is unmarried. These judgements are based on her external appearance, and the fact that she is not wearing a *tali*, the symbol of a married woman. To quote from "Journey 1", "Someone else glanced at her neck and put in, 'Looks as if she isn't even married, anyway'" (16).

The point to note in 'Journey 1' is the inability and reluctance of the protagonist to explain herself or communicate with the people around her. To quote, "She could not explain to them that she was indeed married, that her husband worked in a different town, and that she didn't believe in such outward symbols like a *tali*" (17). There is a distancing between her and the other passengers. The fact that she is travelling alone is also odd to them. When someone asks her whether she is travelling alone she, to quote from "Journey 1", "...nodded and turned away" (18). This turning away expresses her self-awareness of being different in what is a very traditional society, and also the feeling that her explaining her deliberate choices to be as

she is, will not lead to any greater understanding between herself and the others. There is a sense of isolation here.

But, at the very end of the story she talks to a little boy who sits next to her, about Salim Ali because he is interested in birds. This not only hints at her educated self, but shows that attempts at communication can and should be made. The story seems to suggest that the self is not isolated, but lives in society and must negotiate and engage with it, even if it is not always in tune with it.

In “Journey 2” the woman protagonist is placed more as an observer whose own pre-conceived notions of the traditional society around her are rattled. The story is a reminder that it is not just the self that is unstable and evolving, society too has those same characteristics and social mores are flouted in subtle ways more often than is realized.

The title indicates that it is the same woman as in the previously discussed story. In “Journey 2” the reader comes to know that she has been living in Delhi for a long time, and has travelled and lived in many different parts of the world, even outside India. Although originally from Tamil Nadu, she is quite liberal and refuses to be tied down to a single identity so much so that her friend, Dinakaran, who holds on fast to his Tamil identity, wonders at her unconventional ways and asks her, to quote from “Journey 2”, “How did you get to be like this?” (23). He himself is very traditional, and eats only South Indian food when he visits her in Delhi, and is very parochial in his outlook. So the woman tells him, to quote from “Journey 2”, “If you divide up the earth like this, each one staking a claim to their own piece, then people like me who wander around in many places must go and stand on wastelands, or what?” (24).

The important binary in this story is between Dinakaran, whose ideas of identity are fixed, and the woman who is well-travelled and has adapted to changing circumstances. Her identity is fluid and she refuses to be pinned down to any one stereotype. To quote Lakshmi Holstrom, “In all her stories, Ambai questions roles, rules, and identities that are ‘given’” (6). However, the irony in this story is also directed at the woman, for she discovers in a very subtle way that Dinakaran has had a child with a woman called Lily who is married to another man. In fact, Dinakaran takes her to Lily’s place where Lily cooks a meal for them.

Thus, the unnamed protagonist’s own preconceived fixed judgment of Dinakaran as the conventional Tamil man is shaken. She is forced to think to herself that, to quote from “Journey 2”, “she was not sure whether she knew who Dinakaran the individual actually was” (25). Thus, these journeys are important because they help her to constantly experience the complex nature of reality which prevents her from making the same error of developing fixed value-judgements or forming rigid opinions about others. Ambai is constantly critiquing any attempts of stereotyping or creating fixed notions about the self or the other. In “Journey 2”, identities are again shown to be unstable and unfixable.

The story next studied is titled “Vaaganam” meaning vehicle. The modern, middle-class Indian woman’s world has expanded, moving from private to public spaces, whether it is by using a bicycle, a bus or, as in this story, the electronic mouse. In “Vaaganam”, the female protagonist, Bhakyam, is shown searching for a vehicle of her own ever since she was a child. To quote from “Vaaganam”:

She could not remember owning any such thing as a tricycle or a pedal car as small child....When she riffled through the family photograph album, she found photographs of every single boy from their large

family, either on a tricycle, or sitting inside a toy motor-car. Of course, there were photographs of her as well. Holding a wooden doll. Or hanging on to the arm of a wooden chair...It was obvious that the family photographer held firmly to the belief that women were incapable of standing up on their own, and without the support of something or the other. (65-66)

Thus, the search for a vehicle of her own becomes a metaphor for her desire for independence and defiance of gender stereotypes.

The story ends with Bhakyam having found an “electronic vehicle”, the computer. This is symbolic of the new vistas that have opened up to some middle-class women in India. Otherwise too, the ability to go on journeys by themselves, to wherever they want, also gives freedom, and new ways of engaging with the world. The knowledge that opens up thereof, can then be used to compare, contrast and inform her own self in her society. Ambai sets up the ownership of the electronic mouse as an empowering moment in the story. To quote from “Vaaganam”, “She, who was descended from all those who had chariots composed of snake, lion, swan, and horse, now had a vehicle of her own. She began to seek the right electronic moment to destroy demons and meet the gods” (73). Thus, the comparison is with goddesses who were equal to the gods, and had their own vehicles and their own powers. Thus, the new *Vaaganam* or vehicle in the form of this useful and interconnecting empowering tool can be a politically subversive tool for it allows both for the acquisition of knowledge and also for the expression of the self to people around the world.

The last story under discussion, titled “Forest” deals with a journey into forbidden spaces and communities. The protagonist, Chenthiru, is an educated businesswoman who wants to leave the city and escape into the tranquillity of the forest. But her colleague is worried about her safety as she decides to live alone in a forest guest house for some time. It is made clear in the story that this journey is not just an escape from city life or a holiday, but also an exploration, although the nature of it is left deliberately vague and unfixed. Chenthiru says in “Forest”:

I don't know my goal. Is there a goal at all? I know how to overcome the obstacles in my way. But I don't understand the quest. What do I seek? And how? Do I even seek? How much further is it going to be? Even though I have come so far, the burden has not eased from my body. I want to feel light. (153)

As a modern, educated, self-dependant working woman, Chenthiru has had the ability to make unconventional choices for herself. These questions however, are an indication that a sense of completion has not been reached, and may never be. Once again, there is a sense of isolation, of not quite fitting into society nor having the desire to do so.

Soon afterwards, Chenthiru hears voices coming towards her and discovers three women from a lower caste who are carrying food. To quote from “Forest”, “With the ease of long familiar friends, they asked her and told her about themselves” (153). They shared their food with her. Another day, she meets them again and they cook together, creating an impromptu feast. To quote from “Forest”, “When she asks them what they are celebrating, they said it was nothing special, that they tended to get together now and then, just like this” (167). Cooking for pleasure as against cooking as an essential female activity is a theme also explored in other stories of Ambai, like, “Unpublished Manuscript”. Here cooking and sharing of food are acts of fellowship and not a chore or duty. Also, importantly, caste-based

rules of commensality, that is, the act or practice of eating at the same table or who one can share food with, are broken. This journey has taken Chenthiru outside her usual boundaries of caste and class, perhaps not for the first time, but still symbolically important. This friendly feast calms her trouble mind.

One way of interpreting this sequence of events is to state that Chenthiru's journey indeed continues, for these apparently new experiences and meetings are a reminder that the self is not merely constituted in gender terms. In the story, when everyone has finished cooking, they all eat together, no one serving the other. This defies the hierarchy that society demands not just in gender terms, but in class, caste and other terms. These hierarchies are a result of fixing identities onto people, stereotyping them and casting them into traditionally rigid roles.

To quote Lakshmi Holstrom, "Ambai continues to explore the possibility of a more fluid notion of the self, and to seek an open-ended society where – as in the ideal feast – we encounter each other not thorough roles and identities, but as individuals and as equals" (12). Thus, there seems to be a conscious effort on Ambai's part to show this dissolving of hierarchies and forays into new mental and physical spaces. There is recognition that the self is defined not in isolation, nor can it be seen in gender terms alone. Journeys into different social and mental spaces have to be taken, outside stipulated boundaries, so that through new experiences, a better, though not absolute understanding can be gained and conventional identities can be deconstructed.

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