Psychonanalytic Feminism in Ambai’s “A Deer in the Forest”

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Post-colonial literature offers a more subjectively and experientially valid picture of the movements of the psyche. Hence, psycho-analytic theory gives a privileged position to literary criticism of those texts which are great sources of insights into social life and human psychology. At the same time, psycho-analysis in few of its many dimensions, share its concerns, methods and theoretical perspectives with Feminism as well. The mutuality of these concerns has led to a new research perspective which is identified as Psycho-analytic Feminism.

This paper psycho-analytic feminist critique on “A Deer in the Forest,” a typical Ambai’s story. This short story which was originally written in Tamil by Ambai has been translated into English by C.T. Indra. Ambai is the pen name of C.S. Lakshmi, a leading writer in Tamil. She has published several collections of short stories in Tamil. She has also published a critical work in English, The Face behind the Mask, which is a study of the images of women in modern gynotexts in Tamil. “A Deer in the Forest” is one of the popular short stories by Ambai which deals with women and procreation. Ambai recollects the birth of this story in the Introduction to her translated book Ambai: Two Novellas and a Story thus:

I was a Rockefeller scholar-in-Residence at the University of Chicago in 1992. A.K. Ramanujan, who was there at that time, felt that a small group of writers and poets must meet every Tuesday and share their work. “A Deer in the Forest” was written for one such Tuesday meeting. Since I was the only one writing in Tamil; I read it, translating as it went along. The idea of exploring the issue of fertility and the female body must have been within me for a long time before that. It came out as a story at that point of time. (9-10)

“A Deer in the Forest” revolves around an elderly woman, Thangam Athai, who has never attained puberty. It is the story of her domesticity and seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that duality. The femininity portrayed and the narrative design lends to Mitchellian reading of the text.

Juliet Mitchell, an established British feminist analyses women’s oppression in terms of both capitalism and patriarchy-namely, “dual systems” theory. Such dual systems analysis is the found in the works of Mitchell, Heidi Hartmann and Sylvia Walby. Jane Freedman observes in her book Feminism as “Mitchell combines a nonmaterialist account of patriarchy (centred around psychoanalytic theory) with a materialist account of capitalism...” (49). Mitchell combines a Marxist class-based analysis of capitalist production with a radical feminist account of gender relations under patriarchy. She asserts the usefulness of Freud’s work as re-read by Lacan in exploring “the question of the subject” from a feminist standpoint. She is a fiery advocate of women’s liberation movement and at present works as a psychoanalyst in London. One of her influential works is Psychoanalysis and Feminism(1974). “Femininity Narrative and Psychoanalysis” is the transcript of the lecture delivered to a conference on “Narrative” held in Australia in 1972. In this brief work, Mitchell establishes a correlation between feminists, narrative and psychoanalysis.

This paper attempts to illustrate some of Mitchell’s concerns with reference to Ambai’s “A Deer in the Forest.” The narrator, a girl in her early teens is the niece of the silver haired Thangam Athai. The narrator along with her cousins, try to decipher the mystery that surrounds their Athai. They are puzzled by the elders’ reference to the Athai that she had never “flowered.” They try to discover what a body which had not flowered would be like. They do not understand the comment passed by Valli’s mother, “Hers is just a hollow body” (71).

According to the little girls “She appeared no different from any other women” (71). They love the company of Thangam Athai, especially during those nights when they listen to her stories. The narrator recollects one particular story narrated by the Athai on one rainy night. It is the story of a young deer that lived happily in a big forest. It so happens that, this deer loses its way and finds itself in a different forest with no paths. This deer is in a panic, friendless and deserted ambience. The sound of the cataract frightens it. But as days pass by the deer sheds all its fear and it becomes calm. As the Athai ends the story, the narrator too concludes her reverie with the
description of the posture of the Athai being seated “arms thrown across her bosom, palms clasping her shoulders and head resting against her knees” (77).

Ambai has developed the narrative of this story in such a way that it resembles a narrative in psychoanalytic practice. Thangam Athai undergoes the process of psychoanalysis, the psychoanalyst being her niece, the narrator. Mitchell in her “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis” says, Psychoanalysis is a talking cure” and “Psychoanalysts, at one level, are hearing and retelling histories” (406). The story within the story, narrated by Thangam Athai is the story of her own life. As an analyst, the narrator listens to the Athai’s history and retells it.

The deer referred to in the story is none other than the Athai herself. She had a peaceful early life in her native place, wherein every nook and corner, each and every being were familiar to her. Specifically there were no constraints in her life at the parent’s place. But the Athai, like any other woman is shifted, in the name of marriage, to her in-laws’ house, an utterly new place to play utterly new roles. Her biological deformity identifies her as an odd-woman out. This makes her tremble in fear her mind running here and there in panic. Being thoroughly exhausted with all sorts of treatments she finally compromises with her own self. She cheats herself considering her to be a normal woman leading a happy life. Ambai has thus traced the process in which the Athai had become a woman within a new bourgeois society.

According to Mitchell new literary forms emerge, in which changing subjects recreate themselves within a new social context. “The novel,” writes Mitchell, “is the prime example of the way women start to create themselves as social subjects under bourgeois capitalism-create themselves as a category: women” (407). Ambai analyses questions like where women are, why women have to be creative writers. Thangam Athai, who represents women writers, employs the form of a story to describe herself- “a subject in progress” (Mitchell 406). She creates stories of her own that are, according to the narrator, like snatches of poetry, never ending songs without beginning or ends. The Athai’s creative power is such that she is able to conjure up all kinds of images in the children’s minds. Characters hidden in the dark corners of the epics are drawn out and focused under different light. The story of her, which is retold by the narrator, is also one such and this one has the Athai herself as the subject. Through this literary genre of a story she attempts to voice forth her subjective position in the male centered capitalistic society as all female writers do.

The final posture of Thangam Athai, as described by the author reveals her to be a “hysteric” in the truest sense of Mitchellan term. Mitchell defines “hysteria” as “the woman’s simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism” (407). Thangam Athai performs all the duties expected of a woman in the masculine world. She cooks, serves food to her husband, Ekambaram, draws water from the well, manures the plants, attends to the needs of her sisters-in-law, takes care of the children at home and also plays on the harmonium, singing songs beautifully. But she is not identified as a normal human being. The women in the family consider her body to be nothing but “hollow.” They force her to undergo all kinds of treatments available under the sun. She is treated as a specimen and her infertility becomes the mark of her identification.

Ambai, in her original name, C.S.Lakshmi has written on traditional misconception on womanhood in her The Face behind the Mask. She says “physicality is the only aspect that is stressed while portraying a girl becoming a woman. Her thoughts, her ideas do not make her a woman. Her body does”(103). Ambai’s obsession with this pathetic reality has made her sought the story under study. In this context, it should also be also noted that Ambai compares the education given to a woman to the blooming of the flower in her novella, “Unpublished Manuscripts.” It is vivid that the real flowering of a woman lies in the education she receives. Ambai deems the intellectual flowering of a woman more significant than the biological flowering of a woman.

The elders in the family attempt to arrange for Ekambaram’s remarriage. Thangam Athai drinks potion prepared out of the seeds of arali. But she is saved by an antidote, resulting in her voluntary selection of a new bride for her husband. Ekambaram begets seven children through Sangamalam. The other members of the family demand all kinds of allowances from the Athai-right from extracting physical work to taking refuge in her for their mental solace. But they do not fail to taunt her with pleasing words reminding her infertility. The irony that Ambai portrays in the Athai’s life is that the family believes that she has a “lucky touch.” They also believe that the cow yield milk at her touch and the seeds she sows sprout invariably.

The husband too treats Thangam Athai as he would a flower, always addressing her, “Thangamma.” But in spite of all such things, she seems “distant, as if behind a screen of smoke” (71). Ambai is right when she observes in her Introduction to Ambai: Two Novellas and a Story, “in life, suppression and oppression do not
always come in recognizable form. Very often they come under the guise of love, protection, the assurance of security … And yet there is sadness and loss pain and tragedy” (11).

The distance she maintains with her husband and the way she is seen sitting brooding over her history identifies her to be a hysteric. She is thoroughly feminine and at the same time dejected by femininity. So hers is the hysteric’s voice narrating her feminine experience.

Mitchell identifies points of disruption, points of auto criticism within the process of psychoanalysis. The helpless posture of the Athai at the end of the story explicitly reveals the point of auto criticism. It is true that she says to the narrator’s mother, “Come on, what is it that I lack? I live like a queen; my house is full of kids” (72). She does not find anything wrong with her body. She appears to be satisfied with her life. But Ambai does not fail to make a subtle hint at her dejection. The narrator, as a psychoanalyst diagnoses the disruption in her psyche and very rightly senses a disappointment in her.

The deer’s transplantation from one forest to another or the trajectory of the Athai from innocent girlhood to the subjugated womanhood can be read in the light of Lacanian terms. In Lacanian thinking, The Athai’s entry into the second phase of life called “the moment of the Symbolic.” She has to forego the “Imaginary,” “Pre-oedipal,” “Semiotic,” “Carnivalesque,” “Disruptive,” and abide by the “Symbolic Law.” “The Symbolic is the point of organization, the point where Sexuality is constructed as meaning … created round these two poles, masculine and not-masculine: feminine” (Mitchell 408).

The story narrated by the Athai reveals her to have experienced a blissful oneness with her parents and their environment. But the intervention of the “Law of the Father,” the societal law, indicates the “lack” in her, providing the context for language. “The expression which fills the gap is perforce, phallocentric” says Mitchell (407). The phallocentric voice of Thangam Athai pushes her into “symbolic” wherein she assumes to be at peace with herself. She convinces herself that she is being treated well in the family and in reciprocation she imagines loving the family and their environment.

Mitchell analyses the symbolic order from a political dimension. She chooses an “Alternative symbolic universe” as a solution to the challenge posed by the Symbolic. One cannot choose the imaginary, the semiotic as an alternative to the Symbolic law. “Imaginary” too in a way is set up by this so-called Law precisely as its own ludicrous space. So Mitchell concludes as follows, “politically speaking, it is only the symbolic, a new symbolism, a new law, that can challenge the dominant law” (408).

Ambai’s abrupt ending of “A Deer in the Forest” reveals the helpless and dejected state of Thangam Athai. As Mitchell suggests, the only therapy that could be prescribed in the case of Athai is a new law that could challenge the dominant law. Mitchell hints the same when she says in Psychoanalysis and Feminism, “The only thing you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image” (qtd by Jackson X). Therefore women need to subvert the existential patriarchal hegemony to emerge as empowered individuals.

WORKS CITED