

Vivid Women Characters of Ambai: Self-Conceived or Contrived

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the vivid characters of Ambai and analyse whether these women characters are self-conceived or contrived. The short stories 'The City that Rises from Ashes, The Falling and The Pond' of Ambai have such characters that are self-made and some women characters that are contrived in the name of society, creed and culture. This research paper will analyse and distinguish such characters based on their traits.

Keywords: Vivid, Self-conceived, Contrived, Feminist, Women, Patriarchy, Marginalized, Invincible.

Introduction

C. S. Lakshmi, a feminist writer of the 20th century writes short stories under the pseudonym Ambai. She has won Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of short stories 'A Red Necked Green Bird' in 2021. She has so many accolades to her credit including the Commonwealth Prize. She is the director of SPARROW, an organization that archives Research on Women. Some of her prominent works are 'In the Forest A Deer', 'A Kitchen in the Corner of the House', 'Broken Wings', 'My Mother her Crime'. She has been honoured with Tata Lifetime achievement for her contribution to the literary world.

In the short story 'The City that Rises from Ashes' Urmila Tai, despite her age lends her support to her ailing ninety five year old Mother-in-law. She refuses to send her any home as advised by her son. She takes care of her mother-in-law fulfilling her duty as a devout daughter-in-law

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though they quarrel a lot yelling at each other. They are inseparable as these two women have been giving company to each other all these years since her husband's death and her son's departure to a foreign land. There is a mutual understanding and love between the two despite the disparities. The two women do not share their responsibilities towards others when her daughter-in-law was in service, she will return from the work exhausted the mother-in-law will finish all the household chores including cooking. After her retirement from service she played the role of a nurse to her mother-in-law helping her to recover from her age related ailments. Urmila Tai never felt vexed or subdued amidst difficult situations. The bond between the two remained strong forever. Urmila Tai is invincible even in her death, as she proves her defiance against the capitalist. She and her neighbours who have been living for years in their tenements were forced to vacate because of Capitalist and political pressure. When she commits suicides setting fire on her, she screams and yells against the capitalist for destroying their homes and peaceful life. Her mother-in-law who is sent to a Home after her daughter-in-law's death finds cumbersome to survive in the home despite all the acre and facilities there. Urmila Tai who has all the grit and determination to face all the challenges died heartbroken not knowing where to go with her mother-in-law when she becomes homeless within ten days after her daughter-in-law's death the mother-in-law also dies in the home itself. These two are strong women characters who succumb to the political and capitalist power. The maid Kamli and her family was also affected because of urbanization were her Hut was among those that were arsoned. One night all their huts were burnt down. Old people, women, children died. The casualty was around fifty- two hundred which was in the news for two days, then each family received some compensation and construction work began within a month. 'Girangaon will become Bangkok now the whole area is going to be transformed' (pg.18, A Red Necked Green Bird)

In the Short Story 'Falling' the woman character is shown as a loving and caring wife, and affectionate mother. Kamala dotes on her husband, Sathya and his proud of her only son who succeeds in his career and life. But she is totally heartbroken when she comes to know of her husband's ailment his blood clot in the brain brings down his spirit, deteriorating both his health and charm. She as a wife struggles and fights back till the end to save his life. She is astounded to find her son being reluctant to spend for her husband's surgery. She realizes how self centered he is. He is ready to inherit his father's fortune but unwilling to spend for him. He averts any further treatment and the surgery which would cost him lakhs of money that may go futile. He simply declines the doctor's proposal saying 'Amma, what is the point in prolonging his life? How many times can I come from America? One should come, finish the work and go

back, isn't it' (pg.37, A Red Necked Green Bird). In his bed her husband shrinks in size and so immense is the impact of the disease that is cankerous in spreading and causing a huge damage. Their routine was exercising competitively, going on daily walk and they were quite healthy but that particular night he fell in the washroom then she took him to the hospital with the help of a boy from the neighbouring house. She then called her son Aadi who flew from America. The doctors suggested that they could make a hole in the throat and insert a tube. The havoc is intense even after his death as the void is inevitable she loses all her faith in her son. Her husband has left her a good fortune to bare the expenses for the remaining years of her life. At this stage she assures herself not to worry about her son who is well educated and well settled abroad. She feels her mind will never find a better friend to share any of her likes and dislikes. She is reminiscing her younger days of love and marriage when they visited Shimla before Aadi was born. Again after fifty years they visit the same place and cherish the old memories. She revisits after Sathya's death. She has carefully selected the same hotel in Shimla as the best place for her suicide because it's the hotel where they had stayed with Sathya fifty years earlier. When she placed her foot on the safety bars in the balcony of 12th floor, she remembered that she was wearing new clothes and new inner clothes. Aadi shouldn't be embarrassed by any notes by the police about her corpse. 'It would be of solace to him that she died well-clothed with all dignity. Her jaws, teeth, shoulder blades, arms and legs, her thigh could all be fractured into pieces. But her spine shouldn't break. Only the Aadi would realize the strength of her backbone. That as far as women were concerned, it had no expiry date'. (pg.40, A Red Necked Green Bird)

She takes this drastic step with dejection and loss of faith in wife. She can no more be a burden to her son, the 'Falling' from balcony will only be a 'life' of her image in her son's mind. She wants to clearly tell him that she doesn't want to rely on her son who never bothered to rescue the life of his father. There she boldly takes this decision of leaving this world. 'Suicide' cannot be acceptable decision to put off the problems, neither an escapist attitude. Ambai here vividly captures the indignation of a mother who punishes her son. These strong women are contrived to remain docile and meek sufferers but they turn self conceived and strong when they defy the dogma. Ambai has vividly created such puissant women who are radical in thought and action. Kammu is such a character who takes care of her parents and supports her family despite all their tribulations in the short story The City that Rises from Ashes, whereas Kamala who is steadfast and bold loses her faith in her son and develops suicidal instinct to take revenge on her son in the short story Falling.

The Pond is a short story that facilitates self revelation in understanding women through a man's character. The narrator illustrates a man's experience among his friends in a dense jungle when they go for a hike. It was pitch darkness that they encountered in the forest area with ups and downs, pathless muddy routes and suddenly appearing female monkeys with babies. He had left the others and took a thorn- filled path. When others took a respite he set on a search for a temple there suddenly he comes across a pond. 'It was shining like a silver plate with sunlight scattering over it like flowers through the tree tops' (pg.106, A Red Necked Green Bird). He was face on face with solitude with exhilaration on seeing the pond, he jumps into it taking off his clothes. The cold water covered his body. He immersed himself completely into the water. He swam with great enthusiasm to get rid of the journey's tiredness caused by the hike. After submerging, floating and swimming into his mind's content he got out of the water. He felt for a moment he was weightless with all his fatigue exhausted immediately he felt a burden he had never felt so far. He was looking at himself and was stunned. He thought he was hallucinating. To his astonishment, he has turned into a woman. His physique was that of a woman. All his male organs have disappeared. He could hear a disembodied voice whispering to him a male voice. Deshpandey's voice 'Gaze downwards, don't raise your eyes; don't spread your legs, keep them together. What your clothes cover, don't let others see, for you, O Brahmin, have become woman'. (pg. 107 A Red Necked Green Bird). Sometimes back he discussed with his friends about the hardships that women face in the patriarchal society. There was a conversation about sexual harassment which Nangai had argued about. It was then Deshpandey who was a research scholar cited some examples from Vedhas and Puranas. When one of them said that his wife should be with him in a yagaya ceremony, he was sarcastically told by a poet that if he argues so much for equality of women he will lose his masculinity and become a woman himself. Their discussion prolonged on stories of men transforming into women an instance was that of Naradha after having a bath in Kusuma Sarovar river transforming into a woman to love Krishna as a Gopika. Then it traversed to that of Lord Vishnu becoming Mohini, Ila becoming Sutuyuma and living the life of a male for month and female for a month alternatively. Then they were stories of Amba becoming Shikandi, Arjuna becoming Brihannalla, Riksharaja turing into a beautiful female monkey and giving birth to Vali and Sugriva, Shikitvaja who was a woman at night and man by day.

That evening was spent recounting such stories about curses and boons, lust and love about devas, Gods and sages and miraculous events, it was his wife Nangai who caught the pulse of those stories. She argued that only the physique of male and female were differentiated

biologically but in terms of the mind they could flow into each other. Their characteristics and traits were socially determined to think that certain behavior was natural to a woman and accepting it as socially constructed norms of behavior. Otherwise like water in a flowing river the mind of male and female could not be divided by each other. Some of them defied this statement. Mukund cited the ancient Greek myth of tiresisars who has the experience of living the life of both that of a man and woman.

He recollects all these memories and now his mind is agitated. He realizes that it was not a story. He had transformed into a woman. When he comes out of the pond, water was still running of his body. He looked panic- stricken; simmering with emotions he slowly walked away and realized that is gait has changed. He walked on the thorny path with baffled thoughts. He was confused about his relationship with his wife Nangai and his two daughters. He approached his group of who were seated before a born fire. Their chit chat stopped when they saw him. There was a ruckus in a group nobody believed his story. They accused him who has concealed his gender. They were all very indifferent in their behavior. Some of them spoke with sympathy but told him that he should not have lied about his gender. They felt that it had spoiled the jungle hike. When he had to share a tent with three others that night, he could feel that they were extremely uncomfortable. At the night time he slips away from the tent to answer the nature's call. With the trouble mind and chaotic thoughts he walks further into the forest. Suddenly he could feel some footsteps behind him, stalking him pushing him down and brutally molesting him. He realizes HE who is now SHE is totally devastated as his modesty is at stake. The body is bruised and assaulted as if in a war with a brute.

He cries in anguish and pain realizing the pangs of inner fear and outer pain. He runs to the tent and informs his friends who was shocked seeing him in such a miserable state. Everyone hovers around him trying to console him. He saw his violated body with scratches and wounds and tears began to flow. He sat frozen listening to others. They were discussing whether to continue the hike or terminate. They were puzzled whether to take him to the police station to give a complaint or to take him to the hospital for his treatment. When they checked the map for the pond he talked about they could not find it. He asked Kabir and Govind to accompany to the spot. His entire body had been brutalised. For a moment he thought he should drown himself in the pond which was hidden in the thick forest area. His friends stood away from him he put down the bag which the change of clothes, hiding his blood stained clothes in the hollow of the tree.

He splashed the water from the Pond on his face and felt that his lips burnt. He slowly slid into the water as soon as the water touched him his whole body burnt. He couldn't bare the pain, he cried out 'Amma' (pg 113). Slowly the water cooled him. He submerged himself and rose again and again and wept loudly plunging into the water he cleaned his body, scrubbing it with his hands. When he came out, he saw the sun rising like the red flower in the distance behind the tree. He was stunned and it was incredible for him to realize that he has transformed again into a man. The first thought that arose in his mind was that he must go home and embrace his wife and his two daughters. He was not Tiresias Bangasvana the mythical characters who transformed into woman. Now he has genuinely transformed into a person who had realized fully what it meant to be a woman in this cruel period of the twenty first century. These characters of Ambai from 'The City that rises from Ashes' Urmila Tai, her mother-in-law, Kammu and Kamli, the maids are contrived to follow the norms of being modest women. The characters that of Kamala from the short story Falling and the poignant character of the man becoming a woman from 'The Pond' are radical self-conceived portrayals of Ambai.

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