

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture - 08
Patriarchal Culture in "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" – I

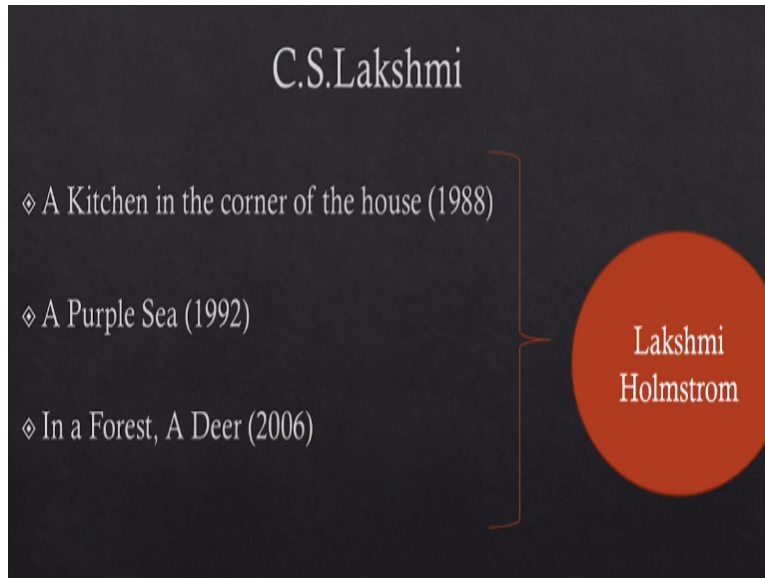
Hello and welcome to week 8. This lecture is on Patriarchal culture in Ambai's A Kitchen in the Corner of the House. So the name of the author is Ambai.

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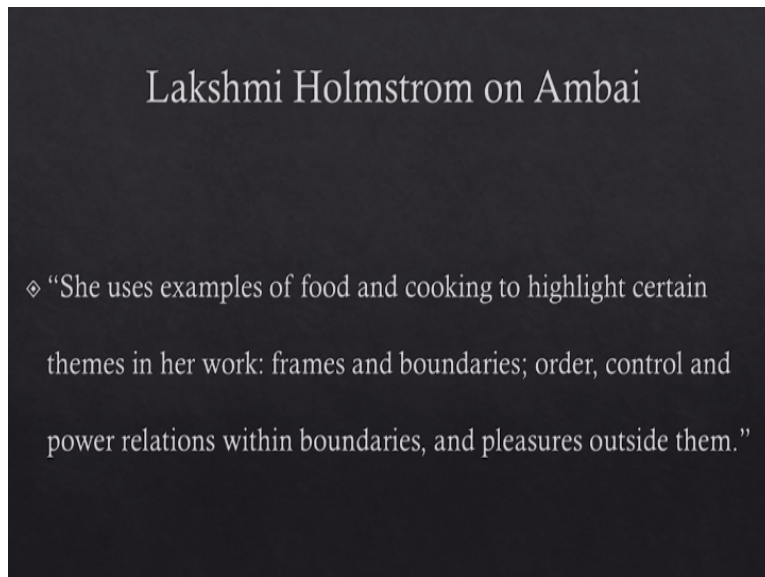
Ambai is the pen name of a C.S. Lakshmi who was born in 1944. She became well known for the Tamil novel *Andhi Maalai* which means *Twilight* and it was published in 1966. It won her the Kalaimagal Narayanaswamy Aiyar Prize and she also was critically you know praised for her *Siragukal Muriyum* short story, *Wings will be broken* which was published in 1967. She is also well known for her feminist perspective in much of her writings.

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So these are the other well known works of C.S. Lakshmi A Kitchen in the corner of the house published in 1988, A Purple Sea in 1992, In a Forest, A Deer published in 2006. All these were written in Tamil and they were translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom.

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This is what Lakshmi Holmstrom a well known translator had to say on Ambai's work. She says that Ambai uses examples of food and cooking to highlight certain themes in her work: Frames and boundaries; order, control and power relations within boundaries, and pleasures outside them. This is a very, very insightful commentary on Ambai's fiction.

The critics states that the food and the cooking aspect of life becomes a metaphor becomes a kind of a conduit to highlight or you know bring to the attention certain common themes in Ambai's work such as you know frames or boundaries rules and regulations, order, discipline, and control within the human relationships in a domestic setup especially and what are the other pleasures outside of them so a food and cooking becomes an integral part to laying there the discrimination that is underneath every human bond in Indian society.

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The slide has a dark background. At the top center is the word "Title" in white. Below it are two bullet points, each starting with a diamond symbol. The first bullet point says "A kitchen in the corner of the house". The second bullet point says "A row of rooms like railway carriages. Right at the end, the kitchen, stuck on in a careless manner." At the bottom of the slide are two red ovals. The left oval contains the text "Least important carriage at the end". The right oval contains the text "Train carriage symbolizing hierarchy".

Let us come to the short story in question; A kitchen in the corner of the house. I want to first explore the significance of the title in this particular story and the narrator says that we have a third person narrator in this story and the story is almost episodic in the sense that we get to know about various events that happens in a big family in Rajasthan during a particular occasion in a year.

So the narrator talks about a row of rooms which are like railway carriages right at the end, the kitchen, stuck on in a careless manner. So again the metaphor of the train is here used to talk about the significance of the kitchen in a hierarchy of rooms and she and the narrator says that the kitchen is just stuck on you know carelessly it becomes a kind of an add on an extra space that is added at the last minute.

So the importance is that it is not very important becomes the least important carriage at the end of a train and again train carriages in lot of the fiction that we looked at for this cause. It talks about symbolically the hierarchies that are there in Indian society it could be class hierarchy it could be economic hierarchy and it could be gender hierarchy and once again the kitchen becomes representative of the female gender and female gender are relegated to the least important space in a home and that is highlighted through Ambai's use of the simily of a train.

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Setting of the kitchen

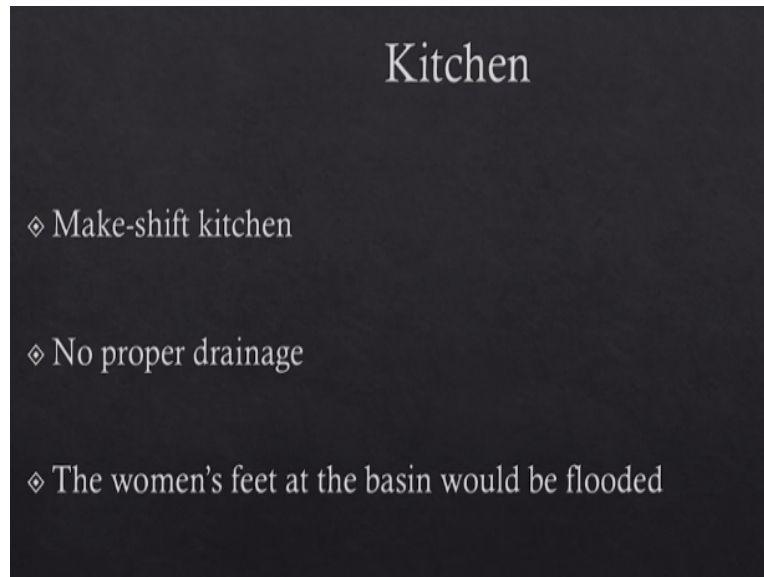
◇ Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within ten minutes there would be small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness. Kishan's mother—called Jiji by everyone—would present a soothing ointment for chapped heels on the very first day one entered the kitchen, cooked a meal and was given the traditional gold bangle.

This except from the beginning of the story tells us very, very incisively the importance of the kitchen through its spatiality. So the setting is itself significant of its place in the family and in the larger social order. So this is how the kitchen is described in the story. The kitchen has 2 windows underneath 1 the tap and basin, the latter was too small to place even a single plate in it, underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge.

As soon as the taps above were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within 10 minutes there would be small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from the constant wetness. Kishan's mother called Jiji by everyone would present a soothing ointment for chapped heels on the very first day one entered the kitchen, cooked a meal, and was given the transitional gold bangle.

So it is a fantastic description that talks about the confined or the very uncomfortable spatiality of the kitchen as well as the rewards for being inside that kitchen and be able to do cooking in it. So let us talk about the nature of the kitchen.

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It is a very make-shift kitchen in the sense that basin is very small too small to place even a single plate in it and then if you look at the drainage system there was hardly any there because once the taps are opened you know the flow would flood and that would cause a lot of physical discomfort pain to the person who is standing in the flood and the narrator says that heels will be chapped will be cracking.

Because of the exposure to the water constant exposure to the water and very, very interesting thing is that there is a reward for being there and that is the gold bangle, the traditional gold bangle would be offered to the person who has become newly initiated into the kitchen of this home. So there is no proper drainage. It is a make-shift kitchen and as I said the women's feet at the basin would be flooded. They are in real physical discomfort while they are cooking.

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Kitchen

- ◊ Inconvenience of the small basin
- ◊ Physical pain in cracked feet
- ◊ Reward for the new entrant to the kitchen
- ◊ A gold bangle

The daughter-in-law is gifted for her trouble

So there is a lot of inconvenience is about you know washing dishes on a daily basis at the small basin and then as I said there is pain are caused because the crack feet and again there are rewards too and the implication is that the daughter-in-law who is the new entrant you know and she is gifted for her trouble gifted for her trouble that is very interesting.

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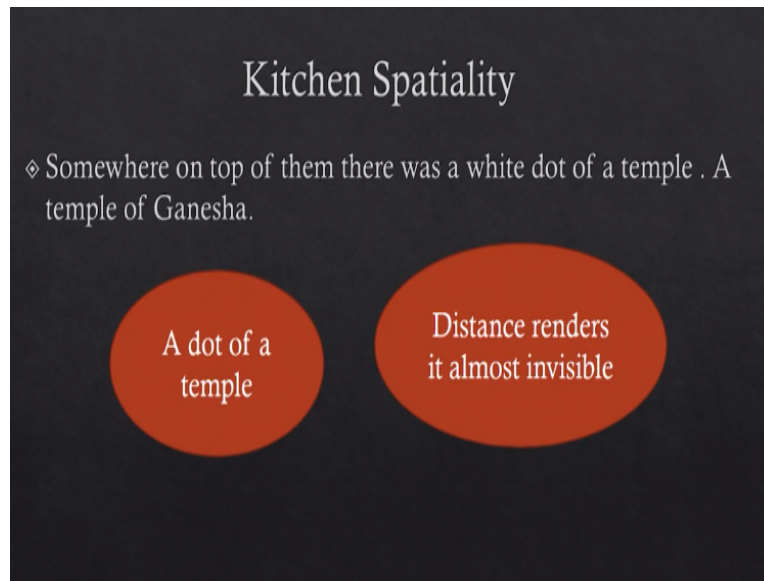
Kitchen Spatiality

- ◊ Physical discomfort
- ◊ Physical confinement
- ◊ Restrictive view
- ◊ Green mountains visible from the window

So while there is a lot of physical discomfort and which is communicated through that description of the kitchen there is also a sense of physical confinement so and that is caused by the restrictive view. Remember there is a reference to windows and through one there is a vision of the green mountains which one can see from the window if there were no clothes drying on the nylon wires outside of the kitchen.

So physically there is a lot of discomfort and there is a lot of restriction so one gets a sense of being confined in that dark space.

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And the narrator says that somewhere on top of them, them being the mountains there was a white dot of a temple, a temple of Ganesha. So one can see those mountains and on top of it was dot which signified a temple, a temple to Lord Ganesha and it is very interesting that it is just a dot and perhaps there was a symbolic implication in that you know in that representation of a temple as a dot perhaps the women in the kitchen are not able to become closer to the spiritual entity due to various hurdles.

Therefore, the temple is somehow distance from them and the distance also renders the temple almost invisible and you can also stress the interpretation to suggest that since the women are confined in the home they are not able to have a lot of spiritual communion or even communion with nature too so there are several implications there.

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Kitchen Spatiality

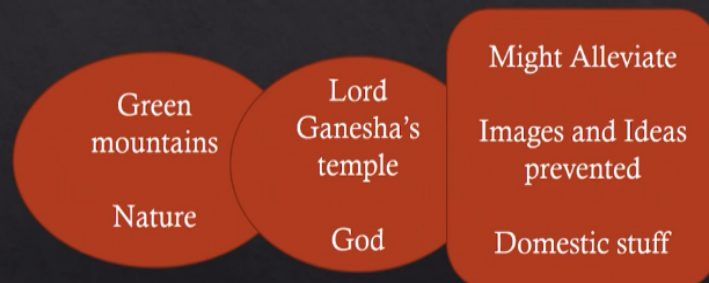
◇ The Green mountains might have made one forget one's chapped heels. But since the clothes line was directly beyond this window, trousers, shirts, pyjamas, saris and petticoats spread out to obscure the view.

The Green mountains might have made one forget one's chapped heels, but since the clothes line was directly beyond this window, trousers, shirts, pyjamas, saris, and petticoats spread out to obscure the view. So as I mentioned these aspects of domesticity, the drying of the clothes, the washing of the dishes, the cooking of the various dishes for the family kind of prevented these women from accessing at the Green mountains as soon as accessing the spiritual entity that was on top of those Green mountains.

There have been distance from all of these aspects of life they are really important aspects of life.

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Kitchen Spatiality and implications



So the Green mountains here signify nature obviously and reference to the Lord Ganesha is a connection to the higher entity so all these 2 aspects which could alleviate the God and nature which might alleviate the pain caused by the really uncomfortable kitchen spatiality have been denied to these women because they are far away and they have been restricted to these women literally and psychologically as well.

Because immense domestic work would prevent them from going to the temple on a regular basis and you know as I said even the drying of the clothes suggesting the sympathy has been engaging in hard domestic labour so that all these clothes are washed and hung up to dry

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And the funny thing according to the narrator is this nobody seemed to object to this being this restrictive kitchen space restrictive on several levels of the flooding of the kitchen and the curtain view of the outside, the confinement that they have to undergo while they are there all the women who worked in the kitchen you know occupy that space seemed not to object to its inconvenience.

There seemed to be a quiet acceptance and why did such an acceptance arise was it because they were rewarded for their slavishness in the form of gold's jewellery so that such questions can be asked, but the reality is there it was quietly accepted by the women.

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The Papaji Family

- ◇ Great lovers of food and drink
- ◇ Constant meal preparation
- ◇ Elaborate meals and snacks
- ◇ Narrative contains multiple references to food

Now the family in question in the story is a large one at least in the slice of the narrative that we see here and a lot of members of this family have congregated in this ancestor home of the Papaji and during a vacation. So he is the head of the family Papaji and his wife is Jiji and he has several sons one of them is Kishan and his wife is called Meenakshi and the other daughters, in-laws, other sons, and there is the step-mother of Papaji so it is a big family and this family loves to eat and drink.

They are great lovers of food and even the women of this family enjoy their drink and the spirits, they hard spirits and it is a common tradition among the family which lives in Rajasthan. So there is a constant preparation of a variety of dishes on the part of the family and if you read the narrative there are multiple references to cooking you know throughout the story from the beginning, the middle, the end.

So it is one of the most important or the most important aspect of this family which is the preparation of food at least that is what the narrative suggest because it gives a lot of importance to the details of the preparation of the food to the variety of food the spices that are added, the different kinds the Mysore style, the Rajasthani style you know chappatis you know methi chappatis.

There are multiple references to varieties of food and the most interesting thing is that every meal seems to be an elaborate meal and there are elaborate snacks different kinds of snacks which are consumed in the evening and during different parts of the day so again this is a wealthy family. No 2 ways about it that is established. This is a wealthy family quiet comfortable economically and socially and there are plenty of women in the story who help prepare the food and there is 1 reference to a certain figure who helps in washing up the dishes.

So the rest of the wok is shared by the women folk.

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Life around the kitchen

◇ “Their style of life did encompass the kitchen; was woven around the concept of the kitchen. The lineage had a reputation for its love of food and drink.”

The head of the family is interested in the cuisine

“Immensely enjoyed the pleasures of life”

So the narrator spells out this facet of life the narrator says that their style of life did encompass the kitchen did include the kitchen it was woven around the concept of the kitchen. It is a very interesting phrase. Life was woven around the concept of the kitchen. Kitchen became the centre of life for this family.

The lineage had a reputation for its love of food and drink and even during wedding and even during the evenings they used to enjoy food and drink hot spirits both the men and the women and the head of the family is also interested in the cuisine in the variety of dishes that has been cooked on a daily basis. So he is impact with what is happening, food wise in the family and obviously this suggest that this family immensely enjoy the pleasures of life, food, and drinking are one of the most important pleasures.

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Thus this idea of hospitality which is mentioned early on in the story and the narrator suggest that Papaji's family the head of the family Papaji is very, very hospitable and there is a reference to a guests who comes and the narrator shows how keen Papaji is in to you know generously feed the guests. So there is admirable hospitality in feeding the guest in this particular household and the women folk his wife Jiji and all the other seem to endorse the view of the head of the family.

They enthusiastically participating "enthusiastically" I would say because we do not know actually the thought process of these women while they are engaged in cooking all the various dishes. So we just kept the external details from the narrator about the various you know aspects that go into the cooking of the meals.

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Lakshmi Holmstrom

◇ “Ambai also sees food and cooking as ways of imposing control within the family, and maintaining boundaries between communities. She questions the value of hospitality, which merely reflects the status and importance of the pater familias.”

So let us take a look at how Lakshmi Holmstrom looks at the role of hospitality in Ambai's fiction. She says that this critic Lakshmi Holmstrom says that Ambai also sees food and cooking as ways of imposing control within the family and maintaining boundaries between communities. So food becomes a way of exercising control within the members of the family and as well as maintaining the difference between 1 family and the other between different communities as well.

And Ambai also seems to question the value of hospitality which merely reflects the status and importance of the pater familias. So this is a very interesting point in the context of a kitchen in the corner of the house because as I said there is a reference to the hospitable nature of Papaji, the head of the family and how he reacts when there is a guest in the house and no guest apparently is allowed to leave without a part taking in the generous food which they food which he has been or she has been offered.

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Hospitality and Patriarchy

- ◆ 'How can we allow you to drink plain water? At least have some sherbet.'
- ◆ 'Very well.'
- ◆ Jiji would get up. 'Just put a couple of kebabs for him on a plate to go with his cold drink.' Even before Jiji reached the kitchen, Papaji would remember the methi parathas which were made that morning. 'Sunie ji', he would call to his wife. 'Warm up a couple of those methi parathas and butter them,' he would say. 'Let Uncle just have a taste.'

So there is an incident which we need to look closely to look at the relationship between hospitality and Patriarchy and by the pater familias means the male head of the family. So there was a guest at the home of Papaji and the guest say that he is you know good with plain water. He is okay with just drinking water and Papaji says how can we allow you to drink plain water at least have some Sharbat very well.

Jiji would get up just put a couple of kebabs for him on a plate to go with his cold drink and this is the suggestion of the head of the family Papji, her husband. Even before Jiji reached the kitchen Papaji would remember the methi parathas which were made that morning. So she has not entered the kitchen she is just about to enter and then Papaji remembers this detail from the morning about what exactly was cooked that day.

And he says that cannot you also give him the methi parathas so can you heat it up and suniey ji he would call to his wife warm up a couple of those methi parathas and butter them so he offers suggestions to improve on the food that was prepared in the morning. And in the morning he would say, let uncle just have a taste. So very, very important set of ideas thrown in that speech of Papaji and then Jiji when she is entering the kitchen.

She also thinks that she would also fry up some you know eggs just to make sure that there is enough food for this guest. So she also you know seems to think fast and you know endorse the

husband's view in order to make sure that this guest gets a good meal while he or she is there, he was there in this household. So the point that I am trying to get it is this. On the surface it is very good hospitality no doubt about it.

But if we explore this idea further one thing becomes apparent the hospitality that this family offers to the outsiders reflects on the status on the quality of the family itself so the male head of the family Papaji is very interested to make sure that you know his status is kind of strengthened. His higher status is strengthened through the generous and tasty food that he could offer for the guest. That is one thing.

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The other thing is that as I said good food and hospitality reflects on the nature of the head of the family, his economic status, his superior position in society and the other thing is that, that does not seem to come to the surface is that Papaji does not involve himself physically in the preparation of the various elements of the food or it is the onus of the women starting from Jiji and the other women who are in the kitchen who need to work really hard.

And quickly to make sure that this guest is given lots of variety of good food that would strengthen the status of the family. So there is a physical labour in this kitchen in this inconvenient kitchen which gets flooded every now or every now and then all the time when

somebody washes the dishes. So in this inconvenient kitchen lot of work, variety of dishes from vegetarian to non-vegetarian from Mysore style to Rajasthani style.

All kinds of food are prepared and offered to the guest in order to impress them so you know making an impression is very, very important. Making an impression is very, very important for Papaji in terms of his status. Now the narrator brings out the contrast you know between the physical details of the space and its other association.

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Kitchen in the corner of the house

◇ “All the same, the actual details, the concrete facts of the kitchen and its space didn’t seem to matter to them. It was almost as if such things didn’t actually exist. In their family houses, one crossed the wide stone-paved front courtyard and the main room before reaching the kitchen in a dark corner. A zero watt light bulb hung there. The women appeared there like shadows, their heads covered, their deep-coloured skirts melting into the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant, spicy dal.”

So the narrator says that all the same, the actual details, the concrete facts of the kitchen and its space did not seem to matter to them. It was almost as if such things did not actually exist. In their family houses, one crossed the wide stone-paved front courtyard and the main room before reaching the kitchen in a dark corner. A zero-watt light bulb hung there.

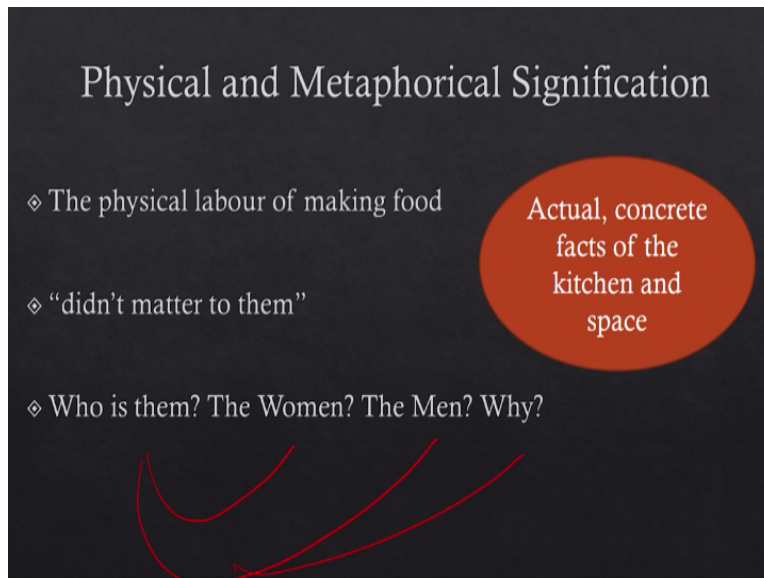
The women appeared there like shadows, their heads covered, their deep-coloured skirts melting into the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant, spicy dal. So the narrator is again lays it bare. The narrator suggests that the physical actual concrete details of the kitchen did not seem to matter to them and my question is who is them?

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Physical and Metaphorical Signification

- ◊ The physical labour of making food
- ◊ “didn’t matter to them”
- ◊ Who is them? The Women? The Men? Why?

Actual, concrete facts of the kitchen and space

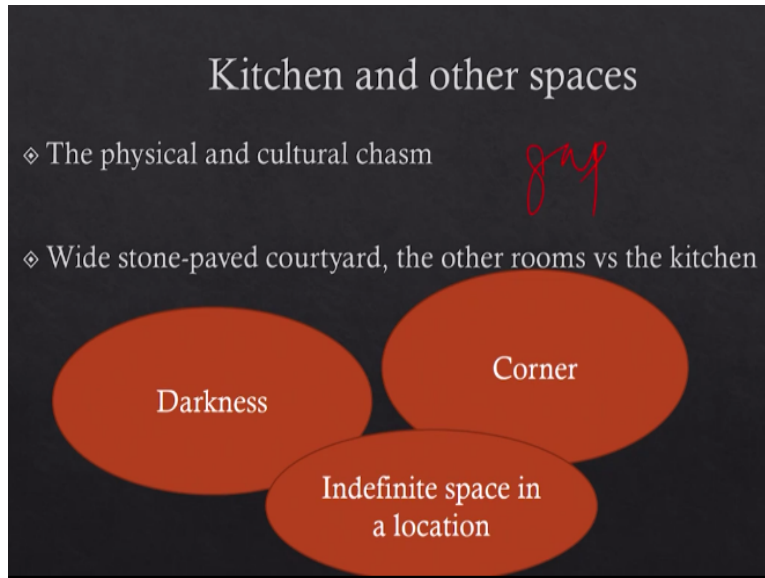


Does them refer to the women who work there did they care about the physical inconvenience that is one thing or is it a reference to the men why did not they care about the physical discomfort of the women who work in that inconvenient kitchen. So the labour of making food becomes almost immaterial to Papaji who reminds his wife about the methi chappatis and asks her to butter them up in order to feed the uncle who is there.

So why does not it matter to the why does not it strike him that is the question to ask and the answer is not you know spelled out in the story. And if you go back to that except is says that it was almost as of such things did not actually exist. So the kitchen as a physical space did not seem to exist to the men folk. They did not seem to even realize the physical walls of the kitchen and in the family houses one cross the wide stone-paved front courtyard and the main room before reaching the kitchen in a dark corner.

So the kitchen is in a dark corner and it is very dimly lit. There is just a 0-watt light bulb and the women in that space appeared like shadows not even like physical peep or you know living breathe human beings they were like shadows you know not 3-dimentional figures there and the heads were covered and the coloured skirts, the red and deep coloured skirts just you know merged into the darkness, the colour seem to merge into one another in order to become black very, very interesting description there.

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So there is a kind of a physical and cultural chasm. There is a wide gap, chasm means wide gap between the physical and the cultural you know aspects of domesticity and the wide stone-paved courtyard in the other rooms seem to be on a higher level compared to the kitchen there is a discrimination in terms of the spaces within the home itself while there is gender discrimination the accepted gender discrimination.

There is also a spatial discrimination with the courtyard and other rooms getting a priority while the kitchen does not seem to and that is where interesting and as I said the kitchen is in darkness is a very, very 0-watt light bulb and the kitchen is a corner it is not even a space that is confined between walls it is a corner and the corner is a indefinite space it could be a corner anywhere it can be a corner anywhere.

So that indefinite space in a location you know tells as a lot about the nature of the identity of the kitchen space and the nature of the identity of the women folk who work in the kitchen. They almost become identity less. One woman is the same as the other women you know and their distinctive dress does not matter. A red colour is as you know is similar to a black or similar to a green or similar to a brown colour.

All the colours become one the dark colour and again what does it suggest. So we need to ask these questions.

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So as I said varied colours become black and need to again ask this question why is the kitchen dimly lit when the family seems to function around the space of the kitchen and there is a lot of cooking going on in a prolonged cooking, cooking that happens across the day and why is such a space you know relegated to almost or nothing in this house hold.

And again as I said if the idea of the skirts the deeply coloured skirts melting into the darkness asks us to ask this question if the skirts melt into darkness then what about the women, the different women the banker who is there you know the really smart women who is there the (()) (29:32) what about the various identities and the all seems to merge into one idea, one idea of women who labours for the benefit of the men so and again what does this darkness of the kitchen itself symbolize what is darkness there.

Is it the darkness in the Indian society or is it the darkness at the heart of the women, is it darkness of the heart of the men what exactly is darkness there? These are similar questions that we need to ask in terms of this particular idea of kitchen spatiality which is beautifully described and in the story by Ambai. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session. Have a good day.