

"A Patriarchal World from a Woman's Perspective: Exploring Female Experiences" in Ambai's short story 'A Kitchen in the Corner of the House'

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Abstract

C.S. Lakshmi, known by her pen name Ambai, is a Mumbai-based Tamil author who received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2021 for her collection of short stories. Her work deeply explores the lives of Indian women, from childhood to old age, offering a poignant critique of the societal pressures and restrictions that shape feminine identity. Central to her writing is the theme of women's oppression and their struggle to assert themselves within changing socio-cultural contexts.

In her acclaimed story, *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, Ambai portrays the lives of women in a traditional Ajmer family, highlighting their confinement to domestic spaces, especially the kitchen. This reflects a broader, often overlooked reality faced by many women in India, where submission and passivity are ingrained virtues under patriarchal norms. Ambai's storytelling skillfully traces the journeys of her female characters, urging them to challenge and transcend these conventional roles.

Through her work, Ambai not only amplifies the voices of marginalized women but also calls for gender equity, encouraging readers to reflect on the oppressive structures that persist in society. Her narratives spark critical thought on the balance between tradition and modernity, advocating for women's liberation.

Key words: Emancipation, Suppression, Subjugated, Liberty, Traditional roles, Feminism

Introduction

Ambai's short story "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House," published in 2006 and translated by Lakshmi Holmström in 2019, offers a poignant critique of patriarchal structures in domestic spaces, particularly within the context of Rajasthani households. Ambai, a renowned Tamil feminist writer, is known for her exploration of women's lives and struggles, often delving into the themes of societal constraints, gender inequality, and the silent suffering of women. Born in Tamil Nadu in 1944, Dr. C.S. Lakshmi, who writes under the pen name Ambai, is not just a fiction writer but also a historian, researcher, and educator. She has made significant contributions to the study of women's history and has actively worked to document their contributions to both literary and social fields through her NGO, SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women), founded in 1988. Her works, both in Tamil and English, are considered milestones in contemporary Tamil literature, shedding light on the lives of women who have long been marginalized and silenced.

Ambai's narrative in "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" revolves around the lives of elderly women in a Rajasthani family, specifically focusing on Jiji, a septuagenarian woman who embodies the deeply ingrained patriarchal values of her time. The story critiques the cultural norms that trap women in domestic roles, highlighting how the kitchen—a space traditionally associated with women—is not only physically but also emotionally confining. The kitchen becomes a metaphor for the limitations imposed on women, symbolizing their restricted autonomy and their constant subjugation to the demands of the family and society.

The central theme of Ambai's story is the examination of how patriarchal structures have shaped the lives of women, making them internalize the belief that their place is within the confines of the kitchen. In this traditional setting, Jiji, the elderly matriarch of the family, finds herself trapped in this role, believing that she can only assert her authority as the "queen of the house" if she conforms to the prescribed gender roles that dictate women's lives. Her life is governed by a rigid adherence to customs, where the kitchen is seen as the ultimate symbol of a woman's worth and contribution to the family. Ambai skillfully uses Jiji's character to illustrate how patriarchal ideologies

have been deeply ingrained, and how women are conditioned from a young age to accept these roles without question.

Comparing and Contrasting the Selected Fictions

The story's setting, a Rajasthani household, is described with an acute awareness of the details that highlight the everyday struggles of women within the domestic sphere. The kitchen, located in a dark, poorly ventilated corner of the house, is where the women spend the majority of their time. It is a space that is physically uncomfortable, with a small basin that makes cleaning difficult and a drainage system that floods the area with dirty water. Women working in this environment have to endure constant discomfort, with their feet becoming cracked and sore from standing in the water. However, rather than addressing the problem, the elders in the family merely offer a soothing ointment for cracked heels as a symbolic gesture of acknowledgment. The gold bangle, given as a token of appreciation, serves as a hollow reward for their suffering, reinforcing the notion that women's sacrifices are to be accepted as part of their duty.

Ambai's portrayal of the kitchen is more than just a commentary on poor physical conditions; it reflects the emotional and psychological confinement of women. The space itself is an emblem of the emotional denial that women experience, where even the small joys—such as the view of the green mountains or a Ganesha temple outside the kitchen window—are obstructed by the clothesline, further symbolizing how their lives are deliberately constrained and how their desires and emotions are disregarded. Despite these conditions, none of the women in the family protest or question their fate, except for Minakshi, the youngest daughter-in-law, who challenges these deeply embedded beliefs.

Minakshi's character stands out as a symbol of defiance against the traditional roles imposed on women. Her bold suggestion to Papaji, the patriarch of the family, to expand the verandah outside the kitchen and to improve the facilities, is seen as a shocking and rebellious act. It challenges the conventional expectation that women should remain silent and accept their subjugation without question. Her suggestion, which aims to improve the quality of life for the women working in the kitchen, is met with resistance and disdain from the elder members of the family, particularly Jiji, who sees it as a threat to the established order. The other daughters-in-law remain silent, unsure of how to react, having never seen such open defiance from a woman before. Minakshi's act of speaking up is a small but significant challenge to the status quo, highlighting the unspoken rule that women have no authority to voice opinions or make decisions.

Ambai's story is a poignant exploration of the emotional and physical toll that traditional gender roles take on women. It highlights how these roles are not just a reflection of societal norms but are deeply ingrained in the personal lives and relationships of women. Through the character of Minakshi, Ambai critiques the patriarchal mindset that prevents women from asserting their independence and autonomy. The kitchen, as a space of domestic labor and sacrifice, becomes a symbol of the larger system of patriarchal control that limits women's opportunities for self-expression and freedom.

"A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" is a powerful commentary on the social structures that confine women and limit their agency. Through vivid descriptions of the domestic space and the lives of its inhabitants, Ambai sheds light on the invisible chains that bind women to their traditional roles. The story not only critiques the patriarchal norms that define women's lives but also celebrates the quiet resistance of women like Minakshi, who challenge these norms in small but meaningful ways. Ambai's writing remains a crucial contribution to the feminist literary tradition, offering a voice to the silent suffering of women and calling for a reimagining of gender roles in society.

Patriarchy is a deeply entrenched system of social hierarchy found across the world, where men typically hold positions of power and control, making all key decisions within a family or society. This system places men at the center of both economic and social order, while women are relegated to the margins, often confined to roles defined by tradition and societal expectations. Patriarchy operates subtly and invisibly, asserting its grip on women in ways that often go unchallenged or unnoticed. In the online blog "Law Pedia," established by Dinesh Gardia and Akash Nanda on March 31, 2021, the status of women in India is depicted as one where progress has been made, but many challenges remain. Despite some advancements, the blog highlights that gender discrimination and violence against women are still widespread issues in India. It stresses the importance of continuing efforts towards achieving a more equitable and just society for women. This reality is reflected in the lives of women in many households, where they face a systemic suppression of their voices and desires.

The situation described in Ambai's story "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" mirrors the very struggles outlined in the Law Pedia blog. In the story, the daughters-in-law, though living in an educated and upper-middle-class family, find themselves unable to express their opinions or even share their pain. The family's social status provides only a superficial semblance of equality for the women, while internally, they suffer in silence, unable to assert their voices. This silence stems from a deeply ingrained patriarchy that dictates their roles in the household, reducing them to mere caregivers and supporters, with little to no agency over their own lives. The male members of the family—especially the father-in-law, Papaji—hold all the power, and the women are expected to remain compliant and submissive.

The central characters in the story, Jiji and Bari-jiji, embody the complex power dynamics that exist within a patriarchal household. Bari-jiji, the stepmother of Papaji, was once the undisputed ruler of the household after marrying Papaji's father, a man significantly older than her. She was in charge of the kitchen and controlled all the food and resources within the home. Her authority extended to every aspect of the household, and she exercised it with absolute power. Jiji, as Bari-jiji's daughter-in-law, played the role of assistant in the kitchen, assisting Bari-jiji in meal preparation and other domestic duties.

However, when Papaji's father passed away, the power dynamics within the house shifted. Within ten days of his death, all control passed to Jiji. Bari-jiji, now in her late eighties, was stripped of her previous authority, including her control over the kitchen, the right to eat the food of her choice, and even her right to partake in certain rituals and practices. Jiji, now in charge, took over the responsibilities once held by Bari-jiji. She became the "queen" of the house, holding the keys to the kitchen and dictating the preparation of meals. The shift in power, however, did not bring peace, as Bari-jiji, in an attempt to regain some of her lost power, resorted to using religious beliefs as a tool to manipulate her family. She pretended to be possessed by Goddess Amba and used this to demand the food she craved, such as meat and alcohol, which she was otherwise denied. Her manipulation worked, and she was provided with what she wanted, though the family members hesitated to challenge her for fear of defying religious customs.

This scenario reflects the harsh reality of widowhood in Indian society, where a woman's worth is often measured by her marital status. Widows, as noted in the article "Marital Status and Women Empowerment in India," frequently face social stigma and are denied the respect and security that marriage provides. In a society where a woman's position is often defined by her relationship to a man, a widow's status is diminished, and her authority within the household is severely restricted. Bari-jiji's loss of power after her husband's death exemplifies this harsh reality, where her identity and authority were tied to her marriage, and once her husband passed away, she was left powerless and silenced.

With Jiji now in control, the kitchen becomes her domain, and she rules it with a strict hand. She is the one who determines what is cooked, how the spices are used, and what is done with leftovers. The kitchen, once Bari-jiji's kingdom, is now Jiji's. Her control over the spices and expensive food items, such as ghee, cashews, and raisins, becomes a source of pride for her. These items are kept under lock and key, and nothing is consumed without her permission. Jiji's authority in the kitchen is a reflection of the deep-seated patriarchal beliefs that have been passed down through generations. She recalls the advice her mother gave her on her wedding day: "Take control over the kitchen. Never forget to make yourself attractive. These two rules will give you all the strength and authority you will need." These words, which she follows to the letter, serve as a guide for her throughout her life, reinforcing the idea that a woman's power lies in her control over the domestic space and her ability to conform to the expectations of beauty and subservience.

The story highlights the broader issue of gender role stereotyping in Indian society, where women are expected to conform to specific behaviors and norms. As Ambai points out, women are expected to be soft-spoken, calm, and obedient, while men are allowed to display confidence, assertiveness, and freedom. This cultural conditioning restricts women's autonomy and perpetuates the cycle of patriarchy, keeping women confined to domestic roles with little opportunity for self-expression or agency. The characters of Jiji and Bari-jiji illustrate how deeply entrenched these gender roles are, and how women, despite their age or experience, continue to adhere to these roles for fear of losing their place in the social structure.

In conclusion, Ambai's story offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal system that continues to dominate Indian society. Through the characters of Jiji and Bari-jiji, the story explores the ways in which patriarchy operates in the domestic sphere, dictating women's roles and suppressing their voices. It also highlights the generational nature of this oppression, where women pass down the same restrictive beliefs to their daughters and daughters-in-law, perpetuating the cycle of subjugation. The story serves as a reminder of the need for continued efforts to challenge these norms and create a more equitable society where women can freely express themselves and claim their rightful place in the world.

The story also presents a detailed depiction of the food culture and hospitality of Rajasthani families, reflecting the complex intersection of gender roles and patriarchy. Papaji, the patriarch, takes great pride in his hospitality and insists that no guest leaves his home without receiving some form of refreshment. Whether it's a simple drink like sherbet or a more elaborate meal, Papaji treats this as a matter of self-respect and pleasure. He even orders Jiji, his wife, to prepare more elaborate foods, including kebabs for the guests. This adherence to hospitality is so rooted in their lifestyle that there is always water boiling on a stove for tea, ensuring that food and drink are readily available. The constant availability of food suggests that the women in the household do not need to make special preparations when guests arrive; everything is already in place for any moment of need.

Women, particularly in the confines of the kitchen, become controllers of a space they believe is their domain. In this small world, they take pride in decisions like the meal for the day or the preparation of food. Yet, this sense of control and power is largely illusory, for the larger decisions of life are made by the men in the family. Women serve and prepare food with dedication, but their hard work goes largely unnoticed. Papaji, for instance, remains oblivious to the emotional or physical toll the women endure in the process of serving guests, and he takes the fruits of their labor for granted. The food, which is often delicious and abundant, appears as if it were conjured out of thin air, with no recognition of the labor behind it.

Despite this, women like Jiji and the other daughters-in-law continue to fulfill their duties without protest, as they have been conditioned to believe that this is their rightful place. Jiji's role in maintaining the kitchen reflects her belief in her power over it, but this belief is not one of genuine empowerment; rather, it is a form of self-imposed subjugation. For women, the kitchen becomes a symbol of their identity, an identity that is restricted and defined by patriarchy. The control over the kitchen is one of the few domains where women can exert influence, yet this power is fleeting and constrained. When Jiji's health begins to fail, her greatest fear is that her authority in the kitchen will slip from her hands. This fear highlights how deeply ingrained the connection between a woman's worth and her role in the kitchen has become. Even in her declining state, Jiji's primary concern is not her own health but the continuity of her authority over the kitchen, which she perceives as central to her identity.

The story also highlights the societal norms that shape women's roles. Jiji, when asked about her ideal choice of a daughter-in-law, insists on someone who is "educated, fair-skinned, and quiet." While education is valued, it is clear that its benefits are limited within the patriarchal structure. For instance, Radha, the first daughter-in-law, who has a post graduate degree in mathematics, uses her education only to manage household affairs, such as calculating the number of mouths to feed or estimating the food quantities for the family. Kusuma, another educated daughter-in-law with a background in French and political science, is expected to serve her family by performing domestic chores like cooking, baking, and preserving food. Even though Kusuma is highly educated, her role is confined to the household, reflecting the stark contrast between the potential of women's education and its actual application within the home.

This theme is reinforced when the women, despite their education and aspirations, find themselves trapped in the cycle of domesticity. At a family picnic, the women are busy preparing the food, managing the children, and catering to the needs of the men. The men, on the other hand, contribute little to the preparation or care of the children, reinforcing the gendered division of labour. When Radha struggles to get the children ready for the trip, Minakshi suggests that Radha's husband, Gopal, should help. However, Radha's sarcastic response reflects the resignation that many women feel: they must bear the burden of domestic labour while their husbands enjoy leisure. The story also emphasizes the subtle ways in which patriarchal norms are passed down through generations. The young girl, granddaughter, Priya, when asked about her future aspirations, declares that she will make chapatis in her house, a statement that is met with approval by the elder women. From a young age, girls are conditioned to accept their domestic roles without question. The societal expectation is that women will care for the home and family while men pursue careers and manage the outside world. This division is deeply entrenched, and women like Radha, Kusuma, and Minakshi often find themselves caught in the tension between their own desires and the duties imposed upon them.

However, Minakshi stands out as a character who is aware of the limitations imposed by tradition. While she does not openly rebel, she questions the status quo and tries to introduce small changes to the family's routines. She suggests that Gopal help with the children's care and expresses a desire to experience the beauty of nature instead of being confined to the kitchen. Minakshi represents the possibility of change, albeit within the constraints of her environment. In the end, when Jiji falls ill, it is Minakshi who helps her recognize that the authority she once held over the kitchen is not true power. Jiji's fear of losing control over the kitchen reflects how deeply she has internalized the belief that a woman's value is tied to her role in the household. Minakshi encourages Jiji to see that her identity is not defined by her ability to rule the kitchen, but by her true self.

Through these characters, the story critiques the patriarchal norms that define women's roles and limit their potential. The kitchen, which is often seen as a domain of power for women, becomes a prison that restricts their

growth and individuality. The story concludes with a message of hope: women must look beyond the confines of the kitchen to discover their true selves, free from the limitations imposed by society. Minakshi, though still conforming to some degree, represents the possibility of change and the need to challenge the traditions that bind women to a life of subjugation.

Conclusion

India has long been a patriarchal society, where gender inequality has been deeply embedded within the culture. This hierarchical setup, with men holding the primary power and decision-making roles, led to women being treated as subordinates with limited rights and opportunities. Through her story, Ambai brings this inequality to light, illustrating the subtle yet pervasive ways in which women are marginalized in both family life and society at large. The narrative highlights how men enjoy a privileged position, while women are relegated to secondary roles, often with little opportunity for personal expression or independence.

In the context of the story, the kitchen serves as a symbol of this patriarchal power. For Jiji, the kitchen represents a space of control, where she derives her sense of worth and authority. However, this perceived power is illusory, as it is confined to the narrow boundaries of household duties, reinforcing her role as a caretaker and nurturer. Despite the hard work and dedication she pours into feeding guests and managing the household, her efforts go largely unrecognized. The men, on the other hand, are comfortably insulated from these domestic responsibilities, enjoying the fruits of women's labor without offering any help in return. This disparity reflects a broader societal expectation that women should dedicate themselves to serving the needs of others, particularly men, without questioning or expecting anything in return.

Ambai uses the story to explore the painful silence that women endure in such a system. They are taught to accept their subordinate position and internalize the idea that their worth is tied to their ability to serve others, especially their husbands and children. Even the women who are educated, like Kusuma and Radha, are still expected to prioritize their domestic roles over their intellectual and personal aspirations. This is a striking commentary on how women's talents and potential are often disregarded in favor of their roles as wives and mothers. They are trained to see their primary responsibility as taking care of the family, a belief so deeply ingrained that they often do not question it, even if they long for something more.

Ambai critiques this deeply entrenched social norm and calls for a reevaluation of women's roles, urging them to seek autonomy and recognize their value beyond the confines of the kitchen. In her story, women are depicted as living within the limits set by patriarchy, blindly accepting the rights denied to them. The lack of awareness about their own potential and rights is a key factor in the perpetuation of this inequality. The writer underscores that societal norms should be challenged and that women must be empowered to stand up for their rights and demand equality.

A central theme in Ambai's work is the importance of self-awareness for women. She suggests that women must not lose their individuality or sense of self, even after marriage. Jiji's attachment to the kitchen, and her fear of losing control over it, serves as a metaphor for the way women become trapped within their roles. She has internalized the belief that her worth is tied to her ability to serve her husband and family, but as the story progresses, there is a glimmer of hope. Minakshi, a character who challenges some of the established norms, urges Jiji to recognize the limitations of her role and to seek out a different, more empowering way of living. Minakshi's quiet resistance to the traditional roles assigned to women serves as a model of strength and autonomy, showing that it is possible for women to break free from the shackles of patriarchy.

One of the most powerful moments in the story is when Jiji begins to understand the need for change. Her transformation is symbolized by her holding Minakshi's hand, a gesture that signifies her willingness to let go of her long-held beliefs and embrace the possibility of self-realization. This is a turning point in the narrative, as Jiji begins to question the limitations imposed on her by both society and her own mind. Minakshi's influence helps her recognize that she does not have to be defined by her role as a wife and caretaker; she can find her own identity outside of the kitchen and beyond the expectations placed upon her. Ambai's writing emphasizes that women must break free from the chains of traditional thinking and reject the notion that their value lies solely in their ability to serve others. She critiques the way women are conditioned to believe that their primary purpose in life is to care for their families, often at the expense of their own desires and dreams. Through the character of Minakshi, who questions the established norms and pushes against the constraints of patriarchy, Ambai advocates for a more liberated vision of womanhood—one in which women are free to define their own identities and pursue their own passions, outside the confines of domesticity.

The story also highlights the larger societal issue of gender bias, particularly the cultural preference for sons over daughters. This preference strengthens the patriarchal structure by reinforcing the idea that men are the primary providers and caretakers in the family, while women are relegated to supporting roles. The narrative critiques this

bias and calls for a shift in attitudes towards women, advocating for a more equitable distribution of power and responsibility. Ambai's exploration of the generational transmission of patriarchal values also underscores the need for change at a systemic level, as it is not only the older women who are complicit in maintaining these traditions, but also the younger generation, who must be taught to challenge these outdated norms.

Ambai's message is clear: women must be allowed to define their own identities, separate from the expectations placed upon them by society. The kitchen, while traditionally seen as a space of power for women, is ultimately a symbol of their confinement. Women must seek empowerment beyond these walls, reclaiming their autonomy and asserting their rights. Minakshi's role in the story represents a potential model for future generations of women, who must learn to challenge patriarchal constraints and pursue lives that are true to themselves. By rejecting the notion that a woman's worth is determined by her ability to serve others, women can begin to realize their true potential and embrace a future of equality and self-determination.

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