MYTH AND CONTEMPORANEITY IN AMBAI’S ‘DIRECTION’

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C.S. Lakshmi, who writes under the pen name Ambai, is a leading Tamil short story writer. She unhesitatingly declares herself to be a feminist. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Ambai has redefined the Tamil feminist consciousness. This she does by deliberately challenging the stereotypical portrayal of women. Defying patriarchal norms and conventions through narrative technique has been a seminal feature of Ambai’s writings. A subversion of myth and a (re)presentation of women’s issues with a contemporary focus have characterized her writings.

Challenging clichéd women roles has been prime focus of Ambai. Lakshmi Holmstrom, in her Introduction to “In A Forest, A Deer” draws attention to this aspect of Ambai’s writing, when she observes, “The agenda she sets for the modern Tamil woman writer, and therefore for herself, is to seek and develop a newer and freer form of expression in Tamil which articulates more truly the real experience of women.” (1) This agenda is implemented by Ambai through narrative strategies which create a paradigm shift in narrating female experiences. A (Re) presentation of myth is underscored through strategic subversion in many of her short stories. This is intertwined with her main agenda of challenging and transgressing conservative social norms.

The prolific Bengali women short story writer and poet Nabaneeta Deb Sen also attempts such a rewriting of the myth. In an interview with Ritu Menon, she says “…my puranic stories do transgress the patriarchal and brahminical canons, interrogating them… they question the human situation in the epics, see them from the women point of view” (63). Ambai employs a similar techniques to destabilize patriarchal structuring of female roles. Deb Sen too had rewritten stories from the Mahabharata as well, about Shakuntala, Amba, Satyavati and Draupadi, etc. She declares “It is my treatment that makes them subversive” (63). The subversive strategy employed by Ambai in portraying the character of Goddess Lakshmi harps on feminist contestation, while, at the same time, it addresses contemporary issues such as secularism and religious tolerance. Ambai underscores the
above point in her interview with S.S.Kavitha. She says “My characters think not only out-of-the-box but also question the prevailing systems” (8), thus conflating the postmodernist critic Linda Hutcheon’s observation about feminism(s) that, “But first those male discourses need confronting, challenging, debunking” (141). Epics and myths being essentially male discourses which culturally construct gender roles, they are debunked by Ambai, who asserts that her agenda is “to challenge the tailored norms for women laid down by society” (8).

In the present analysis of the short story “Direction”, it is argued that by rewriting the myth Ambai interrogates gender identities created through myths and also recreates secular motifs (focusing on religious tolerance). Thus, the process of demythologizing leads to a fresh understanding of contemporary issues related to religion and gender. The woman protagonist of the short story “Direction” describes a cardboard figure of Lord Rama bending his bow with an arrow primed at its target. It carried a slogan “We vow in the name of Rama! We will build his temple in that very place!” (39). This is followed by a casual description of how deities, temples, shrines and cult figures emanate and establish themselves in India.

The narrative begins with the protagonist walking through the streets after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The protagonist is unable to identify with Ram. She protests inwardly against Rama, “in his original form of Vishnu lying on the serpent Adisesha, with Lakshmi relegated firmly to his feet” (40). The Tamil movie Sampurna Ramayanam created yet another digressive thought within her. She had deeply empathized with Ravana, a role played by Actor T.K.Bhagavathi, and had wept sorrowfully, when he sadly sang to Rama, asking him to come to the battlefield the next day. Ambai makes her protagonist deliberately admire the vile demon flouting patriarchal codes of ethics and sanctity.

The author flaunts her deviant attitudes through the pattern of weaving a story within a story titled “For Lakshmi, too an Adisesha” written by the protagonist for her college magazine. She recollects the story which was rejected by the magazine editor. Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, recollects the melting kambodhi raga played by Ravana on his veena as she (as)Sita sat in the Asokavana disheartened. It rejuvenated her cracked soles, roughened hands and parched skin due to her stay in the forest for many years. But still they called him a rakshasa. Then the most important question of Lakshmi, “Were those who abandoned a pregnant woman on the shores of the Jamuna to be described as human, then? Her eyes filled with tears” (41).

This question contests the dubious nature of patriarchal values inculcated through epics and myths. It showcases a reassessment of them by subverting the myth and making goddess Lakshmi herself challenge such conventional
conceptualization. This (re)created Lakshmi of Ambai’s speaks for the mute Sita of the myth who was abandoned by Lord Rama during her pregnancy. The empathy the protagonist develops with the role of T.K.Bhagavathi is illustrated in the demon playing the melodious Kambhodi that soothes the dry heart of Sita in the Asokavana.

Lakshmi’s conversation now takes a new turn as Adisesha, the serpent bed of Vishnu, is stunned by her rebellious attitude. He accuses her that she doesn’t talk like a goddess and Lakshmi shocks him further by him telling that nothing had ever happened according to her wish. She has always wanted to walk through deserts chatting with Fatima and has wished to take infant Jesus from Mary’s arms, carry him on her hip and wander around Bethlehem. She feels that there is no point sitting idly all the time and that she needs at least a serpent bed on her own. Adishesha’s heart melts and he creates a serpent bed for her and Lakshmi sleeps beside Vishnu on her serpent bed, with her entire body comfortably stretched out.

The recasting of the myth exhibits secular motifs of a Hindu Goddess talking and wandering about with Muslim and Christian Gods and Goddess. It reconstructs an alternative paradigm of religious tolerance, accommodating heterogeneous and multiple faiths. This critically interrupts the hegemonic construction of Hindu identity which runs parallel to patriarchal assumptions. The cultural construction of women’s role in Indian society is primarily negotiated through the Hindu epics, myths and Shastras.

In the second half of the story, Ambai ironically argues that the communal harmony promoted in the post-Babri masjid destruction through secular and inter-religious rallies were equally a sham. The protagonist takes part in quite a few of them and finds that these rallies always ended with delicious feast. The speeches by members towards the end focus on coastal cleaning, environmental pollution and other unrelated subjects.

The protagonist is instructed to talk about the environment at the end of one such rally. She is upset at this farce and says feebly, “The rubbish bins ought to be kept clean” (p. 43). Immediately someone in the crowd says that women should come forward and take the responsibility. This irritates her and she hotly retorts, “There was neither male nor female in the matter of rubbish…” “The man proclaims “Oh, a feminist,” and wantonly trivialized her adding dramatically, “Please forgive me madam!” (p. 43), and everyone laughs at this. A female rage runs as an undercurrent throughout this narrative. But patriarchy ridicules this rage and refuses to endorse the non-gendering of even an issue related to environment.

In the final part, it is shown that the protagonist is unable to continue her usual morning walks in the beach peacefully as she comes across a group of Hindu, Muslim and Christian singers each singing devotional hymns, vying
with each other. She tries to walk through new tenements only to be chased by a dog. Later the owner of the dog apologizes and she recognizes him as the man who spoke about environment.

The narrative is pungent in its interrogation of dominant norms established in the society through coercion by the existing Hindu cultural and patriarchal codes. At the same time, it exposes the secular identity promoted by certain parties and organizations as equally pretentious. The concept of Women’s liberation is deemed frivolous. The back and forth movement of the narrative recuperates subjugated women’s voices through the recasting of the mythological Goddess, Lakshmi. This is recollected by the protagonist from her past and juxtaposed with it is the contemporary status of women which is still considered insignificant. The subtle ill-treatment suffered by the protagonist at the hands of men demonstrates this.

Works Consulted


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