

NEW VOICES AND SPACES IN AMBAI'S SHORT STORIES¹

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Abstract: Literatura is an important tool to understand how cultures and identities represent themselves. Images are enclosed within words creating illusions of presence, metonyms and signs of identities' absence and loss. If repetition is the language the dominant discourse uses to create a "ripple-like pattern", Ambai, one of the finest contemporary short-story writers in Tamil, makes use of that mimesis to strategically compel already made stereotypical images that, arduously re-written, attempt to its own deconstruction. This paper aims to analyze the "equipment of living" given by a dominant discourse and how Ambai twists it in order to give voice to the Other of the Other.

Key words: Subaltern, irony, gender, Tamil, dominant discourse, polemic and argumentative logos, domestic observation, interior monologue, surrealist images.

Nuevas voces y espacios en los relatos cortos de Ambai

Resumen: La literatura es una herramienta necesaria para comprender cómo las identidades y los espacios han sido y son representados. Ambai, autora Tamil de narrativa breve, crea imágenes a través de sus palabras inscribiendo signos identitarios y el por qué de la ausencia de una autenticidad propia de los mismos en las mujeres. A través de una estrategia mimética, la autora reinscribe situaciones estereotípicas que acaban siendo deconstruidas a lo largo de su obra. Este artículo pretende dar a conocer a una de las autoras más importantes de narrativa breve Tamil y plasmar, a través de su obra, la variedad de formas en las que las identidades de las mujeres son constuidas en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Subalterno, ironía, género, Tamil, discurso dominante, lenguaje, domesticidad, monólogo interior, surrealismo.

Ambai (1944 -) is one of the finest contemporary short-story writers in Tamil. She is an avowed feminist who articulates her views in fiction, which she writes in Tamil under the name of Ambai, and non-fiction, which she writes in English under the given name of C. S. Lakshmi. The author constantly reinvents the short story genre by juxtaposing different narrative forms and by alternating narrative voices within the same story. Our purpose is to reflect how Ambai draws, through these voices, the equipment for living given by a dominant discourse and twists it in order to give voice to the Other of the Other, that is, to the subaltern Tamil woman who lacks a language of her own.

Ambai's short stories are embedded with the plurality of narrative voices, the use of interior monologues and postmodern techniques of multiple perspectives which are norma-

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lly used in the novel rather than in the short story. Such a wide range of forms in a single anthology of short stories is, as her translator Lakshmi Holmström underlines, unique in modern Tamil fiction (in Ambai 1992: 12). But what is more important is her search for a new language which is linked fundamentally to her political beliefs and practices as a woman and as a writer. The author encourages other writers to stop reinforcing popular and conventional images of women and to write the truth (Ambai 2006: ix). She pursues what Luce Irigaray underlines in “This Sex Which is not One”:

That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labelled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That that has always already happened without their efforts. And that their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. It is not that we have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties our exiles. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips. (Irigaray 1977: 212)

The agenda she sets for modern Tamil women writers is to seek and develop newer and freer forms of expression in Tamil which articulates women's experiences more accurately. Ambai narrates in her stories women's real experiences and transforms women's silences in words and images. By exploring the ways in which people describe themselves and the communities to which they could be said to belong, she underlines how human beings are made subjects. The target nowadays, following Michel Foucault, “is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are” (Foucault 1983: 216); that is, we need to reject our constructed *I*. This author suggests that we have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political “double bind”, which is “simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures” (Foucault 1983: 216). Ambai's work reflects this “double bind”; the freedom of the inner world and the constraints of the external world, both of which can be considered to be manipulated by dominant discourse. The author draws through a variety of images an illusion of presence of the Other, and, at the same time, a sign of its absence. Through constant repetitions, a strategy defended by Irigaray and Braidotti, Ambai mimics stereotypical images and by rewriting them she blows up these representations achieving their deconstruction. If repetition is the language dominant discourse uses to create a “ripple-like pattern” (Sebastian 2000: 101), Ambai also makes use of it in order to deconstruct the equipment for living given by the dominant discourse. The author frees the Others by inscribing new geographical and identitarian spaces.

Ambai is deeply concerned about women –the silences they are locked into, the space they try to create for themselves against tremendous odds, the relationship with their bodies and the sorority they share with other women. The Others, following Spivak, cannot make themselves heard since they are not able to take part in the speech act (in Sebastian 2000: 112). These subaltern women are silenced and learning to represent them involves a process of learning to speak to them and thus a process of unlearning. Being aware of the power of language to inscribe new spaces, C.S. Lakshmi uses, in her article “Landscapes of the Body” published in *The Hindu* in December 2003, Malathi Maithri's poem as a way of exemplifying language as women's weapons of defence:

Speaking in your dialect
 Or without words
 Or even if you are crying
 Simply extend your hand
 Place it in between the thighs
 And pull with all your strength
 His testicles³

This poem serves as an introduction to the short stories' analysis which aims to exemplify how Ambai gives voice to silences to deconstruct the dominant discourse which has displaced women as the Others.

We have selected five short stories to highlight Ambai's intention to forge a new language and space for women: "My Mother, Her Crime", "First Poems", "Once Again", "Journey 1", and the long story "A Movement, a Folder, Some Tears". These short stories are included in *Short Stories by Ambai: A Purple Sea* (1992) and in *In a Forest, a Deer: Stories by Ambai* (2006), a collection awarded with the 2006 Hutch Crossword Book Award for Indian Language Fiction Translation⁴. Our analysis of these short stories will exemplify the movement this author seeks from women's restriction by patriarchal structures to an ultimate liberation from them.

"My Mother, Her Crime" and "First Poems" exemplify how dominant discourse creates the subjects. The main characters of these stories embed the logos transmitted by a dominant discourse which converts them in the Others, that is, in subjects "enveloped in proper skins, but not their own" (Irigaray 1985; 205). In both stories, Ambai reflects the "constructed, rather than biological given, nature of identity" (in Braidotti 1994: 260) which led Simone de Beauvoir to assert that "One is not born, one becomes a woman". In "Once Again", the author highlights how all subjects are being constructed. Hegel underlined how identity was acquired "in a relational link to the other" (in Braidotti 1994: 262), a dualistic structure which led to a gender/sex distinction on a binary foundation where women become the Others. Irigaray defines these Others as the ones who are negative and who lack: "They've left us only lacks, deficiencies, to designate ourselves. They have left us their negative(s)" (Irigaray 1985: 207). Once dominant discourse has been exposed, Ambai gives voice to a woman, in "Journey 1", who denounces the way she has been turned into an Other and demands new definitions for the female feminist subject (de Lauretis, in Braidotti 1994: 275). As a conclusion, we will analyze the long story "A Movement, a Folder, Some Tears" where Ambai explores the possibility of a more fluid notion of the self. The author seeks for an open-ended society with different subjects who act as individuals and equals, and not through roles and identities inscribed by a dominant discourse. Thus, Ambai seeks, through words, the freedom of the Others whom she describes as courageous subjects in a gender oppressing cosmos.

³ <http://www.hindu.com/lr/2003/12/07/stories/2003120700300400.htm> 16/6/2006

⁴ All the stories which appear in these publications, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, were originally written in Tamil and previously published in different journals and collections. "My Mother, Her Crime" appeared in the journal *Kachadatapara*, "Once Again" in $\frac{1}{4}$ (Kaal), "Journey 1" and "First Poems" in Ambai's third collection of short stories, *Kaattil oru maan* (2000), and the long story "A Movement, a Folder, Some Tears" first appeared published in the magazine *Kalachuvadu* (2002).

The short story "My Mother, her Crime" explores with sharpness and irony the variety of ways in which gender is constructed in Tamil society. This tale tells the story of a mother-daughter relationship. Ambai gives voice to a four-year-old girl, Nirajatchi, who becomes the narrator. It begins with the description of the mother whom the girl is totally dependent on to construct her own identity. The mother's red sari and the green veins on her pale breasts are the elements used by Ambai to introduce women's fluids which will cause the abrupt break between the mother-daughter relationships. Ambai extends the main topic, which is menstruation and the loss of innocence, by introducing other relevant colours, such as skin chromatism. The girl wonders why she is so dark while her mother is so fair. From this unanswered question Ambai takes the girl to a puberty stage where another silence seems to occur. When the narrator of "My mother, her Crime" asks what the meaning of puberty is, she just obtains silence for an answer plus the command to "always be as you are now, running about and playing, twirling your skirt..." (Ambai 1992: 20). The mother leaves the household to go to her sister's house where a marriage arrangement is about to take place. Meanwhile, the black girl, as her father calls her, is given a brand new purple skirt to wear. After looking at herself in the mirror bothered by her father calling her black, she goes out to play. As we see, the girl's identity is being constructed by those who surround her. She leaves the thoughts of her skin colour aside seeking refuge in the innocence of her childhood, but menstruation arrives and with it the end of her innocence. Fireworks happen to take place at the same time she realizes her new skirt is scattered with stains. She looks for her sister Kalyani in despair wondering if her Amma will scold her for destroying her new skirt. Kalyani calls her father and so the girl realizes that something has happened while fluids persist and so do fireworks. She starts to cry longing for her mother, the silences, and childhood. The father is not good help either so Kalyani calls the old widow from next door. The girl voices through her tears the silences imposed to women. The mimesis of these silences is that everybody around her at that particular moment keeps saying that nothing has happened to her. Just when the old widow leaves, she says "this is every woman's destiny after all" (Ambai 1992: 24).

The old widow suggests she should wear a half sari, but nobody utters why she should wear it, why she would have to stop twirling her skirt and why from then on she would have to give herself her own oil massages. Instead she is obliged to sit still as a doll, since that will be, as the old widow reminds her, her destiny. At school she does not feel like playing or reading Enid Blyton because all she wants is to know "what on earth has happened" to her (Ambai 1992: 26). She presumes her mother will be the answer to all her worries since she will explain to her "why my whole body sweats and trembles" and why "the world seems to darken" (Ambai 1992: 27). Her mother finally comes back and brings the news that the selected bridegroom to be has rejected her niece since her skin was too dark. Following that statement the mother looks at Nirajatchi and describes her as a burden because of her skin colour and for not being a girl anymore. From then on, she would have to live a constructed subjectivity, her subalternness and her Otherness.

In "First Poems" Ambai gives voice to a nameless sixteen-year-old girl. This tale highlights how dominant discourse is being transmitted and embedded by its receptors, and thus, how it modifies subjectivities. We are told that the main character of this story is from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and wants to achieve wisdom. At the beginning of her

quest she puts into practice strategies such as crying continuously, since, following Ramakrishna Paramahansa, “those who wept continuously for three days would see God” (Ambai 2006: 49). As those strategies did not work she begins to question all the codified messages that surround her. When thinking about sins, she wonders if Chitragupta –a Hindu god assigned with the task of keeping complete records of human beings’ actions and deciding, upon their death, to send them to heaven or hell– takes into account the changing times. She asks herself what a sin is and wonders if what was considered a sin in the past times is still a fault nowadays. In opposition to Nirajtchi, this character is able to question what surrounds her and since she does not have the answers, nor the words to denounce the lack of logic in what she sees, she decides to use a diary given by the capitalist branch of *Nestlé and Company*, in order to record the answers to the questions that the elders cannot respond. The diary, the sky, the sea and the two-foot-tall flute-playing image of Kannan, a deity worshipped across many traditions of Hinduism, are blue. Through the colour blue, the narrator is comparing the creation of Kannan to nature. The sky is naturally blue and Kannan has also been constructed blue and, thus, this is understood as something which is not created by discourse but real as nature, such as the sky. Once the illusion of reality is deconstructed, Kannan becomes a fictitious deity.

A parallelism is described between religion and the construction of the dominant discourse. This sixteen-year-old girl questions what God is and comes to the conclusion that she should not ask where God is but how God is engraved in her heart (Ambai 2006: 50). The narrator is telling us through the voice of a girl that we should not just stop to think where dominant discourse is but how it is embedded within us and that in order to free ourselves from it and create a new space we must dismantle it. From here on, the narrator takes us back to the innocent girl who asks for miracles, and is given one by passing her maths exam. Her father tells her that women are no good at science or maths. Embedding this message, she is not able to pass any of the maths exams except for the one occasion aided by a miracle. But the diary, a place where she can record her real voice, comes to an abrupt end when Kempamma, the woman who works in her house and one of the chosen listeners of her poems –the other one was Mickey the dog– is violently scolded by her drunken husband in front of her. Mickey the dog was the only one who aided the woman by fetching Kempamma’s husband’s throat. The sixteen-year-old girl who, after this incident, understood that women were the Others, and that subaltern women were the Others of the Others, understood what dominant discourse was. The last poems she wrote in her diary were entitled “Loneliness”, “Yearning”, “Dream” and “Silence”. From then on, she stops recording her own voice in the blue diary as she no longer had a voice or a free space.

In “Once Again”, Ambai tells the story of Lokidas and Sabari, two characters moulded by discourse. We are introduced first to Lokus, the male character, and secondly to Sabari, the subaltern/Other. The story begins and ends with a creation. Ambai tells us that two were created, and these two, Lokus and Sabari, will give birth to another creation at the end of the story. Ambai is creating three (not one, nor two but three), and thus, she is breaking up dichotomies. Dominant discourse creates two, one being solid material, and the Other made up of fluids. Three would be liberated from the dominant discourse and thus Ambai ends up this short story with a third creation.

Ambai uses repetitions to depict the construction of the two beings by the symbolic order. Lokus is asked questions such as what he wants to do when he grows up. He answers and the ones around listen to him and let Lokus know that his answers are not only irrelevant but nonsense. This male figure is being told what to do, how to act and what to say. He sees the world square as if everything was structured by a dominant discourse: "they have squared arms. Square heads" (Ambai 1992: 108). His dream is to study economics, but his father says he should study mathematics so as to become an engineer. In his puberty he dreams of stripping the yellow sari he sees on the bus. He is being told not to worry as that is bound to be in a man's mind. His father also reminds him that he is guaranteed a woman to cook for him, but he must remember, though, that he is to wear what belongs to them: the suits, the shoes, the shirts, the razor blades, the tooth paste, that is to say, what has been constructed within and for a stratum. In short, Lokus's identity is totally moulded by their patriarchal dominant discourse:

You are the one who earns money
 You go out to work
 You are one who has many rights
 You are the one who casts the vote
 You are one who mustn't cry
 You are strong
 You make decisions
 You can change the world
 You have firmness of mind
 You enjoy women
 You are forceful in bed
 You want to impress your boss
 You are a man. (AMBAI 1992: 110)

Sabari is also an identity constructed by the symbolic order. Her function is to please the man we have just heard about, thus being his Other. Only once is she allowed to answer a question, and only once is she listened to. It occurs when she is asked whom she would like to marry and she says Abdulla. The enquirer says her answer is wrong, as she is not allowed to choose. Her childhood is full of commandments about what to wear, whom to be with, how to play, what to talk about and what to study. Ambai is not allowing this character to speak, miming women's silences as their logos. This silence is interrupted by her poetry, which Sabari uses to express her ideas and needs. Her father does not understand her since she is not using the dominant discourse logos she has been transmitted. Through poetry Ambai gives voice to women's own logos: "If they demand their rights, they are slandered, by the base rich, who aim their arrows upon the wounded" (Ambai 1992: 112). Sabari's father tells her what to be but so does her mother, who passes on to her the dominant discourse constructing her identity:

You look after the house
 You know that beauty products are for your use
 You are modest

You listen to decisions
 You are a goddess
 You are always helpful
 You work outside the house only when in dire need
 You need protection
 You are a woman (Ambai 1992: 113-114)

Sabari wants to be an aeronautic engineer but her father thinks that this is nonsense since she is going to end up in a kitchen. The author makes clear that both Sabari's body and her mother's are their prisons and the rules they live with are to continue unless an open-minded society is created through new identities:

Amma, the food is terrific.
 Terrific, Kamala.
 My husband won't eat out hereafter.
 Yes, she is a clever wife.
 Use this to clean the toilets in your house.
 Amma, our bathroom smells lovely.
 Yes, she knows how to keep the toilets clean. (Ambai 1992: 113)

The story continues and the empowering fact is that Ambai joins both subjectivities to create a new one. She ends "Once Again" by saying: "In that cold late evening thickly spread with stars, a birth took place, true to its time" (Ambai 1992: 125). Making reference to the title of this short story and also to this last sentence, it seems as if Ambai is telling us that this new being is not going to be constructed again but for once is going to be a three and thus, a subject who is not a subaltern, not an Other. Locus and Sabari create a new identity who might deconstruct the dominant discourse which attempts to transform the baby's authentic *I* into a social construction.

"Journey 1" is told in the third person and is about a nameless woman who travels to Tiruchi on business. She represents any woman travelling on a Mumbai local bus. Ambai gives, in this tale, voice to an adult woman who becomes a heroine since she demands her own space. There are two parts to the story; in the first one, we are told all the events that happened to her on her way to Tiruchi. The traveller sat by the window in the first bus that was ready to go, next to a woman and her baby. The baby, who was not wearing underpants, wetted her sari and she complained to the mother while the passengers were amazed at her reaction. Because she was a woman she was not to complain but to understand that this is what babies do. Ambai creates an angry character who questions this motherhood stereotype by asking the others if there is "some law that if I come by bus I should let all the babies here urinate on my sari?" (Ambai 2006: 16). The others simply thought she was complaining because she was "an unmarried girl getting cross" (Ambai 2006: 17). Dominant discourse creates images that we accept as the norm but the main character of this tale puts them into question. Since in the way to Tiruchi "she had been exposed to torment because she had not safeguards; no protective armour at all" (Ambai 2006: 14), she chooses, in the way back, to wait for a bus with a single seat next to the driver. In this tale the character chooses but she is soon being told to move to the Ladies' side: "Won't you move over to the Ladies' side?"

He asked, pointing to the corner of a seat which already held three people" (Ambai 2006: 18). The woman says 'no' with determination, something which takes the male passenger and the driver by surprise. This character is, following Irigaray, disturbing "their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of habits, the circularity of exchanges, their knowledge, their desire. Their world" (1985: 207).

The long story "A Movement, a Folder, Some Tears" has two main topics, religion and feminism. In the already mentioned "First Poems" Ambai already questioned the belief of only one religion, an issue that she will continue to discuss in this long story. The author narrates the conflict among Hindus and Muslims and defends humanism in the figure of Sakina, Charu and Selvi. On the other hand, Ambai summarizes the deeds and tears that the three main characters of this story went through in order to demand new spaces for the Others: "It was we who laid the way so that you could find a job suited to your intelligence, earning an equal wage with men. We weeded the thorns from your path, removed the obstacles, made you aware of your rights" (Ambai 2006: 187).

The tale begins with Charu on board of a plane and on her way to the United States where she is to do research. This character had lost her husband, Tamal, in 1993, when both of them were on their way to Matunga and the train was attacked by terrorist groups. For ten years she fought against India's great divide among Hindus and Muslims, but she decides to leave the space she had inhabited for so many years and make her way to a new nest. It is at the beginning of the story when Charu listens to a Hindi song that says: "Alone in this city, a man seeking a living night and day, seeking a nest" (Ambai 2006: 179). Selvi stays in India and is the one to tell Charu, by e-mail, about Sakina's death. Selvi becomes the narrator of the story and the one to encourage the readers, by attaching Sakina's letter, to keep on writing the feminist song they once began to sing. As we see, this long story does not follow an order, using multiple voices and narrative techniques which go from poems to e-mails. The tale becomes a puzzle and, like the song, the reader has to complete it.

Ambai uses intertextuality, such as a text by Paulo Coelho, to describe from different angles the current dominant discourse. Coelho's tale is about a wizard who pours a drug inside the town well which causes madness to everyone who drinks from it. The king and queen do not drink from the town well, becoming the only sane ones and thus different. People reject them, since they differ from them, and the king is asked to abdicate. The queen decides to drink from the well and become like everyone else. Charu, Sakina and Selvi are the outcasts of Ambai's long story because they do not drink from the same well as the others. For example, in 1980, a professor told Sakina and Selvi that the beauty of an Indian woman was signalled by "long hair, big breasts, tiny waist, and sword-like eyes" (Ambai 2006: 191). As he went on and on about the long hair everyone's eyes were on Sakina and Selvi. Consequently, they went to a Chinese parlour and cut their hair because they did not want to be defined by the others. Their purpose was to break dominant discourse definitions, commentaries, grammars and rules (Ambai 2006: 191).

As a conclusion to this long story, Ambai introduces a text in the form of an attachment which highlights the purpose of her work which is to explore the possibilities of a more fluid notion of the self but always taking into account how we have been constructed by social and cultural discourses. As we have already underlined, in order to inscribe new spaces and subjectivities there is the need to "refuse what we are" (Foucault 1983: 216).

Sakina, who is described as a bird that had “swallowed many pebbles” (Ambai 2006: 196) impeding her from metaphorically flying free and, thus, dying when throwing herself from a seventeenth floor, writes a letter to a girl called Roshni. The letter Sakina wrote in the fiftieth anniversary of India's Independence summarizes fifty years of fight for a free self. It records how it was difficult for them to make the right decisions in life, in education and work as they “had to oppose the mainstream and swim against it” (Ambai 2006: 197). They were told many stories, such as that marriage was the most important thing in life for women, but also that “rubbish and daughters grow quickly” or that “women and cows will go where you drag them” (Ambai 2006: 198). This discourse made women's bodies grow heavy with the pebbles they did not choose to carry, and, thus, they began to speak through their bodies and silences. Until the sixties they fought only within the domestic sphere but after that they began a battle for the public sphere too. A sorority among women was established, despite the “sometimes” division among activists and academics. Sakina leaves her letter with an open end, asking Roshni and women to complete what they had already began:

But don't think the song is complete. It is true that communal violence, caste-wars, and human degradation have all dispirited us greatly. But our battle continues. We still raise our voices to safeguard rivers, trees, and animals. To safeguard human beings, above all. You will hear in this song, resonances of our joy, despair, disappointments and exhilaration. Sleep well, Roshni. And when you wake up, let it be to the sound of our song. You and I and many others must complete it. (Ambai 2006: 200)

As we see, Ambai's stories are seeking an open-ended society where we encounter each other not through given roles and identities, but as individuals and as equals. Particularly in modern times of dislocation, exile, and diaspora, we need to know and to be in touch with discourses which allow fluidity and change. In “A Movement, a Folder, Some Tears”, the author tells the story of a Zen master who went away to live in a cave and when asked about the wisdom he had attained he played the flute and walked away. As Ambai highlights, “some things can't be wrapped up in words” (Ambai 2006: 194) but can be said through silences. Roshni's letter is incomplete but Ambai gives us the hints, through her writing, to decipher what she has not written but yet said.

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