

Gender Perspectives in Ambai's Short Stories, 'The Forest and 'Gifts'

¹ **S. Ezhilarasi** Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Pallavaram Chennai.

Email: ezil6chinni@gmail.com

² **V. Jaisre** Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English, VELS University (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai.

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Abstract

Introduction of the Writer: Ambai is a Feminist researcher focussing on women's issues through her works. C.S.Lakshmi wrote her fictional literary works like novels and short stories under the pseudonym Ambai. She wrote her non-fiction, articles and published research papers as C.S.Lakshmi. She published her first literary work, a novel, 'Andhi maalai' in 1966. Her short story 'Siragugal Muriyum' published in 1967 received a good response. The kitchen in the corner of the house, A Purple Sea, In the Forest, a Deer, are her popular works. Her short stories are characterized by her passionate writing on gender issues suffused with satire, humour, love for nature and need for ecological balance. In 2021, She won the Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of short stories 'A Red-necked Green Bird'.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, puissant, Mythology, forest, panacea, patriarchal, reinvent, potential, individuality, identity.

Introduction

Ambai is an expert as a writer in genuinely portraying real life-like women characters in her works. She is truly a feminist justifying her role as a writer in creating diverse women characters making her readers empathize with them. These characters are not always sympathetic, shedding tears, timid or inhabitant. But rather they learn from their struggles, fight back, and are bold in their decisions. These characteristics make them unique. Hence can be termed as Puissant Women of Ambai. In her Short Story 'The Forest' Ambai explores the Psychological disturbances and anguish of the protagonist, Chenthiru due to the negligence she faces in the hands of her husband and family. She realizes that not only her kith and kin but the entire society causes such a dismay and vexation which leads her to decide to take refuge in the forest. After much altercation she goes to the forest where she envisions her life in comparison to that of mythological character Sita from Ramayana. She envisages her own life as a woman with grit and determination amidst the patriarchal impositions on a woman as a daughter, wife and mother. Ambai effortlessly portrays this character of Chenthiru as a strong Puissant woman who intends to rewrite Ramayana as 'Sita Ayanam' i.e. story of Sita with Sita as the lead.

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Ambai makes Chenthiru as a voice of women, who defies oppression under anybody's hand irrespective of Father, husband, son or societal pressures. Chenthiru as a child is intelligent in seeking knowledge from her parents and people around her. They wonder how a girl child is so inquisitive to know everything. Her quest for knowledge is sometimes ridiculed. Her love for trees and greenery is vividly illustrated by Ambai. As a little girl when she is found seated beneath a tree, her father teases her that the tree is her mother and that he has found her as a baby there some years back. Her mother also sneers at her seeing her sob. When her younger brother makes fun of her saying, "Ei, you are a girl who was born under a tree!" She retorts saying Buddha attained his enlightenment under a tree only. She feels maybe this could be the cause for her affinity towards trees and woods. Her husband Tirumalai discourages her saying not to venture into a life of austerity. He says that even in epic times a woman has been able to visit the woods merely by accompanying her husband. It is believed epic men went on their own to hunt or to destroy demons. A woman's visit could only be like that of Sita following the footsteps of Rama or Damayanthi walking by the side of Nala. Like hermits and saints, Chenthiru's thoughts drive her often to seek solace in nature. "There were those who teased her: was this an attempt at vanaprastha, they asked. Others ridiculed her saying, 'Oh Forest, come, come! Oh Home, go away!' Brahmacharya, samsara, vanaprastha and sannyasa- must all these happen at separate times and stages?" (145, In a Forest, a Deer). There is always a yearning to explore the dense secrets of the forest. Her actual intention is to self introspect and discover who she is. How else can she prove her mettle? She has been the pillar of support to her husband in his business. During the years when he has been struggling even to lead a mundane life, she has given him unreserved support to make some real progress. She has helped him in taking important decisions rendering valuable ideas that has helped him reap continuous successes. "Did he ever deny that?" (146, In a forest, a deer) She has worked tirelessly alongside Tirumalai as they gradually turned the business in the direction of masala powders and then expanding it to include silk material and readymade garments. For fourteen years they have struggled in the jungle of commerce, as if participating in a race. Now their business has reached as far as Canada. For the past eight years they have also entered into the totally unknown field of leather goods. Chenthiru herself has seen to the expansion of their sales in the variety of suitcases, handbags, shoulder bags, wallets, purses in different sizes and shapes in varied colours. There has been a talk of making her an equal partner in the business. It has come to nothing. But today she has been totally neglected. Neither her husband Thirumalai nor her son Karmegam pay heed to her. "Should she just bundle up her goods and set off? Run off to the forest?" (146, In a forest, a deer). She feels annoyed and dejected when ignored. Her enthusiasm in business and wise decisions are not considered now. The reason is she being a woman cannot be given the partnership. She is educated, clever and capable of leading and running the business triumphantly on par with men. Once they have reached the

pinnacle, they no more need her. Chenthiru decides to forsake them and spend some time in the forest. She writes to the forest department and receives an official letter permitting her stay in the forest guest house. Her husband laughs at her decision and tells her that women cannot stay in a forest. That has not been the practice. Forest is a place of perils and lurking dangers. So a woman cannot go alone to the woods without a man accompanying her. In Ramayana, Sita's safety is vouchsafed only by Rama's presence. Her husband says, "A woman's visit could only be like that of Damayanti, walking by the side of Nala. It was most appropriate for a woman to be a rishi- pathini, spouse of a sage, journeying along with her husband. If she did go there on her own, it could only be as the seductive Menaka, putting an end to a sage's meditation. For a woman, forest is a place where she cannot find her way." (147, In a forest, a deer). But Chenthiru refuses to lend her ears to them. When she shows him the permission letter she has received from forest officials, he exclaims in irritation, 'He complained that she had made all her decisions herself, informing him only at the end. He said she was behaving as if he had banished her, in some sort of way. Arguments and counter-arguments, threats, entreaties'. (147, In a forest, a deer). She is steadfast in thought and action. Her husband sends his brother Annamalai to drop her in the car. But she gets down after a while and takes a bus to the forest region. Chenthiru remembers her husband's argument, 'Everything there- trees, deer, flowers-is bound to mislead her and make her lose her direction. For a woman, the forest is a means of punishment. To send her there is to cast her aside and make her destitute' (147, In a forest, a deer). For some menfolk, a woman setting foot outside their house to explore the external world itself is like women being sent to the forest. Is that an attempt to fortify them or a threat they imagine? She carries a notebook, a dozen pencils and a pencil sharpener along with her clothes in a suitcase. There she is given a warm welcome by a forest guard and taken to the guest house where she stays. Like Wordsworth who seeks wisdom in nature her mind and soul longs to take refuge in the dense and depth of the forest to unravel the mystery of life. She is satisfied with the arrangements there in the room allotted to her. It has a table near the window through which she anxiously tries to get a glimpse of the forest. After relishing the food served, she feels refreshed and pens down her 'to - do' things there. Then after a nap she goes out for a walk where she converses with the tribal women there. As she treads into the denser part of the forest she feels the cool breeze and the ray of the sunlight that touches her. She is suddenly startled by a peacock dancing before her. She kneels down in front of the peacock saying that she doesn't know why she has come there and what her quest is. That moment she heard the voice of some women uttering that it would rain as they have seen the peacock dance. On seeing her they showed their surprise and invite her to join them for lunch. One woman breaks a piece of millet roti and gives her placing some thuvaial on it. As they keep eating, a familiar chit chat among women happens. These women tell their names as Minabai, Rukminibai and Savitabai. On

seeing Minabai chew tobacco leaves after food, she thinks of her mother who picked up that habit in Kerala. Her father has the habit of smoking cigarettes. She remembers how she has chided her mother asking her to quit that unhealthy practice of chewing tobacco. These three women live in small houses built in the forest region. The next day she visits the place where their houses are. Each one invites her home with a warm hug and she is pleased with their hospitality. She is amazed at their confined knowledge of the world they are in and their ignorance of the world outside. She is invited by these women to their bamboo built houses. Chenthiru finds their conversations very interesting and readily accepts to visit their cottages frequently. She reminisces how her brother-in-law brought her like Lakshman bringing Sita to the forest. Her anxiety spikes up when she thinks of the indifference of her entire family. There is not an iota of guilt on their part. This society on the whole takes women for granted. They think it is duty of women to remain patient and to endure all discrimination. She remembers her daughter Valli who is abroad and her son Karmegam who is exactly like his father in his behaviour. Even when her husband telephones her to tell her about their son going to Canada, she doesn't show any curiosity. Chenthiru compares herself to Sita and envisages within herself whether Sita has showed her defiance to Rama by asking Lakshman to beware of her brother who never trusted anyone. Sita tells Lakshman that Rama cross-questions witnesses. He is suspicious of everything. She has been put to ordeal so many times wherein once she has to jump into fire to prove her chastity. Another time for the sake of his subjects' acknowledgements of her purity she has been subjected to test. She asks Lakshman how long she can endure such humiliation. Then she wonders how absurd it is on her part to think of another man to understand a woman's misery. She tells Lakshman that She doesn't expect him to aid or stand by any woman's side. She very well knows that her brother-in-law cannot do anything rather than obeying Rama's dictation. She cannot resist it any more. Lakshman tells Sita that his brother has commanded him to abandon her in Atavi, the forest. She has to live in the ashram of Valmiki in the forest. She tells him that forest life is not new to her. She has sacrificed all comforts of nobility for Rama and accompanied him to the forest. But he was not grateful to her for her devotion towards him. He has only suspected her love and purity. Here, Ambai revolutionizes the character of Sita through Chenthiru. She only portrays her as a replica of Chenthiru. In the modern society, Sita would have refuted the patriarchal dogmas of our society.

Ambai mingles and juxtaposes the modern Chenthiru with the fictional Sita. It is in a forest that Sita is imprisoned. The forest also becomes her sanctuary. Even when in Ashokavanam as a prisoner seated under a tree waiting to be rescued by Rama, Sita's pure mind is filled with hope of Rama's love for her that will safeguard her from her enemies. But what remains the reality is that her husband Rama doesn't hold the same faith on her but is suspicious of her

chastity driving her to jump into fire to prove herself. This Sita of Ambai is not the submissive and docile queen of Rama but an alter- ego of Chenthiru 's mind. She envisions this Sita questioning and chiding the Sage and Poet valmiki for glorifying only Rama and downsizing the virtues of other characters. He has been loyal to his king as a subject but not as an author to his literary creation. So she firmly tells him that she is going to rewrite her life and mould her character. It is not Rama Ayanam but her story is Sita Ayanam. These stern and firm words appear fiery to the eyes of the sage. Sita feels relieved from bondage and oppression of chauvinism that has been suffocating her. Now she is independent and free to roam around the forest like a little girl hopping around in fun and frolic mindset. Chenthiru is hopeful of making Sita a rebellion. How king Janaka found Sita as a boon given to him by Mother Earth, Chenthiru is given to her father as a baby immediately after her birth in the shade of the tree where his wife's delivery happens that stormy night when their car breaks down near the tree. That is the reason why her parents call her the tree's child. Chenthiru considers that tree as her soulmate and shares her likes and dislikes, confides everything to the tree. She feels the tree was responding to every word she uttered. This bonding evolved gradually as a love for nature. Whenever her mind is perturbed the green atmosphere has a healing effect on her. She spends more time in her garden and estates of her father where he was working when she was a child. She relishes the simple food of the forest cooked of tubers ,greens and herbs. The same type of food she is able to relish among the tribal women she meets in the forest. Chenthiru compares herself to Sita in facing disappointment trusting the ideologies of the world. She being a woman is not feeble or weak but able to draw energy from the trees and the tranquility of the forest that make her strong. Chenthiru enters the world of fantasy where Sita meets Ravana who is kind to her .He is polite in words and behaviour. He narrates how he and his wife Mandodhari found a female baby in the lotus pond smiling and crying louder that she will kill Ravana.His wife panics and places the baby in a box,then sets sail the floating box in a river.He now calls Sita as his daughter fondly holding her hands. After Rama forgives him in the battlefield he renounces everything, his kingdom and temporal pleasures and seeks refuge in the forest. His soul is Happy here without anxieties and pangs of failure. He is no more a king carrying the burden of power on his shoulders. He is now able to taste the eternal peace in the woods.Sita then requests him to teach her to play the veena with which he creates a divine music.Chenthiru has learnt to play violin and now she is delighted to see her Sita play the veena. This sublime music elevates the tranquility of the forest with a soothing therapy to her soul.

‘GIFTS’is a short story by Ambai which is part of her collection of short stories,‘The Purple Sea’.The Protagonist is a Lady Reporter whose name is not mentioned by the Author.She travels from North India to South India to gather information on South Indian women and their

lifestyle. She is curious to know whether women in the south are the same like women in the north. Her intention of the visit is to record and analyze the status of women in south Indian states. She visits Tirunelveli, where a man named Chidambaram picks her up from the bus stand and takes her to his house and introduces her to the lady of the house whom he calls, 'Annie'. She is given a warm welcome with a refreshing south Indian cuppa. The Reporter relishes the crispy dosas with spicy chutney made by Annie. Then Chidambaram takes her to the Thamirabarani river where she is amazed by the crowd lingering all over in the vicinity. She wonders how could everyone have their bath in public in the river. She refuses to have a dip in the river. She even asks Annie about that, wherein she finds it's a common sight in villages and towns here to wash their clothes, bathe their cattle in the river. When she returns home Annie asks her to have her bath in the corner of the kitchen. She is astounded and reluctant but manages. She realizes the grim realities of women of this strata. They are confined within four walls which they believe is their world. Nowhere do they have a doubt of this state of their lives that they believe is true. They are blindfolded and they believe what the man of the house says is right. They obediently do as directed by menfolk. These women still think they are bound to remain silent since they are women and that only man has a right to talk his mind. It's a taboo for a woman to express her thoughts. The Reporter asks her a number of questions to study her perception of life. Annie has not seen the world outside her kitchen. She thinks that she is born in this world to do her duty as a woman, cleaning the house, scrubbing the kitchen floor, cooking for others, etc. She takes pride in it. The female Reporter makes a note of everything that Annie confides. She narrates her past life of how she has been married at a young age. Her husband mocks at her ignorance in front of the reporter. As a child, she yearns to have a bath in the sea but her father chides her and also beats for being adamant. She is always fascinated by purple coloured blue ocean. Once she sees a painting of the ocean which as if like a spell on her, allures her. She is enticed in its beauty. Everyday she goes to the shop just to have a glimpse of it. The shopkeeper asks the little girl the reason for her visit and one fine day he gifts her that painting. Annie shows that painting hanging on the wall. Her fifty years of age hasn't weakened her spirit. Her want is so limited only to that piece of art. The next day the lady reporter bids farewell to Annie and she goes to meet another interesting character. Chidambaram is reluctant to send her alone but she refuses further help. She is then received by Ganapathy who takes her to Chandra's house. She is young both in heart and soul who dreams of marrying a wealthy man so that she could enjoy her life in a cosy way. She thinks only her husband can give her the freedom by liberating her from the bondage of servitude in her brother's place. The Reporter is moved by the innocence of the girl who is hospitable towards her, busy in cooking her lunch and preparing aromatic coffee. The reporter is able to read her mind and comprehend her thoughts. She asks Chandra whether she is interested in coming to North India where she will

help her chase her dreams. But she refuses that proposal saying she is bound to obey her brother and cannot travel to Delhi or Bombay like her because her society doesn't permit that. But she is still hopeful that one fine day everything will change. The Reporter realizes that she cannot be the whistle blower now. She accepts Thirunelveli halwa sent by Chandra and the dosa packed for her by Annie before leaving. She has achieved success in her career and this trip to the south has given her the relevant data needed for her writing on South Indian women. This short story thus narrates the lives of three different women with diverse preferences. The Reporter is a bold woman, well-educated and well-settled in life aspiring to accomplish more success in her career. She is clear of her wants and future place in society. But the other two women characters, Annie and Chandra only built castles in air. They are deprived of education, identity and individuality. They think they are duty bound as women to do selfless service to the family. They cannot even speak their mind to the menfolk in their families. Such women are not aware of the significance of gender equality. They stand as symbols of oppression, silenced and muted by Patriarchal oppression.

Ambai, thus interweaves the real lives of men and women of today's world like Chenthiru and Thirumalai with the mythological characters of Sita and Ravana in the short story, "The Forest". Chenthiru rewrites the story of Sita, herself and of every woman who wants to alter the unwritten-laws against women and the boundaries set by men as law makers. Ambai anticipates such women to turn into law-breakers or rebels defying the injustice against women in the name of tradition and convictions confined only to women for centuries. Chenthiru believes that The forest has a panacea to all their melancholy. It turns an elixir helping both Chenthiru and Sita reinvent their potential. In the short story, 'Gifts' Ambai makes the extremes meet. The contradictory characters come across each other representing the majority clan of theirs. Anni and Chandra are meek and subdued women who represent majority of Indian women. These characters of Ambai are ordinary women who are controlled by the dominating men in their families who are the breadwinners of the families. These men take the privilege of nagging and sneering at the women for their ignorance calling them foolish women. They are unable to discern how they are victimized and never they dream of questioning their opponents. There is no chance of any rebellious act from these women. They remain quiet and helpless bearing the brunt of misogynistic attitude of men around them. Even when the lady reporter tries to sensitize them of their situation, these women do not comprehend the seriousness of it. They simply blame God and their destiny. The major transition in the society is yet to come where women also enjoy the privileges of the other gender. Ambai vividly portrays the naive, rural women characters like Anni and Chandra from the short story 'Gifts' and the tribal women characters of Minabai, Rukminibai and Savitabai from the short story 'Forest' and in contrast to these characters are educated, independent and

bold women characters like the female reporter from the short story Gifts and Chenthiru in the short story 'Forest. These women characters represent the proportion of such women we find in our Indian society. Ambai is hopeful that the voiceless women's voice will be heard louder, optimistic of positive transition to happen in our society.

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